
Top up Fees in Free Primary Education: Views of Head Teachers in Selected Schools in the Lubombo Region of Eswatini

Dlamini Nomcebo, Nxumalo Zodwa Gcinaphi*, Bhebhe Sithulisiwe

Department of Primary Education, Faculty of Education, University of Eswatini, Kwaluseni, Eswatini

Email address:

cebodlamini24@gmail.com (D. Nomcebo), znxumalo@uniswa.sz (N. Z. Gcinaphi), sbhebhe@uniswa.sz (B. Sithulisiwe)

*Corresponding author

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Abstract: The study explored the views of Head teachers on the charging of Top up fees in Free Primary Education in primary schools in the Lubombo region of Eswatini. The study was based on the following research questions: What are the head teachers' views on the charging of top up fees in primary schools in the Lubombo region of Eswatini? Why do head teachers charge top up fees in primary schools in the Lubombo region of Eswatini? How have learners been affected by the charging of top up fees in primary schools in the Lubombo region of Eswatini? The study was qualitative and adopted the case study research design. Drawn from a population of twelve (12) schools in the Siteki top zone, the sample comprised of nine (9) schools which were randomly selected, where nine (9) head teachers were purposively selected. Data were collected using questionnaires and interviews. The findings of the study revealed that access to education has improved due to the increased enrolment observed in schools over the years since the inception of FPE. The study also found that the head teachers' stance was divided on the issue of top up fees as some felt that it was justified and others felt it was not. Another finding was that the charging of top up fees negatively impacted on the learners and parents because as a result of not being able to top up some learners have had to drop out of school. The study therefore recommends that government should increase the FPE grant so that head teachers can stop charging the top up fees.

Keywords: Views, Top up Fees, Free Primary Education

1. Introduction

Before the introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) parents of primary school learners in Eswatini were paying all schools fees for their children. The Eswatini government through the European Union (EU) then introduced the Capitation Grant which was piloted in some primary schools in the country. Schools which were piloted were allocated a grant per child which catered for their school fees. In 2010, government through an act of parliament known as the Free Primary Education Act of 2010 introduced Free Primary Education which has been implemented to date. The introduction of FPE brought along some fees which were introduced in stages from grade 1 and 2 in 2010 until the program was rolled out to grade 7 in 2015.

1.1. Background to the Study

In order to ensure that every Liswati child gets access to education, the government of Eswatini in line with the constitution of the country introduced and rolled out FPE in all primary school grade levels. Parents are therefore compelled to send their children to school for Free Primary Education schooling [1]. The Primary Education policy's main objectives are to make basic education accessible to all pupils; thus making education equitable in order to eliminate inequalities; and to ensure that every Liswati child completes the primary education and that education is affordable to all Emaswati children. The introduction of FPE resulted in an influx of children to schools in Eswatini. This is because some of the children were out of school due to lack of funds.

Free Primary Education is not only peculiar to the kingdom of Eswatini as other countries across the globe are also practicing it. Most countries globally regard primary education as a priority. In the context of education being a fundamental human right; African governments have, after years of independence, embarked on the provision of free education [2]. The same thing has been observed in countries outside Africa. In the United States of America, for instance, elementary school is free and compulsory to all children [3]. In Africa, developing countries like Malawi, Uganda and Lesotho have declared primary education free [3]. School enrollment rates in Sub-Saharan African countries have drastically increased since the introduction of Free Primary Education [4]. Free Primary Education was first implemented in Kenya in 2003 however it has been engulfed with varied challenges especially on the management of funds and general management problems arising from the increased enrolment in schools [5]. Several other countries such as Malawi and Botswana in the Southern Development Committee (SADC) region and Africa as a whole have abolished the paying of school fees by parents, to try and increase access to education in order to meet the millennium development goals [5].

The introduction of the FPE program in Eswatini meant that fees would be standardized for all schools with learners receiving school fees and stationary from government at primary school level. Within the implementation of the FPE program there was a consensus that the program would increase education opportunities for Eswatini children as it opened doors for pupils from poor households who would have missed a chance to receive primary education [6]. While FPE has assisted learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, it has at the same time created several problems in schools. The sudden increase in learner population in schools has had far-reaching implications in terms of existing physical facilities and human resources. Since the introduction of FPE head teachers have complained that the funds paid by government towards this grant were insufficient and at times they would threaten to shut down the schools due to the insufficient resources with which to run the schools as well as the late payment of fees by government [6].

In order to try and curb the problem of insufficient funds, some head teachers then introduced additional fees which they said parents should pay despite that the education was now free. The additional fees are called top up fees and they vary from school to school. School head teachers who decide on the introduction of these fees also decide on how much these fees are going to be. The introduction of top up fees resulted in an outcry from parents and other concerned individuals as the feeling was that some learners will not be in a position to pay them as some had enrolled in schools because the education was now free. Government retaliated by declaring that the charging of top up fees was illegal and therefore any head teacher who charges top up fees faces arrest. The introduction of top up fees also saw some interested individuals presenting their views on how best schools can work with the current situation. The best scenario

according to some individuals would be government revising the FPE fee schedule/ package to incorporate expenditure items that were previously excluded. This scenario attempts to address the issue of top-up fees by revising the FPE fee schedule. It proposes a new fee structure that has additional expenditure items [7].

Some people however are of the view that top up fees are charged not because the grant is inadequate but because it is not comprehensive or does not cover all key expenditure items. On implementation modalities, this scenario has two implementation options. The first option is that the state takes care of the full cost of education per learner. The second option is that a cost sharing mechanism is introduced as a way of protecting orphaned and vulnerable learners from dropping out of the school system due to financial reasons. In this regard the cost sharing is between the government and parents. Such considerations are important because if government continues paying fees under the current Free Primary Education structure, then the quality of education will surely be compromised [8].

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The problem in this study is that the introduction of top up fees in schools has resulted in a misunderstanding between parents, head teachers, and government. While some head teachers say their charging of top up fees is justified as they are trying to keep the schools running considering that the standard fees paid by government are not adequate, parents and government feel differently. Government has declared the charging of top up fees a criminal offence which head teachers have to be charged for. This declaration has infuriated some of the head teachers as they feel government is being unfair. The problem therefore is that the demand and paying of top up fees means the FPE program is not fully meeting its intentions as the program was meant to provide education that is free for all learners.

1.3. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

1. To explore head teachers' views on the charging of top up fees in FPE in primary schools in the Lubombo region of Eswatini.
2. To establish reasons why head teachers charge top up fees in FPE in primary schools in the Lubombo region of Eswatini.
3. Determine how learners have been affected by the charging of top up fees in FPE in primary schools in the Lubombo region of Eswatini.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the Open Systems Theory by Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, which is a theory that is used by all modern organization theories. The Open Systems Theory like other theories such as contingency theories, institutional theories and resource dependency theories, state that an

organizations' survival depends on its relationship with its environment. The open systems theory has changed the way in which schools are perceived because of its organization and its demand on educational leaders [9]. Treating schools as if they are independent of their environment will lead to wide misperceptions of the driving factors behind organizational change. Contemporary studies of accountability movement, teacher professionalization, and instructional leadership all benefit from a strong open system approach to understanding environmental demands and the resulting adaptation in school policy and its implementation [9].

The theory links up with implementation and sustainability of schools in particular and education in general. The implementation and sustainability of top up fees in Eswatini depends on the interaction between education stakeholders such as head teachers, teachers, learners, government, and parents.

3. Teachers Views on the Charging of Top up Fees

The review of literature revealed that a substantial number of head teachers in some countries support the addition of fees in free primary education. According to the head teachers funds are actually what make up a school. According to the literature review head teachers are always on the lookout for new ways to expand their instruction and engage their students and this requires funds. This is because while innovative teaching is important it is also very expensive, hence funding is required [10]. According to the literature top up fees in South Africa, are allowed for teachers who want to improve their schools [10]. Top up fees help in classroom enrichment, school supplies, field trips and almost everything that goes into bettering the quality of education. The review of literature further revealed that head teachers charged top up fees because they wanted to purchase books as those that came with the free primary program were inadequate [10]. Studies indicate that shortage of textbooks hinders a lot of progress in the instructional process as learners cannot be assigned home works. This deprives both learners and parents the opportunity to work collaboratively at home and assist each other [10]. According to literature the objectives of FPE cannot be achieved without the provision of teaching and learning materials like textbooks, workbooks, exercise books and stationery hence the availability of such influences the quality of education which is partly influenced by parental involvement that can take different forms either through home works or parent participation in school activities. Top up fees are used to buy the required stationery for the learners so that the teaching and learning will be effective [11].

According to the literature reviewed the charging of top up fees has very serious implications on the education of the kingdom of Eswatini, specifically the learners who come from disadvantaged homes. This is because as a result of being charged these fees, these learners are unable to pay the

fees and they then opt for schools in South Africa where such fees are not charged. The observation made in this regard was that while school head teachers and school committees had already expressed concern about the insufficient funds to run the schools, which overly compromised the quality of education, the charging of top up fees was more of a disadvantage than an advantage to the education system of the country because learners who are unable to pay them leave these schools for South Africa where such fees are not charged [12]. What this means is that the situation in South Africa is that while some schools charge top up fees, some do not. Studies also highlight that it was regrettable that the charging of top up fees seems to have abrogated the provision of free primary education for all primary school learners as well as free education to orphans and was viewed as an act where schools were reintroducing school fees through the top up fees [12]. However, head teachers maintained their stance that they charge top up fee because the money helps to manage the school and they use it for paying bills, buying teaching aids and paying support staff as well. The school head teachers argued that the money paid for FPE program does not meet their running costs [12].

According to them lack of proper water and sanitation in schools affects the health and wellbeing of all learners, directly influencing girls' attendance and retention at school. Furthermore, there are minimal interventions to provide for adolescent girls' reproductive health needs, for example sanitary pads at school, forces teachers to charge top up fees. In addition, head teachers charge top up fees because they want to improve their schools. Head teachers also have to ensure that the school has a committee in shape and that it has proper infrastructure and classrooms [12]. According to the review of literature the issue of top up fees in FPE has been very controversial in Eswatini because while government is against it head teachers want it as they claim that they require it for paying support staff salaries, financing the school feeding scheme, toilet building projects in terms of the FPE Act, and other activities that enhance the smooth running of a school [13]. Head teachers who are advocates of top up fees sought clarity on what needed to be done, while consultations were on going with regard to the top up fees issue, because school coffers had run dry. They claimed that support staff had not been paid for months as government does not deposit monies into school accounts in time [13].

4. Benefits of Charging Top up Fees in Schools

The available literature that was reviewed reveals that the top up fees that are charged by head teachers have a number of benefits to the schools. In Kenya most schools do not have adequate classrooms to accommodate the large numbers of pupils enrolled under FPE. The classrooms are generally congested and there is hardly space for movement. The classrooms are in poor condition. Lighting is poor as many classrooms depend only on sunlight. It was noted, though,

that with the top up fees, many schools had started doing repairs on classrooms using the money [14]. Chalkboards are being given fresh paint coats and windows and doors fixed especially in classes where books and other teaching and learning materials are being kept [14]. Infrastructure is a vital component in the implementation of free primary education; hence the objectives of FPE cannot be achieved without the provision of appropriate infrastructure like classrooms, special teaching rooms as well as teachers' houses [10].

According to the literature reviewed in Kenya students in public schools are sometimes required to buy uniforms, pay examination fees and in some cases even provide their own desks and chairs because the FPE grant is inadequate [14]. In Uganda, government capitation grants are insufficient to cover all students and are dispersed inconsistently, leading schools to charge parent top up fees to bridge the gap and this results in children dropping out of school as their parents are unable to pay the top up fees as a result there are many children who are idling at home even though the government has paid their fees since they cannot afford the top up fees [15].

5. How Learners Are Affected by the Charging of Top up Fees in Primary Schools

The review of literature further revealed that the charging of top up fees greatly affects some learners as they do not have the money. Studies reveal that the inability to pay top up fees and other education expenses keeps many learners out of school [16]. The levying of top up fees however, is not the only factor leading to learners in Eswatini dropping out; factors such as teenage pregnancy, early marriage and lack of appreciation of education by parents from poor backgrounds as other factors that lead to learner dropout [17]. Top up fees however, greatly affect learners because those who cannot pay them are chased away from schools, and because of poor monitoring by the MoET some of the learners are still out of school even today [17].

6. Research Methodology

The study adopted an interpretivist research paradigm where the qualitative research approach was used. The qualitative approach was appropriate for this study as the aim was to get narratives from the head teachers on their views regarding the issue of top up fees. This study also adopted the case study research design. This was based on the premise that this design is appropriate for studying a complex social phenomenon that is not clearly known [18, 19, 20, 21, 22]. The complex social phenomenon that was studied in this study is the charging of top up fees in Free Primary Education.

6.1. Population, Sample and Sampling

The target population for this study was twelve (12) primary schools in the Lubombo region under Siteki top zone

and it was from these that the sample of the study was drawn. The focus was on school head teachers who are also administrators of the fees in the primary schools. The sample for the study comprised of nine (9) head teachers who were purposively picked from nine (9) schools that were randomly selected.

6.2. Data Collection Instruments

The instruments that were used for the collection of data for this study were questionnaires and interviews. An interview is a form of communication based on interpersonal face to face contact between the researcher and the respondent [23]. The interviews were administered on a one on one to allow participants to speak freely, honestly and comfortably, as well as to share their views without fear or intimidation. Questionnaires that consisted of open-ended questions were also administered to the participants [24, 25].

6.3. Data Analysis Procedures

The researchers used Content Analysis where they analysed the content of the interviews and questionnaires to come up with the results for the study [26]. In content analysis, behaviours, views, understandings, actions and experiences are not measured using statistical analysis as in quantitative research. Detailed descriptions and explanations of the phenomena under investigation are discussed under themes and the participants are quoted verbatim [26].

Theme 1: Head Teachers' Understanding of Top up Fees

The data gathered from the head teachers revealed that despite giving varied responses with regards to their understanding of top up fees, what was deduced from the head teachers' responses was that top up fees were additional fees that parents were asked to pay in order to enhance the fees that were paid by government. What was again noted from the responses that were given by the teachers was that they were quick to either justify and or, indicate their support or non-support of the charging of these fees in primary schools, with the latter viewing this as a way of conning parents of their hard earned money. Giving his understanding of top up fees one of the head teachers said:

My understanding of top up fees is that it is additional fees that parents are required to pay by some schools but for me this is just a way of robbing them of their hard earned money. It actually means they are being made to pay the school fees two times as the free primary grant also comes from them as they are tax payers (Participant B).

Presenting a similar understanding another teacher said:

Top up fees is the money that is added to the money already paid by government (Free Education). Parents are required to pay this fee as some head teachers feel that the fee paid by government is inadequate.

What was noted from the data gathered from the head teachers was that both sets of teachers, that is, those who were in support of top up fees and those who were not in support had the same understanding of top up fees, however, for the former top up fees were necessary because they

assisted the principals of the schools to appropriately manage the schools by providing the required equipment/materials for teaching and learning to be effective. According to these teachers, the fees obtained from the Free Primary grant were not enough to effectively run a school, hence schools were always lacking in terms of the materials that were required for teaching/learning.

Theme 2: Head Teachers' Reasons for Charging Top up Fees in Schools

The data gathered from the head teachers unveiled various reasons why some head teachers charge top up fees. According to the participants, in the FPE program, every learner is entitled to free writing materials, for example pencils, pens and exercise books, however, it was not possible for schools to avail these kinds of materials to the learners because the FPE grant was inadequate, hence the charging of top up fees. It emerged from the interviews that textbooks were being shared in the ratio of one textbook to five learners and this affected teaching/learning as there were instances where learners were assigned to do work at home. It was therefore not possible for some learners to do the assigned work at home because they do not have the books thus teaching/learning was affected. The head teachers further stated that top up fees also helped to pay support staff in the school.

The inadequacy of the grant, hence the unavailability of resources/teaching/learning materials was cited by almost all the respondents as the main reason for the charging of top up fees. So top up fees are charged to ensure the smooth and proper management of the school. Providing a justification for charging top up fees one of the head teachers said:

Top up fees in my school help to pay support teachers who know sign language.

Another teacher said:

We charge top up fees because there are a number of resources that the money is used to purchase.

The submissions made by the head teachers revealed a lot of problems with regards to lack of funds in schools. One such is the inability by the school to pay their support staff. The lack of funds did not only affect the support staff but had negative implications on the operations of the schools. According to some of the head teachers, without top up fees both teachers and learners would be affected as teachers who know sign language were required since the school has learners who are deaf and dumb. The data from the head teachers also revealed that as a result of the inadequate grant paid by the government some schools were forced to abort certain academic projects and to compromise security. In addition, the top up fees were required because government takes too long to release the funds and therefore schools are run using the top up fees.

Theme 3: How schools would be affected if they do not charge Top up Fees

The data gathered from the head teachers revealed that if head teachers did not charge top up fees schools will be affected as pupils will not receive the services they require, for example they will not have the required

materials/resources for their learning, will not take part in extra-curricular activities and school trips. It would also be difficult to pay some of the day to day school expenses hence these may escalate resulting in the school accumulating debts that would be difficult to settle.

With regards to this, participant A stated that:

The head teachers would have insufficient funds to run the school for example paying bills. There would be inadequate materials for effective teaching and learning.

To add Participant C said:

Lots of necessary equipment would not be provided on time, since government delays paying the FPE grant.

According to the head teachers who took part in this study since government delays paying the FPE grant learners will be affected because they will not receive the services they need. For example, they will not have extra-curricular activities and school trips. It will also be difficult to pay teachers who assist learners and teachers, more especially teachers in schools that have learners with special needs.

Theme 4: How Head Teachers Think the Charging of Top up Fees Affects Learners

Drawing from the second research question which says; "how have learners been affected by the charging of top up fees in primary schools in the Lubombo region of Eswatini" the findings revealed that the charging of top up fees has greatly affected some learners as they do not have the money to top up. According to the data gathered from the head teachers, a substantial number of learners are out of school because they do not have money to for top up fees. Giving his view on the issue, one of the head teachers said:

Learners miss out on their school work when they are sent home to get the top up fees. In addition some do not even come back as they do not have anyone to pay the fees for them.

The participants of this study were of the opinion that the charging of top up fees affects the learners who come from less privileged homes as learners do not have any source from which to draw these fees. In this way their academic performance is affected as they are sometimes sent home to get the fees if they have not paid them. Top up fees greatly affect learners because those who cannot pay the top up fees are chased away from schools; an act which is the direct opposite of the intentions of FPE and the Constitution of the government of Eswatini which states that it is the right of every child to be at school. The learners' inability to pay top up fees therefore, disadvantages them of their right to education. In line with this finding, the review of literature indicated that the inability to pay top up fees and other education expenses keeps many learners out of school [16].

Theme 5: How Head Teachers Think the Charging of Top up Fees Affects Parents

The data collected from the head teachers indicated that top up fees do not only affect learners but parents as well. The head teachers who felt that parents were greatly affected by top up fees were those who had earlier registered that they did not support this exercise. According to them the charging of top up fees frustrated parents more especially those who

are not employed. Such parents do not have any means of paying these fees and this results in their children being chased away from school. The participant added that parents were frustrated because when their children started school they were made to believe that no fees will be required from them, as their children were out of school because they could not afford the fees. Parents were also of the view that schools will be able to operate effectively using the standard school fees. However, the levy of top up fees causes stress to parents especially those who have challenges raising the top up fees.

7. Discussion of Findings

The study found that the head teacher's views on the charging of top up fees are divided. While some feel that the practice is justified, others feel it is an unfair practice as it means that as tax payers the parents are now being made to double pay the fees. This is because the FPE grant that is paid by the government comes from the parents' taxes and again the top up fees are required from the parents. According to these teachers primary education is supposed to be free in line with the constitution of the kingdom of Eswatini which stipulates that primary education should be free. Another finding from the study was that head teachers charge top up fees for varied reasons. One of the reasons is that the FPE grant is not adequate as there are varied materials and other expenses that schools should take care of. For example learners require materials such as books, pencils, pens, and the grant is insufficient to provide all of these. In addition, there are other expenses such as the payment of support staff and assistant teachers which the FPE grant does not cater for. Moreover, government always delays the payment of the grant; hence schools find it difficult to operate. The top up fees therefore come in handy in this situation.

This finding corresponds with the literature because according to the study that was carried out in South Africa, head teachers in South Africa support the charging of top up fees on the basis that the FPE grant is insufficient. Head teachers who want to expand their instruction using modern approaches which are normally expensive are allowed to charge these fees [10]. Also, top up fees are allowed so that head teachers can improve their schools by buying resource materials which include, stationery and other school supplies, field trips, and everything that is aimed at improving the quality of education in schools. In addition, the literature stated that the FPE objectives cannot be achieved without the provision of teaching/learning materials; hence the charging of top up fees is justified [11]. In line with this finding the literature indicated that the charging of top up fees is beneficial as it eases issues such as congested classrooms, lighting in classrooms, poor conditions of classrooms, and all forms of classroom repairs.

Another finding of the study was that the charging of top up fees disadvantages learners who are from poor home backgrounds as their parents are unable to pay them. Learners are at times sent home to get the fees; hence they

miss out on their school work. Some also drop out of school as their parents are unable to pay the fees. The parents are also not spared as they are frustrated with the top up fee requirement, more especially those that are not working. They are stressed as their children drop out of school because they are unable to pay the fees. This finding is again in line with the findings of the study in the review of literature where it was found that the charging of extra fees in FPE has resulted in a number of children being out of school. So charging these fees does not solve the issue of inadequate resources instead it disadvantages the learners as they idle at home yet government has paid their fees [16, 15].

8. Conclusion

The study concludes that while some head teachers support the charging of top up fees others feel that they are not necessary as the grant is adequate. According to the latter the charging of top up fees is against the policy of free primary education as some children drop out of school as a result of their inability to pay the top up fees. For the former however, the charging of top up fees is premised on that the FPE grant is inadequate as there are a number of resources and expenses that it does not cater for. Both parents and learners are disadvantaged by the charging of top up fees as some parents do not have the money and the learners have to drop out of school.

9. Recommendations

In line with the findings of the study the following recommendations are made:

1. The Eswatini government should consider increasing the FPE grant so that head teachers can stop charging top up fees.
2. Government should inject enough money for the schools to run smoothly and should not delay the payments.

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