

Original Research Article **Challenges Arising from Universal Free Basic Education, Eswatini**

ABSTRACT

Aims: In Eswatini, assiduous efforts are made to make education accessible to all, disadvantaged inclusive. The study examined public primary school teacher challenges as a result of free basic education (FBE), identified its impact, and conceivable mitigation strategies.

Study design: The empirical procedure adopted the qualitative design approach.

Place and Duration of Study: Randomly selected public primary schools from the four regions of Eswatini participated in the study during the 2020 to 2021 academic year.

Methodology: Population covered 30 teachers sampled under convenience and referral from 15 randomly selected schools. Data was collected by means of surveys.

Results: Teachers had a common opinion of the significance of FBE, it opened doors for children who would otherwise have missed a chance for education. Further findings indicated a plethora of problems since the introduction of FBE, such as shortages of teaching-learning facilities/resources, influx of learners, lack of attention to individual learner needs and trajectories, declined discipline, and deficient in teaching staff. Also, the deterioration of quality education due to automatic promotional policy.

Conclusion: Patterns of educational disadvantage must be tackled in Eswatini, visible drawbacks were shortage in facilities/materials needed for instruction, decline in discipline, difficile in attending to special needs learners in overcrowded classrooms, limiting productivity of schools, teachers, learners, and quality of education. It is hoped that the findings would shed more light on FBE for multi-stakeholder collaborations that will bring about decisions and strategies to affect its success for productive educational goals.

Keywords: Basic education; Challenges; Free basic education; Public primary school; Teacher perceptions

1. INTRODUCTION

From an epistemological perspective, education is a gradual process that brings positive changes to human life and behavior by the guidance of an instructor; however, learners can also take charge of their learning. Education is attainable in formal, informal, or non-formal settings with a formative effect on how a person thinks or acts. Education is a procedural effort of acquiring knowledge through study or imparting knowledge by way of instructions or some other practical means that brings a natural and lasting change in an individual's reasoning to achieve targeted goals. Educational impact on a nation is an empowering tool that expands knowledge to maximize abilities to invent and create, opens doors of escape, embraces diversity, acts as a catalyst to national identity, promotes human rights, and economic development raised through human capital all geared toward national and global development. All these are achievable via any of the forms of education, which requires perseverance, tuition, cost, and in some cases free. Free inspired the concept of FBE factoring inclusiveness enabling everyone to aspire and reach their educational potential. Universal free basic education is critical in nurturing children's development across a range of intelligence, and skills and lays the foundations necessary for successful participation in adult life. The universal declaration of FBE was significant since it gave the right to every child and individual to have the valuable benefits of education. Education offers several benefits ranging from academics to social and emotional developmental needs. This became achievable with the introduction of FBE with a no child left behind policy irrespective of socio-economic background. It was a paradigm shift against educational discrimination and

inequalities, serving as a means for all to acquire knowledge and skills to eradicate poverty and break the cycle of the deprived not having access to education. In Southern Africa, assiduous efforts were made to make education accessible to disadvantaged children.

2 REVIEWD LITERATURE

2.1 Free Basic Education Initiative and Benefits

The United Nations and many governments recognized the need and right to education for all global citizens, therefore, in 1948, the United Nations legitimized the idea of the individual state's financial responsibility to provide education when it was accepted in Article 26 of the Declaration of Human Rights. It stated that everyone had a right to education and that must be free in the elementary and fundamental stages to give those from underprivileged homes a chance to be educated [1]. Globally, most countries took the initiative to introduce FBE, Ethiopia and Malawi introduced FBE policies in 1994, Botswana started in 1999, and Lesotho in 2000. Consequently, in Eswatini the introduction of the 'Free Basic Education Act' was enacted in 2010 by the Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training [MOET]. Section 10 Clause 1 coerces parents and guardians to send their children or wards to school [2]. The FBE policy has been described as lendable because of its effect on the gross enrolment rate which increased resulting in more children admitted into primary school, providing free and obligatory tuition to grade 1 through to grade 7 pupils. This has become a part of the responsibility of most countries based on basic human rights [3]. The FBE aim was to augment the productive ability of disadvantaged school-going-age children, vulnerable children, and orphans. It created a positive outcome because it resulted in the abolishment of school fees and other levies that posed a serious hindrance to accessing formal education. FBE has been viewed as a consolidated program aimed at creating a conducive environment characterized by minimum barriers to access to quality primary education. The objective of FBE is to address the following barriers; distance from school, school fees, and socio-cultural, eradicate illiteracy, alleviate poverty, eliminate all forms of disparities and inequalities, and provide basic skills and knowledge for all Eswatini populace [2;4]. Free basic education is also known as compulsory schooling, open entry, free of charge at all primary school levels, bringing unity and order to education. It is said to be free because individuals are not responsible for tuition fee, but the government of that particular country, covering tuition, and stationeries together with at least a meal for the learners. In ESwatini, FBE was implemented after the article was approved by most societies that would gladly provide free education at all primary levels for all. FBE was implemented in grades 1 and 2 in 2010 officially though the process started in 2009. The program was then rolled out to grade 3 in 2011 and grade per year until the whole primary grades received FBE [3]. FBE in Eswatini begins at the age of six with a normal progression in a seven-year program that ends with an external examination in grade 7. This is a national assessment and is compulsory for every child to sit for it to qualify to enroll for senior secondary school or high school education [2]. The policy explicitly stated that all school going age children should access primary education with or without barriers. However, access to formal education is impeded by several barriers such as poverty, hunger, and poor progression of children [5]. Though FBE is a global obligation, education requires indirect additional costs such as travel and uniforms and which is still a challenge to low-income families. The introduction of FBE has helped eradicate poverty as well as improve the living standards of many. And the global initiative for FBE was aimed at promoting quality education for all, enhancing and developing political, social, and economic situations by eliminating chances of illiteracy and creating educated citizens. FBE bridges the gap between the rich and the poor in terms of access to education which is recognized as the vehicle for upward mobility for the economic and social development of any country. It made it possible to impart knowledge to the deprived, orphaned, and vulnerable children as well. FBE to be specific has the following benefits but is not limited to, the attainment of the millennium development goal of universal primary education, especially in developing countries like ESwatini. It has also contributed to modernity and morality in certain societies. The economic development of a country is dependent on education; literacy undoubtedly goes hand in hand with economic growth and development [6].

2.2 Challenges and Mitigation Strategies Associated with Free Basic Education

In as much as FBE has the major benefits of increasing access to basic education for all children regardless of their socio-economic status, there have been serious challenges that have bedeviled its implementation. They include and are not limited to; congested classrooms, limited physical facilities, and a shortage of teaching staff, and qualified teachers which negatively impact the quality of education. For instance, in Kenya, the declaration of FBE in 2003 led to challenges such as the influx of pupils' enrolment [7] affecting management, teacher shortages, lack of teaching-learning materials, shortage of facilities [8] and embezzlement and delay of funds [9] to mention a few. Amnesty International [10] corroborates that the South African educational system has underperformed in educational outcomes that perpetuate inequality and fails the school-going child because it is typical of having disintegrated infrastructures, sanitation, lack of basic materials and equipment, security, and classrooms filled beyond reasonable limits. Literature identifies the significance of FBE and its challenges with various mitigating strategies. In the context of Eswatini, this study aimed to add up to this field of study by investigating the challenges faced by schools and teachers in Eswatini as a result of FBE implementation, its impact on teaching, and seeking possible ways of addressing such challenges. The value of FBE cannot be over-emphasized as it opened access to education to students from disadvantaged communities and families resulting in an overwhelming student population in schools. However, there have been mitigating strategies that have

been in place in different countries, for instance, a study conducted by Mulinya and Orodho [11] showed that in Kakamega, South district in Kenya, to mitigate poor learner performance due to high enrolment which was a burden on teaching and teachers. Parents of underperformed learners, with the support of the school committee and other governing bodies, went the extra mile by employing additional teachers and taking care of the expenses. This eased the pressure on teachers, giving them room and time to support and take care of learner needs. On the same note, Njueh and Minja [12] of Nairobi opined that an integrated approach where multiple stakeholders are involved helps in addressing the challenges that come with FBE. A critical view of such support systems brings to the fore the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration in ensuring quality education that is accessible to all regardless of socio-economic status.

3. METHODOLOGY

In conducting the study, the qualitative approach was used since it gathers in-depth insights into problems for research. It is a strategy in that one chooses to integrate different components of the study coherently and logically, ensuring effectiveness in addressing research problems [13]. Qualitative research tries to preserve the voice and perspective of participants and can be adjusted as new research questions arise [14]. Well-written research requires data collection from a sample using an instrument that is valid and reliable hence surveys were used for data collection. With surveys, one can gather a lot of data in less time, respondents can answer questions without revealing their identity, responses can be compared with the historical data and enables understanding of the shift in respondents' choices and experiences, and fewer chances of bias creeping if one has a standard set of questions to be used for the targeted audience such benefits influenced the use of surveys in data collection for the study. The study was carried out in the era of Covid and due to the Covid-19 lockdown of schools and regulations such as limits on traveling, surveys were considered to be the best mode to gather data since they could be distributed online (WhatsApp) as a fast and healthy way to curb and contain the spread of the virus. Five head teachers and 25 sampled teachers from 15 randomly selected primary schools of the four regions of Eswatini participated in the study. The convenience sampling method was adopted to contact 12 known teachers due to availability and propinquity. The referral sampling approach was then used to get the 12 teachers to network and source other valid information from the rest of the participants. In total, thirty educators opted to be investigated with informed consent before participation. Data were analyzed using the content analysis approach which involved classifying collected data to make sense by highlighting important features and using numbers and percentages to quantify data where needed.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The sampled participants had comprehensive knowledge of FBE and its intended purpose, for if Eswatini have high rates of the educated it would mean eradicating illiteracy and poverty. They understood that exposure to quality education meant a more developed country therefore the need for all stakeholders to ensure supporting systems are in place for FBE's proper implementation.

4.1 Demographic Data

The study was conducted with 15 schools randomly selected across Eswatini involving 17 males and 13 females to avoid biases making a total of 30 teachers of varying ages and teaching experiences. From the biodata gathered, their working experiences ranged from 2 to 15 plus years comprising teachers who were already in the teaching field before the commencement of FBE in 2010. This gave a balanced view since older teachers are familiar with the educational conditions before FBE's implementation and its current eventualities. Five teachers had taught for 2-5 years (17%), 10 had been in the system for 5-10 years (33%), 9 had been in the field of teaching for 10-15 years (30%), and 6 respondents (20%) a long experience of over 15 years. From this data, 50% of these teachers have been in the mainstream system before and after the onset of the FBE policy had rolled and this validates the findings. Participants were from varying grade teaching levels making the sampled population heterogeneous. Seventeen (17) teachers were found to be teaching grades 3 to 5 having the highest percentage (57%), then grades 5 to 7 had nine (9) teachers with a percentage of 30% and the least being grades 1 to 3 with a percentage of 13% with four teachers.

For learner-educator ratios, 2 (6%) teachers had the suggested ratio of 1:30 or fewer learners; 4 representing 13% tutors had 1:40 learners; 10 teachers which 33%; indicated 1:50 and a high figure of 14 (46%) teachers had 1:50 plus learners respectively. Almost 50% of teachers had over fifty learners in one class exceeding the recommended learner-educator ratio of 1:30 or lesser leading to overcrowding. The study was in line with Marais [15] who asserts that overcrowded classrooms are one of the challenges of FBE, only 6% of the teachers had the recommended ratio or less. The study disclosed that a mitigating strategy of focusing on learner educator ratio is a start to fixing classroom problems, improving education quality, and giving teachers more time to focus on individual learner needs. Moreover, innovative teaching approaches can be adopted, resulting in fewer disruptions which are positive and transformative for both teachers and learners, enhancing learner-centeredness, and discipline [16].

4.2 Challenges that Come as a Result of Free Basic Education

There are deep-seated concerns about FBE in Eswatini and this is depicted in a myriad of challenges that arose from its inception. The Ministry of Education and Training's policy on learner grade retention was the participants' first call since

weak learners were not allowed to repeat a grade, and in their view, this was a hindrance and lowers the standard of education then again negatively impacting students' achievement. Globally, grade retention is a controversial subject as proponents see it as a motivational tool for giving learners a second chance to improve outcomes and catch up. Also, its implementation in the early grades has a positive impact on learner outcomes, and achievements, and give time for them to develop social maturity [17;18]. However, opponents argue that retention has adverse effects on learners, such as lowering self-esteem and self-image, affecting and influencing their lifestyle emotionally and socially. Alternatively, to some parents and the educational system, it comes at an extra cost and a waste of resources as corroborated by Kyereko *et al.* [18] who stated that the automatic promotion policy on retention is a waste of educational resources and results in the high dropout rate of school children [17]. An additional difficulty was attending to enrolled learners who were not exposed to pre-primary education. Reviewed literature points out that pre-primary education pre-prepares children for the formal school setting. They learn to identify, sound, and write letters of the alphabet or numbers, count, have early mathematical skills, and recognize shapes and colors by name and imagery. They learn skills such as engagement, socializing, emotional, communication, and developmental skills, they learn to collaborate and receive academic learning skills and knowledge about the world around them. Teachers emphasized that the lack of such building blocks of education is burdensome thus they have to offer extra tuition or productive instructional strategies as interventions for learners who could not easily catch-up during lessons. This is to support, motivate, and make learners competence-ready [19]. Although it is not a necessity to attend preschool, the child must be trained and exposed to the basics of education enabling them to be school ready. United Nations Educational, Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO) [20] alluded that, for years to come, early childhood education is the foundation for every form of learning and development.

Furthermore, the uncooperative attitude of over-aged enrolled learners was challenging, they tend to bully younger learners. This corroborates the opinions of Owuor *et al.* [21] whereby in their study found that due to FBE, classrooms have learners of varied ages and some averaged. An example given was a 13-year-old learner in class 2 and 20 years in class 8. In Africa, there is a high number of over-aged enrolment in schools, UNESCO added that over 90% of primary school learners are over-aged for their grade levels due to FBE. Over-aged enrolment is a result of some parents or guardians' delay in early enrolment of their wards; they wait up until the child can walk themselves to school. Being over-aged has negative influences on learning which bring about threats and tension in the classroom. This raises security concerns for teachers and schools [20]. Similarly, learners who came from poverty-stricken or child-headed families more often came to school on empty stomachs consequently they were unable to concentrate during lessons. There are socioeconomic reasons leading to poverty and hunger, and child-headed families are more of the challenges faced in public primary education. Most of these learners who come from deprived backgrounds will have limited opportunities for developing sound minds and skills needed for success in school, and they are less likely to perform in school. And without good performances, they have reduced opportunities to further their education.

To confirm the aforementioned grievances and confronted challenges, in 2018 a study on grade retention in Eswatini was conducted and the results revealed that it was caused by a myriad of factors. These included the lack of parental or guardian support as a repercussion of FBE policy. Parental involvement is a supportive key in helping learners not to fail at school. They encourage and provide care the school is not able to give [17]. Parents' and guardians' direct assistance with education had reduced on account of FBE [22]. Also, insufficient grasp of the English language, perceived difficult curriculum, congested classrooms, and failed attempts to meet the set standards for promotion to the next grade were identified. The study further identified, the decline in learner motivation and commitment to school work as a result of the banishment of corporal punishment with the introduction of positive discipline. Other factors were poverty, attending to learners with special educational needs, and immaturity level of learner grades [teachers having an overflow of learners who were behind in education]. Another is inaptly teacher qualifications (in the case of this study, 19 teachers were diploma holders whereas 11 had bachelor's degrees in primary education. This may mean teachers are not keen to further their studies). Also, schools' non-compliance to MOET promotion and retention policies due to inadequate knowledge of the policies, and pressure to excel in national examinations [23]. Tooley *et al.* [24] aver that all the above-mentioned are challenges that influence the quality of education and these outcomes are attributable to FBE.

4.3 Schools Challenges

Barriers to schools' under-achievement are oftentimes attributed to matters outside the educational system, fiscal, health-related issues cultural or communal concerns, and family. This is coupled with a lack of familial interest and support for education, and the lack of motivation or direction within the educational environment or school. To identify some of the challenges faced by schools as a result of FBE, teachers were asked to give an accent to or disagree with the lack of teaching and learning materials, learner educational mobility, teacher shortages, embezzlement, delay of funds, and low learner outputs. It is widely recognized that to enhance the quality of teaching, and learning, and improve student performance, teaching, and learning materials play a dominant role [25].

The data revealed that there is a serious lack of learning-teaching materials as a high percentage of 87 teachers concurred that schools lacked teaching-learning materials to accommodate the alarming number of learners. Since FBE, there has been an insufficient supply of textbooks, resulting in learners' textbook ratio of 1:3 or some cases 1:5 or an overwhelming ratio of 1:15 instead of a book to a learner [26; 27] although it is a requirement that every child must have a personal textbook [28]. Teaching-learning materials are paramount to the education process because they support

specific learning aims and objectives, but the lack of them hinders the productivity of both teachers and learners. How well a student learns and the extent to which it transforms their personal, social, and developmental benefits are education outcomes. The benefits of numeracy, literacy, emotional, creative, and life skills are broadly conceived as educational outcomes. The implication is that quality is proved by outcomes, though the educational quality is dependent on the systems input and learner characteristics [21]. Close to seventy percent of teachers (67%) corroborated that there was low learner productivity in schools which resulted in grade repetition. Universally, grade repetition is a major concern but more common in developing countries. They exert additional pressure and workload on the teachers and educational system [17] which compromises the quality of education. Monitoring global reports index that in most Sub-Saharan countries, the educational quality remains poor and the challenge is not just the gross intake rates of learners but maintaining them in school [21]. In effect, underachievement in schools is a fact in deprived and disadvantaged areas. Underperformance at the primary level means a substantial number of learners enter into the educational stream with a limited range of skills which is a disadvantage to good performance. Learners' underachievement is an early indicator that something may be wrong, a severe disadvantage to a young child. If this leads to occasional taunting, eventually the learner may drop out or be excluded from school, therefore the learner is more likely to be involved in other risk behaviors not beneficial to society.

According to Sorin and Iloste [29] of Australia, mobility in education is circumstantial, resulting in the family moving due to employment or change in accommodation; another factor could be parents moving children from one school to another due to personal reasons. Notably, learners who transfer from school to school are more likely to come from single-parent homes and disengaged [30]. Teachers' reports indicated that switching schools affected learner outputs, 53% of the teachers gave consent to this. Eventually, every student changes schools, if the child is embracing new academic challenges and social fits then it is an advantage but learners who move more often have a propensity to have low positive outcomes academically, impede learning, and makes the student unstable. This is because such transfers necessitate weeks of settling down resulting in absenteeism. Additionally, schools with high percentages of learners switching schools have stressed learning environments, instructional issues, and social vices such as bullying, tardiness, robbery, negative behavioral issues, and verbal abuse of teachers. School mobility brings disruptions to class routines, building lasting relationships become a challenge affecting the child's development and esteem. Learners who switch schools are more likely to drop out.

The success of education is largely dependent on a school having adequate, skilled, and extremely motivated teachers [31]. 93% of respondents corroborated to the massive lack of teachers in schools since the Ministry of Education and Training is not able to employ an adequate number of teachers to replace the retired because in 2018 the government took a directive to freeze vacant and new posts to bring more money into the country. Although there is an increase in educational attainment, there is little change in human resources. The class sizes have changed amidst diminishing teaching staff [32]. From earlier findings, almost 50% of the investigated teachers had classrooms occupied with 50 plus learners which are more than the required learner-educator ratio of 1:30 [7], this increases teachers' workload, therefore, affecting teacher-learner productivity [22]. Although FBE led to the abolishment of school fees in public schools, the cost of school uniforms comes at an expense for some families. Additional information gathered from Eswatini was the lack of school uniforms for some learners thus putting an extra burden on the schools to buy uniforms for vulnerable children to ensure all learners have the feeling of belonging which enables them to sense belonging to a school community that enhances teaching and learning. Moreover, prescribed uniforms avoid competing for clothing and shift much focus to school and studies. On the contrary, in the delay of funds by the government, 90% of the teachers stated that funds were distributed on time to the selected schools of study. Mbwana and Onyango [33] affirmed that the adequate supply of funds has added advantages in increasing teaching and learning outcomes, and enhances the confidence levels of heads of schools to manage and run affairs efficiently.

4.4 Teacher Challenges

Teachers are important and best known for educating learners that are placed in their care. Beyond that, they serve many other vital roles other than teaching, they set the tone of the educational space making it a conducive environment for learning, act as role models who mentor and nurture. Besides, they equally listen and look for signs of trouble in and around the classroom. Aside these qualities and duties, there are a couple of drawbacks that can make a teacher's job tedious, especially in countries that implement FBE. The following areas were looked at to address some of the hitches faced by teachers as a result of FBE implementation. A good indicator of a country's determination to provide universal quality education for all is a commitment to spend any amount in acquiring the necessary teaching-learning enablers for schools. The study established the lack of instructional materials, 93% of respondents affirmed this challenge, lack of teaching materials like textbooks, exercise books, chalks, and dusters make it hard for effective teaching and learning to take place. Teachers had to improvise by making photocopies and sometimes ended up financing some of the needed materials as buttressed by UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report [28]. The growing number of learners with diverse learning styles in a classroom and the materials needed for teaching due to FBE makes it difficult for teachers to explain abstract concepts. Besides, with the aid of teaching-learning materials learners can concretize a learning experience to make learning more exciting, interesting, and interactive [34].

Learner over-enrolment was another leading challenge for teachers, with the influx of learners in classrooms exceeding the required ratio of 1:30, indicated by a high percentage of 93% [28] of teachers who agreed to the high numbers in the classrooms. This is supported by Tooley *et al.* [24] who reported enrolment cases with the onset of FBE. Owuor *et al.* [21] added that over-enrolment influences educational quality, it activates a sequencing reaction on working space, arrangement of sitting, sanitation, instructional methods, assessments, and examinations, and facility adequacy, among others. The mass influx of pupils into schools due to FBE has stretched facilities to their limit. Classrooms are overcrowded with less space to maneuver, desks and chairs are inadequate and so are textbooks as stated by Mwanza and Silukuni [26]. Lack of installed temperature regulators for the cold winter times; overcrowded classrooms tend to be too hot during summer for teachers and learners thus resulting in low concentration levels in learners, as observed by Marais [15].

Free basic education was introduced to ensure inclusion, inclusion meant all; this opened doors to special needs learners [35]. Learners with special needs is a term used to describe learners who are unable to process information as quickly as others, take longer to develop new skills and understand complex information, and may find it difficult to interact with other people. 67% agreed to have challenges addressing learners with special needs. Teachers in mainstream schools have little or no knowledge of how to handle or help such learners especially those who had been in the system before the onset of FBE. A teacher's class may have learners with various disabilities and since each learner is a unique case, the teacher must modify their lessons to suit each learner by providing individualized education programs, and thus becomes time-consuming. Inclusive education of learners with special needs in mainstream schools due to FBE has posed a serious threat to teachers [36]. Moreover, special needs learners have individual needs and trajectories that require differentiated instruction and support [19] with the required facilities. Educational facilities are buildings and equipment that are built or installed or established to serve educational services. The physical and emotional health of students and teachers depends on the facilities available. Eswatini public schools are not adequately equipped, a shortage of facilities was reported by 73% of the teachers, and there is a drastic increase in enrolment but resources in schools are not expanded [32]. Existing facilities must be maintained while new ones are constructed not to strain current ones [21]. Inadequate facilities affect management and attending to learner needs. Intrinsically, limited facilities [learning-teaching aids, structures, water, desk, commode, et cetera] compromise the quality of education [31].

The decline in discipline was another problem, 53% of the respondents alluded to the fact that discipline was deteriorating. Common issues could not be addressed in schools due to large numbers and the abolishment of corporal punishment. The introduction of positive discipline is not effective to cope with the large numbers. Congestion had hindered classroom management and teachers' control over learners. Respondents stated that over-age learners fail to cooperate with teachers when they try to discipline them, sometimes rejecting the discipline of any form. Disciplining children is important to create a safe learning environment. Discipline help lays a good foundation for being selective, independent, punctual, focused, encouraged, and organized in life. Large class sizes affect class management by teachers in terms of maintaining discipline and the achievement of effective teaching and learning. It is difficult to maintain discipline in a class as many children are unruly and noisy. Disciplining learners is meant to discourage unacceptable behavior and a way of managing the classroom. Teachers have a responsibility to devote their time to learners' behavioral problems. The teacher must assert discipline during classroom interaction, this may not be easy in a large class as the teacher may not be able to monitor and modify the behavior of every learner. On the issue of managing curriculum, 67% of the teachers held the view that FBE did not affect such and they do manage to finish the syllabi on time whereas 33% failed. FBE hurts the management of curriculum and instruction. Curriculum and instruction are the core of any institution of learning. Similar studies on Kenyan schools indicated that 56% of teachers fully covered syllabi for various subjects while 44% could not fully cover syllabi. Too much workload and large classes were singled out as the reason why syllabuses were not fully covered [37].

4.5 Impact of Challenges of Educational Quality

The nature of attaining educational quality is multi-faceted and schools alone cannot solve the deep-rooted societal problems, there is a need to ensure that the FBE program in place is effective as possible. The study found that the FBE program has both positive and negative impacts on the children of Eswatini. Teachers credited FBE for giving every child a chance for education and an instrument of change, for no country, can develop unless the citizens are well educated. Some acknowledged that FBE played a key role in reducing the level of theft and violence among children because they spent more time at school rather than on the streets. Access to education is a protective factor against living on the streets. However, teachers stated that the automated promotional policy, questioned the very quality of education since there were no failures but promoted all learners regardless of their weakness in content knowledge for the next grade.

Before the implementation of the FBE policy in Eswatini, the teaching staff that had already been in the system before FBE did not receive suitable professional development before the enactment of policy. This resulted in many not being able to mitigate the high enrolment rate and meet differentiated learner needs [special cases such as the autistic, disabled, down syndrome, impaired, et cetera] which affects performance and quality of education. Additional evidence from Zwane and Malale [38] of Eswatini emphasizes that the government failed to train public school teachers in the country before the policy implementation which resulted in the majority of the teachers not readily prepared to face the consequences of FBE. Motsamai and Alers [39] corroborate that empirically, quality is diversified and has many

meanings, within a cultural, economic, and political context, making education complex. On the account of primary education, they summarized that quality in basic education is dependent on the setting, teacher and learner readiness to participate, what and how is taught, learner types, learner wellbeing, attitudes, knowledge and skills, curriculum structure, educational level of teachers which reflects performance, supporting material, infrastructure and family and community support.

Zwane and Malale [38] of Eswatini state what encompasses quality education, they acknowledged the role of the teacher as pre-eminent in quality education and that the quality of education is determined by the quality of its teachers. Additionally, the effectiveness of a school is a contributing factor in quality although social backgrounds and learner abilities greatly influence outcomes. Already, there is the issue of understaffed teachers, but the intake of new teachers with inadequate knowledge of content and subject matter is counterproductive and perilous to quality education. For quality to be assured, the educational system needs teachers who are qualified and motivated; and learners who are prepared to learn and change [39]. Also having a quality assurance team to assess teachers and what goes on in the schools and classrooms will go a long way to ensure educational quality, for having a good education is significant for the development of Eswatini if not, FBE will not serve its intended purpose.

4.6 Strategies to Alleviate Challenges

There is a need to find strategies to challenge the underachievement of FBE since these have profound consequences on learners later in life. Not only limited to economic uncertainties, but individualized well-being, self-esteem, and participation in family and societal living. Collected data disclosed and suggested ways on how teachers could mitigate challenges that came as a result of FBE. 93% harmonized on understaffing and the employment of extra teaching staff. The massive enrolment has its toll on the teachers in attending to the needs and trajectories of learners therefore the employment of additional teaching staff will aid in matching up to the recommended learner-educator ratio [40]. According to Motsamai and Alers [39] and Saxena *et al.*, [41], teachers have administrative burdens, not only are they expected to give classroom instructions but also commit to instilling values in learners. Teachers' tease, interact and engage learners to apply acquired knowledge to their daily happenings. With all these demands on the teacher, it is a prerequisite that the government and schools recruit quality teachers for improved learner outcomes. Twenty-six representing 87% of teachers approved that government should construct more classrooms to decongest classrooms. Additional evidence from Motsamai and Alers study in 2022, stated that on the issue of infrastructure, teachers complained of inadequate structures to accommodate the high number of learners. Overcrowded classrooms exacerbate other challenges like insufficient desks and hinder movements in attending to individual learners [26].

Public schools' management relies solely on support and funds from the government. 80% concurred that government and the Ministry of Education should ensure early disbursement of funds with continuous follow-ups to confirm funds do reach schools on time. On a great note, this will enable the school administration to buy needed materials on time for an easy flow of teaching and learning at the onset of school openings. Motsamai and Alers, [39] opine that delay in the disbursement of funds affects a school destructively, needed instructional and learning aids cannot be acquired in time affecting the quality of education. Respondents had equal response percentages (50%) that there should be an encouragement of enrolment but with restricted transfers to avoid negative effects on performance because of the interruptions caused by educational mobility. Gasper *et al.*, [30] point out that switching schools hurt learners' behavior and outcomes. Twenty-three (77%) teachers did not agree to teachers investing extra time in teaching and learning since teaching is a strenuous exercise done at lengthy hours, thus exhaustion will affect teacher effectiveness. Saxena *et al.*, [41] affirmed that the teaching profession is a complex, challenging, and demanding task that requires endurance.

Crombach *et al.*, [42] observed that street children are vulnerably exposed to precarious conditions and violence. These children are marginalized and have less chance of any fruitful future, but the onset of FBE which became a stimulus for inclusive education opened doors for such deprived children. However, absorbing these children into the mainstream requires rehabilitation because of adverse effects such as psychological disorders. 70% of teachers consented to rehabilitate street children before intergrading them into the formal school setting. In some cases, some of these children are under the influence and misuse of drugs, criminal activities, and promiscuity leading to unintended pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases which are no hopeful attitudes to life in any way. Street children are generally exposed to violence, looting, and vandalism making them a threat to security. With all these related behavior patterns, there is the need to address the risk of underlying problems and have an in-depth investigation to understand their challenges and recommend strategies to address their social development before absorbing them into the educational system [43]. In addition, teachers specified that government should provide workshops, seminars, and training courses for professional development which will have a positive effect on their performance and the quality of education given to learners. Teachers' professional development is not only for the individual benefit of the teacher but a national benefit as well, it is essentially important that teachers receive refresher training courses from the government and ministry in alignment with the global and diversified needs of learners [39]. Correspondingly, teachers entreat the government to address the issue of passing weak learners who do not qualify for the next grade by allowing them to repeat the year.

5. CONCLUSION

Patterns of educational disadvantage must be tackled in Eswatini, there are visible drawbacks that come as a result of FBE, most of the teachers stated that there was a shortage in facilities and materials needed for teaching, a decline in discipline, and difficulty in teaching learners with special needs in overcrowded classrooms, all these limits the productivity of schools, teachers, learners, and quality of education. UNESCO [17] proposed that leaving such problems unattended will result in insurmountable challenges in the future that will sabotage educational goals and values. Although, the government had no clear plan for dealing with the rapid rise in enrolment which affected school infrastructure, teaching personnel, and other learning enablers. These hurdles cannot be unnoticed as they have the potential of demobilizing the quality of education entirely in Eswatini. Therefore, before the learning process becomes meaningless, it is a matter of urgency that the government prioritizes the hiring of qualified-skilled teachers and reverses the decision to freeze the appointment of new teachers. Concerns were raised about the quality of education in public schools given the increase in the enrolment of learners. The implementation of the FBE policy came on board with the government's unpreparedness for its challenges. Furthermore, the government must invest in school infrastructure development, availability of furniture, and other necessary amenities to mitigate the learner surges in schools. This development will ensure that the acceptable teacher-learner ratio is realized to allow a smooth and effective instructional process [39;3].

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends encouraging teacher incentives, well-equipped and sufficient teaching-learning materials, and facilities for progressive teaching and learning. Also, the school administration together with the Ministry of Education and Training should invest and put systems in place to accommodate the high enrolment rate of learners thus may help ease congestion in schools. Easing the congestion will go a long way in improving educational outcomes for teachers who can have ample space and time to attend to individual learner differences. The old experienced teachers should be briefed and well-equipped with knowledge and skill to handle learners with special needs since FBE was not introduced until 2010. The government introduced the course of Inclusive Education in tertiary institutions while some teachers were already out working so professional development on Inclusive Education for such teachers could help achieve the FBE objective. Teachers need to be trained and prepared to work in multi-age classrooms, often with students who are adults and independently providing for themselves [18]. There must be institutional implementations to enhance and support the schools with the provision of support for individual tuition, in-class support systems, individual withdrawal classes, small group classes, support with the completion of the task and written examination preparations for special needs learners, and to promote quality education. In addition, the Eswatini government needs to make the funding of schools a priority. Government should keep up the good work of distributing funds to schools, and make sure that all payments due are received for the effective running of administrative duties in schools. This includes and is not limited to, furniture, textbooks, exercise books, instructional materials, equipment, feeding scheme, repairs of existing infrastructure needed for learners' safety, et cetera. Regarding grade retention, there should be measurements set in place in clarifying it, such as evidence of the learner's attendance, behavior, and performance with parental consent for validation. When used selectively and not discriminatory, it will develop the educational system rather than lead to higher dropout rates. Parents, schools, and teachers must identify learner difficulties and provide interventions [pairing weaker learners with performing students, extended day or year schedules for remedial support, summer school programs, training teachers to work with multi-age and special needs learners], providing varying and better learning opportunities to attend to the needs of such learners for a better outcome to promote them to the next grade. To limit repetition, another factor that needs to be looked at and worked upon is investing in pre-primary education, if possible, there should be an early start in investing in the labor force of the future. Furthermore, enforcing age-appropriate enrolment policy, employment of supporting quality teachers, infrastructure, and teaching-learning materials [17]. To tackle over-aged enrolment, there should be proposed actions on age-appropriate enrolment policy as well, and older learners could be diverted to accelerated learning programs [20] or build on practical transferable skills. Leaving these bottlenecks in FBE unchecked will only aggravate issues though trying to make education accessible to all for the betterment of the nation.

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