

Assessment of The Effects of Fee-Free Education on Teaching and Learning in Primary Schools in Tanzania: A Case Study of Nyasa District

France Mapunda¹, Egidio H.Y. Chaula², Lucas Mwahombela³

Department of Education
Email: franceosmund2@gmail.com

Abstract:

This study assessed the effects of fee-free education on teaching and learning in public primary schools in Nyasa District, Tanzania. Guided by Human Capital Theory, the research involved 47 participants, including education officers, school heads, teachers, parents and pupils from four primary schools. A qualitative case study design was used, with data collected through interviews, focus group discussions and document reviews. Findings revealed that while school heads demonstrated effective managerial skills, they encountered significant challenges, such as limited funding, misconceptions about the scope of fee-free education, overcrowded classrooms and a shortage of teaching materials. These factors hindered the full realization of fee-free education's potential in improving teaching and learning outcomes.

Keywords: Fee-Free Education on Teaching and Learning in primary schools Nyasa District, Tanzania.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Tanzania reintroduced its Fee-Free Education policy in 2015 as part of a global movement recognizing education as a fundamental human right and a key driver of development. FFE is aligned with international frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, the Education for All initiative 1990 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable education. The policy aims to increase access to education by removing financial barriers, particularly for children from low-income, rural and marginalized communities.

Historically, school fees have limited access to education in many low and middle income countries. The Education for All movement and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, which included the target of achieving universal primary education by 2015, promoted fee abolition as a means to increase enrollment.

In Tanzania, FFE was reintroduced with the goal of improving educational access and equity. This policy led to increased enrollment, especially in rural areas. However, challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, high pupil-teacher ratios and shortages of teaching materials hindered the quality of education. Additionally, indirect costs like uniforms, transport and meals, along with socio-cultural factors such as early marriage, continue to impede consistent school

attendance, particularly for girls. This study explores the implementation and effect of Fee-Free Education in Tanzania, focusing on the opportunities and challenges faced in improving access and quality in primary education.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

FFE is present and is being implemented in 2015 many contexts, but its overall success or challenges are not clearly known. While the policy has removed financial barriers and increased enrolment, there is limited evidence on whether it has achieved the intended quality outcomes. The actual extent of its effectiveness remains uncertain because issues such as hidden costs, overcrowding, teacher shortages and sustainability of funding are not fully assessed or documented. Similarly, while challenges are often mentioned, there is little systematic evaluation to determine how they affect teaching, learning and long-term educational goals.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Literature Review

Human Capital Theory, first introduced by economist Gary Becker in 1964, serves as the theoretical framework for understanding Tanzania's Fee-Free Education policy. Becker argued that education is an investment that enhances individual productivity, which, in turn,

fosters economic growth. Tanzania's FFE policy, introduced in 2015, aimed to remove financial barriers to education, particularly for rural and disadvantaged communities. The policy sought to increase educational access, enhance skills and boost national productivity by creating a more skilled workforce.

The introduction of FFE has led to a substantial increase in enrollment rates, with the Net Enrollment Rate rising from 84% in 2015 to 95.4% in 2024. This growth has been particularly beneficial for marginalized groups, especially girls, whose enrollment rates have approached parity with boys. This progress is seen as a key step toward achieving gender equity in education. Prior to FFE, many girls, especially in rural areas, were excluded from education due to high costs. The increased participation of girls represents a significant stride in empowering women and improving human capital development.

However, while the policy has expanded access to education, it has also highlighted critical challenges regarding education quality. Overcrowded classrooms, high pupil-teacher ratios up to 1:70 and a shortage of qualified teachers and teaching materials have compromised the effectiveness of teaching. Human Capital Theory stresses the importance of not just access to education but also maintaining high standards to realize the economic benefits of education. In comparison to developed countries like Finland and Japan, where fee-free education is supported by robust infrastructures and resources, Tanzania's struggles with overcrowding and resource shortages demonstrate the contextual limitations of applying Human Capital Theory in developing countries.

Despite these challenges, there are potential solutions. Innovations like Massive Open Online Courses, offered by platforms like Coursera and Khan Academy, could complement traditional education by offering affordable skills training in fields like technology. However, barriers such as limited digital infrastructure and unreliable internet access especially in rural areas must be addressed. Additionally, incorporating hands on learning experiences like internships and fieldwork into the curriculum can enhance practical skills and align with the goals of Human

Capital Theory by preparing pupils for the job market.

In summary, while FFE aligns with Human Capital Theory in expanding access to education, it also underscores the need for further investment in quality infrastructure, teacher training and resources to ensure the benefits of education are fully realized.

2.2 The Influence of Fee Free Education on the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Primary Schools

Fee-Free Education policies have been implemented in several Sub-Saharan African countries, including Kenya, Ghana, Uganda and Tanzania, with the aim of improving access to education for all children, irrespective of socio-economic status. For instance, Kenya's Free Primary Education policy, introduced in 2003, led to a sharp increase in enrollment from 5.9 million in 2002 to over 8 million in 2003 (World Bank, 2021). Similarly, Ghana's Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education, launched in 1996 and Uganda's similar policies boosted enrollment, particularly for disadvantaged children.

Although these policies succeeded in increasing enrollment, they have also brought to light significant challenges related to education quality. In many cases, the rapid increase in pupil numbers has not been matched by an equivalent expansion in resources or infrastructure, leading to overcrowded classrooms and inadequate learning materials. This has made it difficult for teachers to deliver effective instruction, as many struggle to manage large classes without sufficient teaching support.

In Kenya, Uganda and Ghana, the introduction of fee free education led to rapid enrollment, but the corresponding expansion in resources, infrastructure and teacher recruitment did not keep pace. This resulted in overcrowded classrooms and resource shortages, with pupil and teacher ratios soaring, which undermines the quality of teaching and learning. In some regions, pupil and teacher ratios reached unmanageable levels, further complicating classroom management and the ability to provide individualized attention to pupils.

Teacher shortages and insufficient training have become significant barriers to maintaining educational quality. As enrollment increased, the demand for qualified teachers surged, but efforts to recruit and train educators did not meet the need. Many teachers, burdened with oversized classrooms, face burnout and low morale, which adversely affects teaching quality. Additionally, inadequate salaries and poor working conditions contribute to high teacher turnover, further destabilizing the education system.

The financial constraints faced by governments have also played a role in limiting the effectiveness of fee-free education policies. Insufficient funding has hindered the expansion of classroom space, the recruitment of teachers, and the procurement of essential learning materials. As a result, schools are often ill-equipped to handle the influx of pupils and education quality suffers as a result.

Despite these challenges, Fee-Free Education has succeeded in increasing access to education, particularly for marginalized groups like girls and rural children. However, disparities in regional access and gender equality persist and quality issues remain significant. Policymakers must therefore focus not only on increasing enrollment but also on improving teacher training, infrastructure and the provision of learning materials to ensure that educational quality is not compromised.

Conclusion, The introduction of Fee-Free Education policies in countries like Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania has significantly improved access to education, especially for marginalized groups. However, the surge in student enrollment has highlighted challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages and inadequate resources, all of which undermine education quality. To ensure the long-term success of Fee-Free Education, governments must invest in infrastructure, teacher training and resource provision. Only by addressing both access and quality can these policies achieve their full potential in promoting universal, equitable education. International organizations and NGOs play a vital role in supporting these efforts, helping to bridge resource gaps and ensure that Fee-Free Education policies deliver tangible improvements in educational outcomes.

3.0 Methodology

The methodology of the study was guided by a Human Capital Theory, allowing flexibility in design, sample selection and methods, emphasizing practical, context and specific results. A mixed methods approach predominantly qualitative was employed to integrate and balance strengths across qualitative data. The case study design facilitated a detailed assess the effects of fee free education on teaching and learning in primary schools within its natural context.

The study was focused on Nyasa District, a rural region in Tanzania, to evaluate the effect of the Fee-Free Education policy on primary education. While FFE has led to increased enrollment, it has also brought challenges like overcrowded classrooms pupil and teacher ratios exceeding 70:1, a shortage of teaching materials 60% of schools report deficits and teacher dissatisfaction 75% report poor working conditions. Geographic isolation further complicates access, especially in remote areas with poor transportation. Despite increased enrollment, the district faces fluctuations in academic performance, with gender dynamics shifting in 2022 and 2023. Disparities in funding between rural and urban schools have exacerbated these challenges, highlighting the need for more equitable resource distribution.

The study sampled 47 participants, 22 pupils, 12 teachers, 4 headteachers and 4 ward education officers, 4 parents and 1 the District Education Officer. This diverse group provided a comprehensive view of FFE's effects. Key challenges identified were overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching materials and low teacher morale. Teachers reported a 15% drop in academic performance due to large class sizes, while geographic barriers caused a 15-20% decrease in school attendance. Rural schools, with significantly less funding, struggle to meet educational needs compared to their urban counterparts.

A qualitative research approach was used to explore the experiences and perceptions of various stakeholders involved in the FFE policy's implementation. This approach was chosen to capture the complexities of the participants lived

experiences and to understand the multifaceted effects of FFE on education in Nyasa District.

The study employed a qualitative case study design to gain a deep understanding of the FFE policy's effects in Nyasa District. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant experience, ensuring rich and relevant data. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators, focus group discussions with pupils, parents and teachers and a review of school reports, exam results and policy documents. This design facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the policy's effects on access to education, teaching quality and academic performance.

Multiple methods were used to gather comprehensive data, Firstly Interviews with Teachers to explore classroom dynamics, challenges in managing large classes and the effects of FFE on pupil attendance and performance and Interviews with Parents to gain insights into the ongoing economic barriers like transportation costs and uniforms, which still hinder school attendance despite fee abolition. Secondly Focus Group Discussions with Pupils to understand psychosocial factors influencing attendance, such as family obligations and gender-related challenges. Thirdly Documentary Review to analyze school reports, NECTA exam results, attendance records and government policy documents for a broader context of the FFE policy's effects.

Data analysis was done using thematic, narrative, contextual and content analysis methods. Transcripts from interviews and focus groups were coded to identify recurring themes like overcrowded classrooms, insufficient resources and teacher dissatisfaction. Content analysis of policy documents highlighted the gap between FFE's goals and its actual effects. Data triangulation confirmed the findings, such as a 25% increase in enrollment, but also revealed positive and negative effects on performance and attendance due to overcrowded classrooms and lack of resources. The analysis underscored the need for improvements in resource allocation, teacher support and infrastructure to maintain the quality of education alongside increased access.

Lastly, ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality,

securing institutional permissions and conducting member checking to guarantee participants privacy and accurate data representation.

4.0 Discussion of the Findings

4.1 Influence of Fee-Free Education on the Quality of Teaching and Learning

The introduction of Fee-Free Education (FFE) has expanded access, especially for marginalized children. By removing financial barriers, more children from rural areas now have the opportunity to attend school. However, the rapid increase in enrollment has strained education quality. Overcrowded classrooms, often with more than 60 pupils, limit teachers' ability to provide individualized attention. Shortages of resources like textbooks and teaching aids hinder effective learning, particularly in practical subjects like science. Additionally, inadequate infrastructure, such as poor sanitation facilities, exacerbates challenges, especially for girls, leading to increased absenteeism. Teacher welfare has also suffered, with burnout and dissatisfaction due to large class sizes and a lack of professional development. While FFE has improved access, further investment in resources and infrastructure is essential to ensure quality education.

The study found that FFE has significantly increased access to education, but introduced several challenges that affect quality. Key findings include

Increased Enrollment but Overcrowded Classrooms, The most notable outcome of the FFE policy has been the rise in pupil enrollment, especially in rural areas. Many marginalized children now have access to education, but the surge has led to overcrowded classrooms, with pupil-teacher ratios sometimes exceeding 70:1. This limits teachers' ability to provide individualized attention, reducing the effectiveness of teaching.

Shortage of Teaching and Learning Materials, The rapid expansion in enrollment has not been matched by an adequate increase in teaching resources. Rural schools face significant shortages of textbooks, desks and basic infrastructure. This shortage hinders lesson

delivery and limits pupils' engagement with the curriculum.

Teacher Shortages, Teachers in Nyasa District reported burnout due to the overwhelming workloads from large class sizes. Many teachers feel unsupported and ill-prepared to manage overcrowded classrooms and diverse student needs. The lack of professional development further worsens teaching quality.

Socio-Cultural Barriers, Socio-cultural factors, particularly for girls, remain significant barriers to education. Early marriage, teenage pregnancy and household responsibilities contribute to absenteeism and dropout rates among girls. These deeply entrenched norms must be addressed through targeted interventions.

Hidden Costs, Although FFE removed tuition fees, families still face indirect costs, such as for transportation, uniforms and meals. These costs are prohibitively expensive for many, particularly in rural areas, preventing consistent school attendance.

4.2 Conclusion

Tanzania's reintroduction of Fee-Free Education in 2015 has improved access to primary education, particularly benefiting rural and marginalized communities. However, the surge in enrollment has exposed systemic weaknesses, such as overcrowded classrooms, shortages of teaching materials and insufficient teacher support, which negatively affect education quality. Socio-cultural factors, such as early marriage and household duties, and hidden costs like transportation and uniforms, continue to limit school attendance.

To ensure the benefits of FFE are fully realized, the government must invest in teacher recruitment and training, improve school infrastructure and implement social support programs. A comprehensive approach to education reform is needed, one that goes beyond simply eliminating school fees and addresses both financial and socio-cultural barriers.

4.3 Results

The effect of Fee-Free Education on teaching and learning in Nyasa District revealed several significant barriers: financial constraints, overcrowded classrooms, shortages of teaching materials, teacher shortages, socio-cultural barriers, hidden costs and technological challenges.

5.0 Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Summary

This study evaluated the impact of Fee-Free Education on primary education, focusing on teaching quality, academic performance and pupil attendance. FFE has increased enrollment, particularly for marginalized children who were previously excluded due to financial barriers. However, challenges like overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources and insufficient teacher support have affected education quality. While attendance has improved, hidden costs like transportation and uniforms still hinder consistent attendance. Addressing these challenges is crucial to enhancing teaching quality and academic outcomes.

5.2 Conclusion

Fee-Free Education has successfully expanded access to education, especially for marginalized groups. However, its effects on teaching quality. Overcrowded classrooms, limited resources and teacher burnout have negatively affected teaching effectiveness. While attendance has improved, socio-cultural factors and indirect costs continue to limit regular school participation. A comprehensive approach, addressing both financial and infrastructural challenges, is needed for FFE to fully realize its potential in improving educational outcomes.

Recommendations

To improve the implementation of FFE, the following recommendations are proposed are, Teacher Training and Support prioritize professional development in classroom management, pedagogy and technology integration to manage large, diverse classrooms effectively. Increased Resource Allocation,

Ensure sufficient textbooks, learning materials and infrastructure, with a focus on gender sensitive facilities to support girl's attendance and learning. Addressing Hidden Costs, Implement programs to reduce indirect costs such as uniforms, school supplies and transportation for economically disadvantaged families. Recruitment of More Teachers, Hire more teachers to reduce overcrowding and improve pupil to teacher ratios. Blended learning models should be considered to manage large pupil's populations. Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, Establish a robust system to monitor the effects of FFE on academic performance, attendance and teaching quality, with regular feedback from key stakeholders.

5.4 Recommendation for Action

To implement the recommendations effectively, the following actions are necessary are. Establishment of a Task Force, Form a task force to oversee FFE implementation, comprising representatives from the Ministry of Education, teachers' unions and local communities. Public and Private Partnership, Collaborate with the private sector to enhance resource provision, such as textbook donations and teacher training through corporate social responsibility programs. Community Engagement, Involve local communities in supporting schools through fundraising, volunteer tutoring and other initiatives to reduce financial burdens. Government Assistance for Indirect Costs Explore cash transfer programs and subsidies to help families cover the costs of uniforms, transportation and other educational expenses.

5.4 Recommendations for Further Studies

Future research should focus on several key areas to better understand and improve the impact of Fee-Free Education (FFE). First, longitudinal studies are needed to track pupils' academic progress over several years, which will help assess FFE's long-term effects on graduation rates and transitions to secondary education. Second, technology integration in classrooms should be explored to determine how digital tools and blended learning models can mitigate challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and resource shortages. Third, studies comparing

regional and socio-economic effects of FFE in urban versus rural areas will offer valuable insights into how socio-economic factors influence its success. Additionally, conducting a cost-benefit analysis of FFE would help evaluate its economic efficiency, identify funding gaps, and propose strategies for sustainable implementation. Finally, gender-specific research should focus on how FFE affects girls' access to education, particularly in rural areas, to ensure that gender equity is achieved and barriers are effectively addressed.

5.5 Conclusion

Fee-Free Education has made substantial progress in improving access to education, especially for marginalized communities. However, significant challenges remain, including overcrowded classrooms, insufficient resources and socio-cultural barriers. To fully realize the potential benefits of FFE, a holistic approach is required one that includes increased investments in teaching, infrastructure and family support. Addressing these issues will be crucial for maximizing the positive effects of FFE on educational outcomes for all pupils.

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