

Implementation of Free Education Policy in Tanzania: Perspectives of School Administrators

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Abstract: The Free Education Policy in Tanzania was introduced to expand equitable access to basic education and support national social and economic development. Although the policy has significantly increased school enrolment and attendance, its implementation has generated a number of operational challenges within schools. This paper examines these challenges from the perspectives of school administrators. The study employs a qualitative research design based on a theory-guided literature review of policy documents, education sector reports, and empirical studies related to free education and school leadership in Tanzania. Relevant literature was identified from scholarly databases and official government publications and analyzed using thematic synthesis to identify recurring patterns related to policy implementation. The analysis is guided by policy implementation theory and educational leadership theory, which provide a framework for interpreting how national policies interact with school-level realities. Findings indicate that delayed and insufficient capitation grants, rapid enrolment expansion without proportional infrastructure development, teacher shortages, and unclear policy guidelines place considerable pressure on school management. The study also highlights limited administrative autonomy and weak stakeholder engagement as factors constraining effective school leadership. The paper argues that successful implementation of free education requires not only adequate funding but also stronger administrative capacity, improved policy communication, and governance systems that support school level decision-making. Understanding administrators' experiences therefore provides important insights for improving policy implementation in Tanzania and similar education contexts.

Keywords: Free education policy; policy implementation; school administration; educational leadership; Tanzania.

Cite this Article

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Introduction

The introduction of the Free Education Policy in Tanzania represented a major reform in the country's education system aimed at expanding equitable access to basic education. Announced in 2015 and implemented in 2016, the policy removed school fees and most parental financial contributions in public primary and lower secondary schools (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2016). The reform reflected national commitments to social justice, poverty reduction, and human capital development. It also aligned with global education agendas such as Education for All and Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasize inclusive and equitable quality education (UNESCO, 2015). The policy produced rapid and visible changes in school participation patterns. Enrolment in public primary and secondary schools increased substantially within the first years of implementation, particularly among children from low-income households and previously marginalized communities (Mbiti & Schipper, 2019; URT, 2018). Removal of direct schooling costs reduced financial barriers that had historically limited access. Increased participation signaled progress toward universal basic

education and strengthened national aspirations for socioeconomic transformation through education. Access expansion, however, occurred within an education system characterized by existing resource constraints. Many schools entered the reform period with limited infrastructure, insufficient teaching materials, and teacher shortages (Bashir et al., 2018). The sudden increase in student numbers intensified pressure on already constrained school environments. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate sanitation facilities, and shortages of desks and textbooks emerged across many regions (Bhalalusesa & Mosha, 2019). These conditions created new challenges for maintaining educational quality alongside expanded access. School administrators occupy a central position in policy implementation because they translate national directives into operational school practices. Head teachers and principals coordinate enrolment management, resource allocation, financial reporting, staff supervision, and community engagement. Under free education, these responsibilities expanded substantially. Administrators became responsible for managing increased enrolment, administering government capitation grants, maintaining accountability systems, and sustaining learning quality

under resource pressure (Ngussa & Makewa, 2014). Their leadership therefore mediates the relationship between policy design and educational outcomes. Implementation complexity increased because policy expectations expanded faster than systemic capacity development. Government funding mechanisms such as capitation grants replaced school fees, yet disbursement delays and funding gaps limited school operational capacity (URT, 2019; World Bank, 2021). Infrastructure expansion and teacher recruitment progressed gradually relative to enrolment growth (Bashir et al., 2018). Administrators responded through adaptive strategies such as timetable restructuring, temporary classrooms, and community engagement efforts. These strategies sustained access while exposing tensions between policy goals and practical realities. Administrators' perspectives provide critical insight into implementation processes because they experience policy effects directly within school environments. Their experiences reveal operational constraints, leadership dilemmas, and contextual adaptations shaping implementation outcomes. Policy analysis that excludes administrator perspectives risks overlooking mechanisms that determine effectiveness at ground level. Understanding administrative experiences therefore contributes to more realistic policy evaluation and reform design. This study examines challenges in implementing free education in Tanzania from the perspectives of school administrators through qualitative literature analysis guided by policy implementation and educational leadership theories. Synthesis of research findings and policy documents identifies systemic factors influencing implementation and clarifies leadership conditions required for sustainable reform. The analysis contributes to understanding how national education policies interact with school-level realities in resource-constrained contexts.

Problem Statement

The Free Education Policy in Tanzania sought to eliminate financial barriers and ensure equitable access to basic education. The policy succeeded in expanding enrolment and participation across primary and lower secondary education (URT, 2018). Increased access represents a major achievement in national education development. Yet implementation has generated significant challenges within school environments responsible for delivering education. Many schools struggle to provide adequate learning conditions despite higher enrolment levels, indicating a gap between policy intentions and educational practice. A central implementation issue concerns imbalance between enrolment growth and resource provision. Removal of school fees stimulated rapid increases in student numbers, while infrastructure, teaching materials, and financial support expanded more slowly (Bashir et al., 2018). Schools experienced overcrowded classrooms, insufficient furniture, and shortages of learning resources (Bhalalusesa & Mosha, 2019). Administrators manage these conditions while attempting to maintain instructional quality and school discipline. Such constraints undermine the quality dimension of free education and threaten sustainability of access gains. Financial management under free education introduces additional strain. Government capitation grants replaced parental contributions, yet disbursement delays and funding gaps relative to enrolment levels limit school operational capacity (URT, 2019; World Bank, 2021). Administrators plan budgets and procure resources under uncertain funding conditions while remaining accountable for financial reporting and compliance. Limited financial autonomy further constrains responsiveness to school needs. These conditions create tension between accountability

requirements and resource availability. Human resource limitations intensify implementation challenges. Teacher recruitment has not matched enrolment expansion, producing high student–teacher ratios and expanded teaching workloads (Bashir et al., 2018). Administrators allocate limited teachers across subjects and grade levels, often outside specialization areas. Teacher fatigue and reduced motivation affect instructional effectiveness, while administrators lack authority to recruit additional staff locally (URT, 2018). Responsibility for learning outcomes therefore exceeds administrative control over staffing inputs. Community–school relations also shifted under free education. Removal of fees altered parental expectations regarding financial responsibility for schooling. Many parents interpret free education as elimination of all contributions, reducing community participation in school development (Mbiti & Schipper, 2019). Administrators must negotiate between policy directives and practical needs for community support. Ambiguity in policy communication regarding permissible contributions intensifies these tensions (Sumra, 2017). Governance arrangements contribute to implementation difficulties. Centralised authority over staffing, infrastructure, and finances restricts school-level decision making while accountability expectations remain strong (URT, 2018). Administrators remain responsible for policy outcomes without corresponding authority to adjust resources or structures. This imbalance reduces administrative effectiveness and discourages innovation in addressing local challenges. The core problem therefore concerns conditions under which free education operates rather than policy goals themselves. Expanded access has not been matched with adequate resources, autonomy, and support systems required for effective school management. Administrators carry increased responsibilities within constrained environments, producing implementation strain that affects educational quality. Understanding these administrative challenges is essential for strengthening policy effectiveness and sustainability.

Research Questions

This study examines the implementation of the Free Education Policy in Tanzania through the perspectives of school administrators. The central research question guiding the analysis is: How do school administrators experience and manage challenges associated with implementing the Free Education Policy in Tanzania? To explore this question, the study addresses four interrelated sub-questions:

- i. What institutional and resource constraints affect administrators' implementation of the policy?
- ii. How do administrators interpret and apply policy directives within their schools?
- iii. What leadership strategies do administrators use to maintain school functioning under free education?
- iv. How do governance and accountability structures influence administrators' capacity to implement the policy effectively?

Significance of Study

This study holds importance for multiple stakeholders involved in educational policy, school administration, and national development in Tanzania. It contributes to the understanding of policy implementation through the lens of school administrators, who translate national directives into practical actions. While the Free Education Policy increased access to basic education,

understanding the challenges faced at school level illuminates gaps between policy intentions and implementation outcomes. Administrators' experiences provide insight into conditions that facilitate or hinder effective policy operation (Lipsky, 1980; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). The findings offer guidance for policymakers and education authorities. Funding delays, infrastructure deficits, teacher shortages, and governance limitations highlight areas requiring intervention. Aligning policy ambitions with resource allocation, administrative capacity, and institutional support can improve the effectiveness and sustainability of free education (URT, 2019; World Bank, 2021). The research also enhances professional development for school administrators. Identifying leadership strategies, coping mechanisms, and decision-making approaches under free education informs training programs, mentorship initiatives, and professional guidelines. Administrators gain tools to manage enrollment growth, resource constraints, and community expectations effectively (Hallinger, 2005; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). The study has implications for education quality and student outcomes. Understanding administrative challenges enables targeted support to reduce the negative effects of overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and teacher shortages. Improved school management strengthens educational quality and equity, ensuring that access expansion leads to meaningful learning outcomes (Bashir et al., 2018; Bhalalusesa & Mosha, 2019). Finally, the research provides insight for other countries pursuing free or universal basic education in resource-constrained contexts. Lessons from Tanzania regarding administrative challenges, resource management, and stakeholder engagement can inform policy and practice in comparable education systems (Mbiti & Schipper, 2019; Sumra, 2017). The study contributes to understanding the interaction between national policy and school-level practice, informs policymakers and administrators, strengthens leadership knowledge, and offers practical guidance for sustaining free education in contexts with limited resources.

Theoretical Lens

The analysis integrates policy implementation theory and educational leadership theory to interpret administrators' experiences under free education reform. Policy implementation theory explains processes through which policy intentions translate into practical outcomes. Top-down perspectives emphasize centralized authority, clear objectives, and compliance structures guiding implementation (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Free education in Tanzania reflects this orientation through nationally defined funding mechanisms, enrolment policies, and administrative regulations. Implementation of success within this model depends on alignment between policy goals, resources, and institutional arrangements. Bottom-up perspectives emphasize the role of local actors who interpret and adapt policy within contextual constraints (Lipsky, 1980). School administrators function as street-level implementers translating national directives into school practices. Their decisions regarding resource allocation, staffing distribution, and community engagement shape actual policy outcomes. Implementation therefore emerges through interaction between policy design and local realities rather than automatic compliance.

Educational leadership theory complements implementation theory through explaining how school leaders manage organizational change and sustain educational quality. Instructional leadership emphasizes administrator focus on teaching and learning

conditions such as class size, resources, and teacher support (Hallinger, 2005). Transformational leadership highlights vision, motivation, and collective commitment during reform processes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Distributed leadership recognizes shared responsibilities among staff and stakeholders in complex organizational environments (Spillane, 2006). Integration of these theories clarifies that free education implementation depends on both structural policy conditions and leadership capacity within schools. Policy implementation theory explains systemic constraints such as funding gaps and centralized governance. Educational leadership theory explains administrative responses such as adaptive management, stakeholder negotiation, and internal capacity building. Combined application provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing administrators' experiences under free education reform.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design based on theory-guided literature review to examine challenges in implementing free education in Tanzania. Literature-based qualitative analysis enables synthesis of empirical studies, policy documents, and sector reports to generate conceptual understanding of implementation processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The approach suits policy research contexts where extensive documentation exists but perspectives require integration and interpretation. Data sources include government policy documents, education sector performance reports, capitation grant guidelines, and scholarly studies addressing free education and school leadership in Tanzania. Key policy materials include the Education and Training Policy and related implementation guidelines (URT, 2016; URT, 2018; URT, 2019). Scholarly literature examining resource constraints, enrolment expansion, and leadership challenges in Tanzanian schools provides empirical grounding (Bashir et al., 2018; Bhalalusesa & Mosha, 2019; Ngussa & Makewa, 2014; Mbiti & Schipper, 2019). International analyses of African education systems offer comparative insight into structural capacity issues (World Bank, 2021).

The analysis followed thematic synthesis procedures. Relevant literature was reviewed to identify recurring patterns describing administrators' experiences and implementation challenges. Themes related to funding, infrastructure, staffing, governance, and stakeholder relations were coded and organized conceptually. Policy implementation theory informed interpretation of structural conditions shaping implementation. Educational leadership theory informed interpretation of administrative responses and coping strategies. Theoretical integration enabled explanation of both constraints and agency within implementation processes. The literature-based qualitative approach provides comprehensive understanding of systemic issues affecting free education implementation. Integration of multiple sources enhances validity through triangulation of findings across studies and policy reports. Conceptual synthesis offers insight into administrative experiences that might remain fragmented within individual studies. The method therefore supports robust analysis of policy implementation in resource-constrained education systems.

Findings and Discussion

The literature reviewed reveals that implementation of the Free Education Policy in Tanzania has produced significant administrative, organizational, and pedagogical challenges at school level. These challenges cluster around five interrelated

domains: financial constraints, infrastructure pressure, human resource shortages, governance limitations, and community– school relations. Each domain influences administrators’ capacity to translate policy directives into effective educational practice.

Financial constraints and capitation grant management

Financial limitations emerge as the most persistent challenge affecting school administration under free education. The policy replaced school fees with government capitation grants intended to cover operational costs such as teaching materials, minor repairs, and examination expenses (URT, 2019). Evidence shows that grant disbursement often occurs late and remains insufficient relative to enrolment growth and school needs (World Bank, 2021). Administrators therefore operate under conditions of uncertainty that complicate budgeting, procurement, and planning processes. Studies indicate that schools receive funding calculated per student, yet enrolment increases outpace financial adjustments, creating widening resource gaps (Mbiti & Schipper, 2019). Administrators must prioritize expenditures among competing needs such as textbooks, classroom maintenance, and sanitation supplies. This prioritization frequently results in postponement of essential improvements, particularly infrastructure maintenance. Policy implementation theory interprets this condition as resource goal incongruence, where policy expectations exceed available inputs (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Financial constraints also increase accountability pressure on administrators. Government regulations require detailed reporting on grant usage, yet administrators lack sufficient training in financial management and procurement procedures (URT, 2018). Audit compliance obligations consume administrative time that might otherwise support instructional leadership. Educational leadership theory recognises this shift as role expansion, where administrative accountability demands reduce focus on teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2005). Consequently, administrators balance financial compliance responsibilities with educational leadership tasks under constrained conditions.

Infrastructure pressure and learning environment quality

Enrolment expansion following free education produced significant strain on school infrastructure. Many schools designed for smaller populations now serve double or triple their previous student numbers (Bashir et al., 2018). Classroom shortages, overcrowded learning spaces, inadequate desks, and limited sanitation facilities appear frequently in the literature (Bhalalusesa & Mosha, 2019). Administrators confront daily logistical challenges related to space allocation, timetable restructuring, and facility maintenance. Overcrowding affects instructional processes and classroom management. Large class sizes reduce teacher– student interaction, limit formative assessment, and increase disciplinary difficulties. Administrators attempt mitigation through double-shift systems, temporary classrooms, and multi-grade arrangements. Such strategies maintain access while compromising pedagogical quality. Instructional leadership theory emphasizes that effective teaching requires manageable class environments and adequate learning resources (Hallinger, 2005). Infrastructure deficits therefore constrain administrators’ ability to support instructional improvement. Sanitation and water facilities represent another

infrastructure concern. Rapid enrolment growth increases demand for toilets and water access, especially in rural schools. Insufficient facilities create health and attendance risks, particularly for girls during adolescence (Bashir et al., 2018). Administrators must manage maintenance and hygiene promotion without sufficient funds or technical support. These conditions illustrate how physical infrastructure directly shapes educational participation and equity outcomes.

Teacher shortages, workload, and professional strain

Human resource limitations form a third major domain of implementation challenges. The policy increased student numbers without proportional teacher recruitment, producing high student– teacher ratios (Bashir et al., 2018). Administrators distribute limited teachers across subjects and grade levels, often assigning teachers outside their specialization. This practice affects instructional quality and teacher confidence. Large classes and extended teaching loads increase teacher fatigue and reduce motivation. Administrators must address absenteeism, performance concerns, and morale issues while lacking authority to recruit additional staff. Centralized teacher deployment policies restrict local staffing decisions (URT, 2018). Implementation theory describes this condition as authority– responsibility imbalance, where local actors carry operational responsibility without decision power (Lipsky, 1980). Professional development opportunities remain limited relative to expanded teaching demands. Teachers require new strategies for managing large classes and diverse learning needs, yet training access remains uneven. Administrators attempt peer mentoring and internal workshops, illustrating distributed leadership practices (Spillane, 2006). Such initiatives demonstrate leadership agencies under constraint, though they cannot fully compensate for systemic staffing shortages.

Governance structures and administrative autonomy

Governance arrangements significantly influence administrators’ capacity to implement free education. The Tanzanian education system retains centralized authority over staffing, budgeting, and infrastructure planning (URT, 2018). Administrators remain accountable for performance indicators such as examination results and enrolment retention while decision-making power over critical resources remains external. This structural configuration creates administrative tension. Administrators must achieve policy outcomes without full control over inputs. For example, requests for additional teachers or infrastructure improvements require approval from higher authorities, often involving lengthy procedures. Delays reduce responsiveness to local needs and hinder school improvement initiatives. Policy implementation theory interprets this situation as hierarchical rigidity limiting local adaptation (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Educational leadership research emphasizes that effective school leadership depends on autonomy aligned with accountability (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Restricted autonomy reduces administrators’ capacity to innovate or tailor solutions to contextual challenges. Leadership effort becomes reactive rather than strategic. The literature therefore suggests that governance arrangements shape the practical limits of school-level leadership under free education.

Community expectations and school-stakeholder relations

Free education has transformed relationships between schools and communities. Removal of fees altered parental perceptions regarding financial responsibility for schooling. Many parents interpret free education as elimination of all contributions, including voluntary support for infrastructure or materials (Mbiti & Schipper, 2019). Administrators encounter resistance when requesting community participation in school development activities. This shift reduces local resource mobilization that previously supported school improvement. Administrators must negotiate between policy directives prohibiting compulsory contributions and practical needs requiring community support. Ambiguity in policy communication regarding permissible contributions intensifies this challenge (Sumra, 2017). Administrators therefore engage in continuous dialogue and persuasion to maintain community involvement. Community expectations also influence perceptions of school quality. Increased enrolment often raises expectations for improved facilities and teaching resources. When improvements do not materialize due to resource constraints, communities attribute responsibility to school leadership rather than systemic factors. Administrators therefore face reputational pressure alongside operational constraints. Educational leadership theory identifies this dynamic as stakeholder accountability, where leaders must maintain trust and legitimacy among multiple constituencies (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

Leadership adaptation and coping strategies

Despite constraints, administrators demonstrate adaptive leadership practices. Resource mobilization efforts include partnerships with local authorities, community fundraising within permissible limits, and collaboration with non-governmental organizations. Staff redistribution and peer support systems address teacher shortages. Timetable restructuring and space optimization respond to infrastructure deficits. These practices reflect distributed and transformational leadership within resource-constrained environments (Spillane, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). However, leadership adaptation operates within structural limits. Persistent funding gaps, staffing shortages, and centralized governance reduce the effectiveness of local initiatives. Implementation outcomes therefore depend on interaction between leadership agency and systemic support. The literature suggests that administrators sustain access gains through adaptive management, yet quality improvement remains constrained without broader policy and resource alignment.

Synthesis of Findings

The findings demonstrate that free education implementation produces complex administrative demands exceeding school-level capacity. Financial uncertainty, infrastructure shortages, staffing deficits, limited autonomy, and shifting community relations interact to shape administrators' experiences. Policy implementation theory explains these challenges as mismatches between policy goals, resources, and institutional arrangements. Educational leadership theory clarifies how administrators respond through adaptive strategies and stakeholder engagement. Free education has succeeded in expanding access. Implementation

strain at school level indicates that access expansion occurred faster than systemic capacity development. Administrators function as mediators between national policy and local educational realities. Their experiences reveal critical conditions necessary for sustainable implementation: predictable funding, infrastructure investment, adequate staffing, clear policy communication, and balanced autonomy with accountability.

Conclusion

The Free Education Policy in Tanzania represents a transformative reform that significantly expanded access to basic education and strengthened national commitment to equity and human development. Increased enrolment across primary and lower secondary levels demonstrates the policy's success in reducing financial barriers to schooling. Implementation analysis, however, reveals persistent challenges within school environments responsible for delivering education under free education conditions. Evidence from the literature shows that administrators face interconnected constraints involving funding uncertainty, infrastructure shortages, teacher deficits, centralized governance, and evolving community expectations. These factors create tension between policy goals and operational realities. Administrators carry expanded responsibilities for enrolment management, financial accountability, instructional quality, and stakeholder relations while resources and decision authority remain limited. Implementation strain therefore reflects mismatch between policy expansion and systemic capacity development. Administrative responses illustrate adaptive leadership practices within constrained environments. Resource mobilization, staff redistribution, timetable restructuring, and stakeholder negotiation sustain school functioning and preserve access gains. Leadership effort alone cannot fully compensate for structural resource gaps and governance limitations. Sustainable implementation requires alignment between policy objectives, funding mechanisms, infrastructure investment, staffing provision, and administrative autonomy. Strengthening free education implementation requires several interrelated actions. Predictable and adequate capitation funding aligned with enrolment levels would stabilize school operations. Accelerated infrastructure development and teacher recruitment would improve learning conditions. Clear policy communication regarding stakeholder roles and permissible community participation would reduce misunderstanding. Expanded school-level autonomy within accountability frameworks would enhance administrative responsiveness to local needs. Leadership preparation and financial management training would strengthen administrative capacity. Administrators' perspectives provide essential insight into practical conditions shaping policy outcomes. Their experiences reveal operational realities often underrepresented in national reform design. Incorporating administrative knowledge into policy review and planning processes would improve alignment between policy intent and school capacity. Lessons derived from Tanzania's experience also hold relevance for other education systems pursuing free education reforms in resource-constrained contexts.

Recommendations

To strengthen the implementation of the Free Education Policy in Tanzania, several actions should be considered. Ensuring timely and adequate disbursement of capitation grants aligned with enrolment levels is essential. Predictable funding allows school administrators to plan operations effectively, procure necessary

learning materials, and maintain facilities. Providing training in financial management and budgeting can further enhance transparency, accountability, and efficient use of resources.

Expanding and upgrading school infrastructure is critical to address overcrowding and improve learning conditions. Investments in classrooms, desks, laboratories, libraries, and sanitation facilities should reflect enrolment growth. Schools experiencing rapid population increases require priority attention, and interim solutions such as multi-purpose classrooms or shared resources can help maintain educational quality while long-term infrastructure development progresses.

Increasing teacher recruitment and providing professional development is necessary to maintain instructional quality. Recruitment efforts should target schools facing high enrolment pressures, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Training programs should equip teachers with strategies for managing large classes, multi-grade teaching, and inclusive pedagogy. School administrators also benefit from leadership training to optimize staff allocation, monitor performance, and maintain teacher motivation.

Strengthening administrative autonomy within accountability frameworks can improve responsiveness and effectiveness. School leaders should have greater discretion over staffing, resource allocation, and local problem-solving, while remaining accountable for outcomes. Empowering administrators to adapt policies to local conditions encourages innovation and practical solutions in constrained environments.

Improving policy communication and stakeholder engagement is equally important. Clear guidance regarding school responsibilities, community contributions, and policy objectives helps reduce misunderstandings. Administrators should engage parents, local leaders, and community organizations to build trust, support school development initiatives, and ensure collaboration in sustaining educational quality.

Finally, establishing robust monitoring and evaluation systems supports continuous improvement. Tracking enrolment, resource allocation, teacher deployment, and learning outcomes enable timely identification of challenges and informs adjustments to policy and practice. Involving administrators in feedback mechanisms ensures that local insights are incorporated into national planning, enhancing the overall effectiveness of free education implementation.

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