



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Revisiting Education in Zambia in the Post-Independence Era

Dr. C. Maria Ugin Joseph

Dean, School of Education, DMI – ST. EUGENE UNIVERSITY

P.O. Box 330081, Plot No: B2029/M, 9 Miles, Great North Road, Chibombo, Lusaka, Zambia

Mail: uginjoseph@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Since its independence in 1964, the education system in Zambia has undergone radical transformation from a limited, elitist colonial legacy into a broad, comprehensive national strategy of development to encompass socio-economic advancement and nation-building. Inspired by President Kenneth Kaunda's Humanist ideology, early post-independence policy was directed towards the expansion of primary and secondary education, the establishment of teacher training colleges, and the founding of the University of Zambia (UNZA) to bank human capital. This development favored social integration, equality, and self-sufficiency, resulting in rapid enrollment growth and country access improvement.

Still, the system remained plagued by difficulties, especially during the 1970s and 1990s, as economic downturns, shortages in resources, and structural adjustment policies strained the quality and equity of education. Rural disadvantaged regions and excluded groups, including girls and handicapped kids, suffered proportionally from lower infrastructure, teacher shortages, and socio-cultural constraints. Despite such nominally corrective interventions as scholarships and integrative education schemes, disparities in access and attainment persisted, particularly along gender and rural-urban axes. Curriculum reform aimed at localizing content and making it more relevant suffered with spotty implementation and lacking resource availability.

The 1990s witnessed further challenges posed by economic liberalization and low public spending, resulting in the spread of private and community schools that unintentionally widened socio-economic gaps. Policy initiatives like Educating Our Future (1996), targeted at decentralization, vocational training, and improved teacher welfare, faced issues of viability under budget constraints.

In the past decades, Zambia has aligned its education agenda into global agendas like EFA, MDGs, and SDGs, having abolished primary school fees and promoted ICT integration, inclusive education, and mother-tongue education. Throughout, issues of equity have remained pertinent, such as the rural-urban divide, gender imbalance, and issues of digital divide exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to build a sustainable education system similar to Vision 2030 and Agenda 2063 of the African Union, Zambia must focus on enhancing teacher capability, ICT infrastructure, inclusive policies, and addressing underpinning socio-economic and regional inequalities. Subsequent studies must quantify long-term learning outcomes and the efficacy of inclusive and technological interventions to guide evidence-based reforms and position education at the centre of national development, social cohesion, and economic growth.

1. Introduction

When Zambia became independent in 1964, it inherited a narrow, elitist education system that was not appropriate for the development requirements of a new state. Fewer than 100 Zambians had experienced tertiary education, while the majority of citizens had no formal education (Kelly, 1991). Responsive to these weaknesses, the first government placed emphasis on education at the top as basic to nation-building, social integration, and economic modernization. President Kenneth Kaunda, in his philosophy of Zambian Humanism, put serious focus on education not only as a way of generating capable manpower but also as a way of encouraging national identity, equality, and self-reliance (Kaunda, 1967).

The education was therefore seen not only as a way of individual development but as the basis for transforming society. The post-independence state invested heavily to expand access to primary and secondary schooling, establish teacher training colleges, and develop new institutions of higher education. Regional imbalances were reduced, excluded groups were integrated, and the gender imbalance in school enrollment was reduced as part of a broader vision of broad-based development (Mulenga, 2004). These initiatives set the ground for rapid increases in educational opportunities during the first decade of independence.

But this ambitious increase also encountered severe structural and resource-related problems. Inadequate financial resources, insufficient trained teachers, and an underdeveloped curriculum placed limits on equity and quality. Political exigencies and economic dynamics determined the pace and effectiveness of reforms, bringing pressures between universal access and maintaining academic standards. Through these challenges, the post-independence education

policies in Zambia had an impressive commitment to social justice, national cohesion, and educating citizens to play their part in bringing about the socio-economic metamorphosis of the country (Phiri, 2010).

With the recapture of this historic trajectory, it is therefore feasible to discuss how past lessons can be derived in order to inform contemporary policy-making. A critique of the achievements and shortfalls of Zambia's education sector across centuries provides lessons on drivers that enhance resilience, innovativeness, and equality in education. In addition, citing this historical examination in terms of current initiatives under Zambia's Vision 2030 and the African Union's Agenda 2063 highlights the ongoing relevance of post-independence school philosophies to achieving sustainable development, social cohesion, and human capital development.

2. Early Post-Independence Educational Vision (1964–1972)

In the early post-independence years of 1964, Zambia's first republic placed education at the heart of its development process. Guided by President Kenneth Kaunda's philosophy of Humanism, education was perceived as a way of building values of self-reliance and social responsibility (Kaunda, 1967). The government launched mass education campaigns with the increase in primary school enrolment and investment in dozens of teacher training colleges to meet the growing demand (Snelson, 1974).

A flagship accomplishment was the establishment of the University of Zambia (UNZA) in 1966, which provided the country with its first national university (Ministry of Education, 1966). UNZA, along with the expansion of teacher education, facilitated the development of the human resource base that was required for government, health, and industry (Kelly, 1999). The period was marked by optimism, with education being

2.1 Expansion of Secondary Education

There was a four-fold increase in secondary school enrollments in Zambia from 1964 to 1970, representing a huge expansion in the provision of education opportunities (Mweetwa, 2000). The government policy was to open at least one secondary school in each district and to establish large schools to accommodate the growing number of students. The aim of this expansion was to provide the nation with educated individuals possessing skills for national development.

2.2 Establishment of the University of Zambia (UNZA)

The launch of UNZA in 1966 marked a milestone in the history of Zambia's education. The UNZA was established by an Act of Parliament with the responsibility to provide education that responded to the economic, political, social, and cultural conditions of Zambia, reflecting the aspirations of the nation (Banja, 2012). The university played a significant role in the generation of human capital for most sectors, including the government, health, and industry.

2.3 Evolution of Teacher Education

Recognizing the necessity for quality education, the state financed teacher training colleges to deal with the increasing demand for trained educators. The colleges were instrumental in enhancing the standard of primary and secondary education, and in the general shaping of the education system.

3. Growth and Equity Challenges (1973–1990)

During this period, Zambia's education system faced intense stresses in spite of earlier expansion. Economic downturns, caused by declining copper revenues and global oil shocks, reduced government expenditure on education, leading to shortages of classrooms, teaching materials, and qualified teachers (Mwanakatwe, 1974; Jeter, 1982). Rural areas were disproportionately affected, speeding up interregional inequalities, while gender inequalities persisted, with girls being compelled to leave school due to socio-cultural barriers such as early marriage and household duties (World Bank, 1986).

Curriculum reforms aimed at localizing content struggled with inconsistent enforcement, and groups like disabled children remained virtually outside of mainstream schooling (Kelly, 1999). The dilemma between expanding access and guaranteeing quality became a defining challenge of the era, and it highlighted the need for policies that reconcile growth and equity and inclusivity.

3.1 Economic Restraints and Resource Constraints

The 1970s and 1980s were characterized by acute economic difficulties that had a direct bearing on the education sector in Zambia. The heavy dependence of the country on copper exports rendered it highly susceptible to the volatility of world commodity prices. The 1970s oil shocks, combined with a steep fall in copper revenues, resulted in a steep fall in government revenue (Jeter, 1982). Therefore, there was a massive retrenchment of public spending on education that impacted both the quality and the quantity of services delivered.

There were acute shortages of infrastructure in the nation's schools. Rural classrooms were overpacked, with one room having double or triple the capacity of pupils it had originally been intended for. Textbook provision was inadequate, with several students sharing one book or relying on printed notes. Shortages of teachers ran rampant, particularly in rural schools, as educated teachers migrated to cities or into other careers where they could gain a higher income (Mwanakatwe, 1974).

These financial pressures not only limited access by students to education but also impaired the quality of instruction, with teachers instructing enormous classes without proper materials or back-up. The crisis exposed the vulnerability of Zambia's education system to macroeconomic shocks and rekindled memories of the need to introduce policies that would ensure sustainable funding and equitable distribution of education resources.

3.2 Rural–Urban and Regional Disparities

Between 1973 and 1990, enormous differences were registered between urban and rural environments, and between provinces. Urban towns such as Lusaka and Ndola enjoyed somewhat enhanced access to schools, qualified teachers, and studying materials, while rural provinces, especially Northern, Luapula, and Western, were under-served (Mwanakatwe, 1974). Rural district children walked a long distance to reach the nearest school, and the said schools lacked basic infrastructure, textbooks, and qualified teachers.

Case Studies:

- It was recorded in Luapula Province, based on a 1980 survey of several secondary schools, that they shared one trained teacher for multiple grades and subjects, with correspondingly dismal learning outcomes (Chansa, 1980).
- Western Province had fewer than 40% of primary school completers, while compared to over 70% in Lusaka, the dramatic regional disparities are evidenced (World Bank, 1986).

By and large, the rural–urban divide was underpinned by socio-economic traits such as household poverty, availability of transport, and restricted parental schooling. These divides saw to it that, as long as city students consistently had continuity to secondary and tertiary education, rural students had broken schooling patterns, consolidating regional human capital imbalances.

3.3 Gender Equity in Education

From 1973 to 1990, there was some increase in the access of girls to education, yet significant barriers continued to exist. Enrolment of girls into primary school increased, particularly among urban-based girls, due to government initiatives to promote universal education (World Bank, 1986). Socio-cultural beliefs continued to limit female enrolment, even in rural settings. Early marriage, household work, and customary tasks often forced girls to leave school earlier than they should have. In some districts, parents preferred boys' education when funding was scarce, even more in reinforcing gender disparities (Kelly, 1999).

Direct Interventions for Girls' Education:

- Scholarship schemes: Provincial education authorities introduced mini bursaries for girls from poor families to attend school.
- School clubs and campaigns: NGOs and community groups launched girls' clubs to encourage awareness of the importance of education and delay early marriage.
- Sanitation and boarding facilities: Pilot programs in certain secondary schools improved access to sanitation facilities and provided boarding for girls in hard-to-reach areas, thus reducing dropout rates.

Despite all these efforts, girls continued to be underrepresented at the secondary and higher levels of education. Science, mathematics, and technical courses had very low participation from women, which limited future career opportunities and reinforced long-standing gender imbalances in occupations and leadership roles. All these constraints required policy measures, outreach to communities, and gender-responsive school infrastructure.

3.4 Inclusive Education and Marginalized Groups

From 1973 to 1990, education for disabled children and other vulnerable groups was highly limited in Zambia. There were hardly any schools that were empowered to handle students with physical, sensory, or intellectual disabilities. For example, there was only one school for the blind in Lusaka and one school for the deaf in Kitwe, and children in the majority of the remaining provinces had no access to specialized education (Kelly, 1999). Transportation challenges, weak study materials, and low numbers of qualified instructors further restricted access.

Community Responses and Special Schools:

- Many religious groups and communities established small special sections within normal schools, offering minimal basic literacy and numeracy for children with disabilities.
- NGOs and foundations occasionally supplied braille materials, mobility aids, and training for teachers to support inclusion, though the coverage was thin and highly localized.

- On the countryside, community-led initiatives sometimes offered unofficial education to orphans or marginalized ethnic youth, giving them basic education despite absence of government support.

Despite these interventions establishing meaningful spaces for some children, systemic exclusion persisted. There were practically zero inclusive education policies at the national level, and the vast majority of the marginalized learners remained barred from mainstream education. This necessitated increasing calls for coordinated policy guidelines, mobilization of resources, and capacity development programs to ensure inclusive access for all children.

3.5 Curriculum Relevance and Learning Quality

From 1973–1990, attempts at making the curriculum more locally centered were drastically constrained. Curriculum reforms undertaken during the 1970s aimed to incorporate Zambian history, culture, and civics education, diverging from models colonial in nature (Kelly, 1999). As much as national identity and skills for everyday life were intended to be promoted, the application was uneven. Almost all the rural schools lacked textbooks or teachers who were learned in the new curriculum, weakening the effects of the reforms (Chansa, 1980).

Results of Tests and Literacy/Mathematics Proficiency:

- National tests revealed uneven performance, with students attending urban schools performing better than their rural counterparts because they had better learning materials and equipment.
- Literacy levels rose gradually, but early grade reading and writing skills remained poor in disadvantaged provinces. In Northern and Luapula provinces, for example, only 40–50% of students were able to achieve minimum literacy levels at the end of primary school (World Bank, 1986)
- Mathematical skills were also poor, particularly in multi-grade rural schools where teachers were underqualified or overloaded.

These were issues that demonstrated accessibility was insufficient to ensure quality learning. The decade highlighted the imperative for teacher education, instructional materials, and monitoring systems to ensure that reforms of the curriculum equated to real improvements in learning outcomes.

4. Structural Adjustment and Education Reforms (1991–2000)

The 1990s were a period of intense economic and political transformation in Zambia. The advent of multiparty democracy in 1991 was followed by the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) promoted by the IMF and World Bank. While the reforms were intended for economic stabilization, they had extensive ramifications for the education sector, demanding policy innovations and community responses.

4.1 Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) impact

SAPs led to the huge reduction in government expenditure, particularly on social services such as education (World Bank, 1995). Government school overcrowding was the order of the day, with classes designed for 40 students having between 80–100 students. Teacher shortages became widespread as qualified teachers were compelled to leave their jobs due to low salaries and poor working conditions to teach in private schools or other sectors (Munachonga, 1997). Its quality declined, marked by falling pass rates in national exams and low student enrollment in mathematics and science subjects.

4.2 Rise of Private and Community Schools

Private and community schools, particularly in urban districts such as Lusaka and Ndola and rural districts such as Mkushi and Choma, emerged to negate the reduced public supply of education (Ministry of Education, 1996). By opening up access, they generated socio-economic imbalances since more well-to-do families were able to pay for higher quality education while the poor kids remained in under-equipped state schools. As an example, a study in Lusaka demonstrated that children in low-fee private schools scored higher on literacy tests than children in overcrowded state schools, a reflection of the impact of disparate resources and teacher availability.

4.3 National Policy Reforms: Educating Our Future (1996)

The Educating Our Future (1996) policy tried to address systemic problems by emphasizing decentralization and local control of schools. Staffing decisions, resource allocation, and infrastructural development were transferred to District Education Boards, which made the schools more accountable to local needs. The policy also promoted diversification of the curriculum, adding vocational and practical courses such as agriculture, carpentry, and home economics in order to equip students for employment in a liberalized economy. Pilot interventions in Chipata Secondary School and in some rural schools demonstrated the potential of vocational education in preparing students with entrepreneurial and livelihood skills in the face of declining formal employment opportunities.

4.4 Teacher Welfare and Capacity

Teacher welfare was a major concern during this period. Cuts in salaries, delayed payment, and appalling working conditions led to teacher attrition and migration to private schools or alternative employment (Kelly, 1999). The Ministry of Education and donors responded to these with teacher retention and professional development measures, including in-service training courses, small monetary incentives in rural provinces, and pedagogy and curriculum delivery enhancement workshops. Nonetheless, sustaining teacher quality and morale remained a persistent problem throughout the decade.

5. Recent Trends (2000–2025)

In the 21st century, education in Zambia has changed significantly, reflecting global education agendas and also domestic ones. Policies and programs have sought to expand access, raise quality, and secure equity, as well as respond to technological, social, and economic challenges.

5.1 Alignment with Global Formulas (EFA, MDGs, SDGs)

Zambia aligned its education policies with global frameworks such as Education for All (EFA), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Major initiatives included abolition of fees in primary schools in 2002, increasing enrolment from 1.5 million to over 2.5 million in a few years (Ministry of Education, 2002). Policy interventions were also on literacy improvement, gender equality, and reduction of drop-out rates.

Partner Donor collaborations were central to the efforts, financing programs like UNICEF's School Feeding Program, World Bank-supported teacher training programs, and UNESCO-sponsored literacy efforts. Such collaborations improved both quality and access, especially in rural and disadvantaged areas (UNESCO, 2005).

5.2 ICT Integration and Digital Learning

Technological transformation took the fore in contemporary education. City schools had computer labs, e-learning content, and instructor training on ICT to enhance interactive learning and access to global information (Mulenga, 2020). Rural schools lagged behind, with slow or no internet, minimal electricity, and no devices being there to create a digital gap.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted such inequalities. As urban schools transitioned to online or radio-patterned learning, rural students were left behind, experiencing 30–40% learning losses in some school districts (World Bank, 2021). Teacher preparedness for online instruction was extremely uneven, prompting specialized digital literacy programs for teacher training in e-learning pedagogy and virtual classroom management.

5.3 Inclusive Education and Mother-Tongue Instruction

Inclusive education came into prominence, with inclusive student policies for those who are differently abled, like offering braille and audio materials, special teachers' training, and inclusion of special units in mainstream schools (UNESCO, 2019).

Mother-tongue instruction was fostered in primary grades to improve literacy acquisition. Pilot projects demonstrated that first-literacy in indigenous languages significantly improved reading competence in English by later grades (Tambulukani & Bus, 2011). However, large-scale application was still challenging due to the lack of teachers, material availability, and the prevalence of English on national examinations and curriculum.

5.4 Curriculum Reforms and Skills Development

Curriculum reforms targeted STEM education, vocational training, and entrepreneurship to prepare students for a competitive world economy. Pilot schemes in Copperbelt and Lusaka provinces introduced practical technical courses such as ICT, agriculture, and small-scale enterprise management.

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) were also engaged. For example, a collaboration between the Ministry of Education and a private mining company funded science laboratories and vocational schools to impart students with practical skills and entrepreneurial skills.

5.5 Equity and Access Challenges

Even with policy changes, there are still important equity issues that persist. The rural–urban divide is still wide, with rural students exposed to bad facilities, ineffective teacher deployment, and thin learning material. Socio-economic differences still determine access to private tutoring, internet materials, and co-curriculum activities.

Interventions to reduce inequalities have come in the shape of special bonuses to rural school teachers, scholarships for poor children, and community-based programs to increase access to early childhood and primary education. The interventions are intended to prevent excluded learners, including girls and children with disabilities, from being left behind in pursuit of universal education.

6. Conclusion

Since gaining independence, the education system in Zambia has passed through periods of optimism, crisis, and reform, reflecting the overall socio-political and economic life of the nation. The most notable achievements are increases in primary and secondary school expansion, growth of institutions of higher learning such as the University of Zambia, the growth of teachers' training institutions, and increased attention to inclusive learning strategies (Kelly, 1999; Ministry of Education, 2002). Policy interventions towards gender balance, literacy improvement, and building capacity have also contributed to the development of human capital and socio-economic development.

Yet underlying challenges remain. The rural–urban gap, regional imbalance, and socio-economic disparities continue to limit equitable access to quality education. Gender inequality in the form of early marriage and socio-cultural norms continues to affect girls' educational achievements, while children with disabilities and other vulnerable populations face restricted participation (World Bank, 1986; UNESCO, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic also exposed vulnerabilities in ICT infrastructure and digital learning preparedness, particularly in rural areas (Mulenga, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

In the future, Zambia must leverage experience and integrate reforms with Vision 2030 (GRZ, 2006) and the African Union's Agenda 2063. Policy implications include strengthening teacher training and continuous professional development, expanding ICT infrastructure to bridge the digital gap, and implementing curriculum and language policies that reconcile global competitiveness with local relevance. Equitable access to quality learning needs focused interventions to eradicate inequities across regions, gender, and socio-economic status in order to include all learners with high-quality and inclusive learning.

Future studies will need to measure the long-term impact of schooling reforms on learning outcomes, the effectiveness of inclusive education measures, and the integration of ICT in urban and rural classrooms. Studies on mother-tongue instruction, vocational training, and public-private partnerships may also inform evidence-based policymaking to enhance Zambia's schooling system.

Finally, education should continue to be the foundation of national growth, promoting social harmony, human capital development, and long-term economic prosperity. Through leveraging past achievements and solving entrenched problems, Zambia can attain a balanced, enduring, and future-proof education system.

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