

# Teachers' Perspectives on the Effects of Free Primary Education Policy of the Kingdom of Eswatini on Education Quality in Public Schools

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## ABSTRACT

*This article offers an analysis of the perspectives and experiences of teachers from the Kingdom of Eswatini in the Ka-Bhudla Primary School concerning the effects of the Free Primary Education policy (FPE) on the quality of education in public schools. The purpose of the study is to determine the effects of the FPE policy implementation in the quality of education. The article employs a qualitative research paradigm in terms of a case study method. Semi-structured interviews were held with one school principal and eight primary school teachers. These interviews were complemented with unobtrusive research methods in terms of a conceptual and documentary analysis by way of a literature review. The findings revealed the emergence of adverse consequences following the implementation of the FPE policy in the Kingdom of Eswatini. The quality of education at the Ka-Bhudla Primary School declined drastically as a result of increased learner enrolments and a lack of support from the Eswatini government.*

**Keywords:** Free Primary Education, Kingdom of Eswatini, education, facilities, infrastructure



## INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of 2005 of Swaziland, as ratified by the Swazi monarch in February 2006, provides that every child has a right to free education in all public schools, at least up to the end of primary school level (Constitution 2005: section 29 (6)). Though the FPE policy was implemented a year later than outlined in the Constitution of 2005, the Swaziland government eventually rolled out FPE in all public schools in 2010 (Swaziland Ministry of Education and Training 2010). The policy was adopted following a civil litigation initiated by the Swaziland National Ex-Mine Workers' Association against the government. The first beneficiaries of the FPE policy completed their primary education in 2016, graduating to secondary school.

The implementation of FPE in Swaziland (officially renamed as the Kingdom of Eswatini in 2018) was met with excitement and approval by the general public with most applauding the government for adopting what was then referred to as a 'progressive and pro-poor policy'. However, the introduction of this policy was also greeted with challenges at the implementation level. Serious concerns were raised about the government's capacity to sustain such a resource-demanding policy. Dlamini (2017:348) found that the main challenge of this policy was overcrowded classrooms which resulted in shortages of facilities, infrastructure, equipment and learning materials at schools. Nudelman (2015:13) confirmed that a lack of recruiting teachers deprived education quality in public schools. Therefore, the absence of proper planning, uncertainty, confusion and poor coordination by the government, had a negative effect on the implementation of the FPE policy in the Kingdom of Eswatini (hereafter referred to as Eswatini) (Dlamini 2017:348–350).

The study sought to capture the perspectives and experiences of primary school teachers on the introduction of the FPE policy and its effects on education quality in the country. Based on the research findings and conclusions, recommendations are made on how to restore and maintain education quality at the Ka-Bhudla Primary School. The benefit of achieving and maintaining education quality is that those learners who get an education have higher incomes, have more opportunities in their lives, and tend to be healthier. Societies benefit as well. Societies with high rates of education completion have less crime and effective citizen participation in government decisions. A lack of access to education quality is considered the root of poverty (Dlamini 2017:348–351; Slade 2017).

## BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Public Administration as a discipline is hardly a century old and has passed through



several phases of development. The discipline originated in the United States and according to Woodrow Wilson's article entitled *The Study of Administration* (Thornhill, Van Dijk & Isioma 2014:6), its importance was to make a distinction between politics and administration. For him, politics had to do with policies or expressions of a state's will, while administration has to do with the execution of these policies. In this regard, it is important to note that Public Administration operates within the political environment with its activities and programmes carried out by the government. Unlike private administration which gets evaluated on the basis of cost-benefit analysis, public administration's ultimate test is the efficient delivery of services to the people and the citizens' satisfaction. What this means is that government programmes are not for profit, they are largely non-profit activities, their services border around service functions, promotional, development and regulatory tasks (Mathebula 2019:344–345).

Thornhill and Van Dijk (2010:102) suggest that Public Administration should be viewed as an applied science which relates to the practical situations within which public administration is practised. Administration does not take place in a vacuum; its aim is the effective and efficient realisation of goals within the borders of a specific country. These goals are what have been alluded to by Mathebula (2019:345) as delivering services and products to the people by the government authorities. Thornhill and Van Dijk (2010:101) introduce another aspect of public administration: they noted that the discipline relates to the activities and processes which deal with the formulation and implementation of public policies at all spheres of government. This view implies public administration does not only determine the execution of activities but also describes how an activity should be implemented.

Public education policy is but one of many decisions that are initiated by the executive branch of government aimed at developing its people. All over the world, national governments are considering educational problems in ground-breaking ways. These terms differ somewhat from country to country. Du Plessis (2020:3) states that public education policies have been developed to increase the fraction of children who attend school and to improve the quality of education offered. To understand the decision-making process concerning public education, it is necessary to appreciate that public schools are in a way a monopoly. In the business sense, this term means an exclusive ownership through legal privilege, command of supply or concerted action. Most countries, including Eswatini, have an absolute or monopolistic control over the service of education. The Ministry of Education of Eswatini determines all the policies relating to education in the country. This means that a decision taken by the Ministry will apply uniformly to all public schools in the country (Hoffmann & Marcus 2011:104).



The character of public schools is that they are largely dependent on direct and indirect financial aid from the government. The involvement of government in public schools goes as far as formulating policies and regulations that govern their operations. Public education is regarded as a public service for which the government has a responsibility to ensure its optimal deliverance to the satisfaction of its people. Concerning this research, the FPE policy is but one public education policy which has been adopted by the Eswatini government as a service to its people. It spells out a decision taken by the country to do away with tuition fees for all primary school children attending a public school in the country.

Against the above background information, the research problem entails the implementation of the FPE policy in Eswatini which resulted in a decline in education quality due to the high enrolment of learners and a lack of recruiting teachers.

The main purpose of this research was to obtain the primary teachers' point of view regarding the effects of the FPE policy on education quality in public schools in Eswatini with specific reference to the Ka-Bhudla Primary School. The focus was on the changes evident in the teaching and learning environment and the results of the first graduates after the implementation of the FPE policy.

## **QUALITY EDUCATION IN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

Literature is filled with varying definitions of quality. The Oxford English Dictionary (2020) defines quality as a standard of something measured against other things of a similar kind. In addition, Budiharso and Tarman (2020:101) define quality as a product or a service that is free of any deficiencies. These scholars believe that a product of quality should be fit for the intended usage and exceed the customers' expectation. The concept of quality is summarised by Akareem and Hossain (2016:53–55) as fit for purpose. They explained that quality in primary education speaks to what is taught, how it is taught, to which learners and in what setting. To this extent, quality education should thus be fit for purpose in terms of the curriculum, teaching plans, education level of the teachers, the learners' skills, attitudes and knowledge, as well as the school infrastructure and supporting material.

A working paper published by UNICEF titled 'Defining Quality Education' (2000:4), offers a broad and comprehensive perspective on what constitutes quality education, and this includes:

- Learners who are healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and learn and supported in learning by their families and communities.



- Environments that are healthy, safe, protective, gender-sensitive and which provide adequate resources and facilities.
- Content that is reflected in curricula relevant for the acquisition of basic skills; especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy, skills for life and basic knowledge of health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention and peace.
- Valid and reliable assessments that facilitate learning and reduce disparities.
- Outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes, and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society.

Saxena, Saxena and Gihar (2009:215–220) bring on board another interesting revelation to the debate of quality education. They contend that the quality of education depends largely on the quality of and performance of the teachers. Their argument is that the tasks of teachers are demanding, challenging and complex as they are not only expected to fulfil their teaching commitments but also inculcate values among learners. Through their interaction with learners, teachers engage in activities to ensure that the learners are able to apply their learning in real life. Therefore, unless schools recruit quality teachers, learners cannot expect quality education.

Education is thus a complex system within a cultural, economic and political context. This study relied on the assertion by Fouché, Sebastiaan and Van der Vyver (2017:2), that quality education entails the well-being, engagement, performance and the retention of teachers. In this study, the focus is on the teachers' perspectives on the effects of the FPE policy.

What then constitutes quality education in Eswatini? According to Zwane and Malale (2018:4), teachers play an essential role in quality education and thus the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers. Osakwe (2016:176) asserts that quality is based on how efficient the teachers are, and how adequate the instructional materials and facilities needed for teaching and learning, are. This statement retaliates to the submission of Saxena, *et al.* (2009:215) which suggests that quality education is dependent upon the quality of teachers.

Van der Merwe (2011:774) states another important factor on the question of what may constitute quality education in Eswatini. The author suggests that school effectiveness may also be an element of quality education. This would be translated to classroom successes, which is mainly defined by quality feedback to individual learners. Even though academic outcomes may be largely influenced by the learners' social background and own abilities, for Van der Merwe (2011:775–177) the school environment in which the common characteristics of effective schooling prevail, remain the most conducive to



any possible learner success. Moreover, Osakwe (2016:177) points to the fact that the concept of quality education is diversified: it encompasses how learning is managed and organised, the content of learning and the level of achievement in terms of outcomes and what goes on in the learning environment.

The following section presents a brief introduction on the history of the Kingdom of Eswatini and how the political landscape paved the way towards FPE. This will be followed by a brief discussion of the key legal frameworks that embody the FPE policy of Eswatini.

## **FREE PRIMARY EDUCATION POLICY OF ESWATINI**

Mzizi (2004:99) states that the Kingdom of Eswatini remains alone as a single-party monarchy on the continent of Africa. The current system of rule of the country has combined the traditional and Western style of governance. Gumedze (2005:268) posits that Parliament, judiciary and other organs of state which form the modern-day democratic institutions exist parallel to what is referred to as 'Swazi Law and Custom' which remains unwritten and dictates that the King rules the country in council. It is through this same structure that the monarchy abrogated the 1968 Constitution which permitted the participation of political parties and asserted all powers to the King as traditional as well as political leader of Eswatini.

According to Mzizi (2004:99–102), between 1973 and 1978, the King recreated himself as an absolute monarch and governed the country with a council of ministers who, through the Legislative order of April 1973, had no say on any legal Bill except to draft it and present it to the King to rectify as King's-Order-in-Council. What this means is that the 1973 events enabled the King to transform himself from a Constitutional Monarch with executive powers to an Absolute Executive Monarch with unlimited powers. The April 1973 decree birthed a wave of dissenting voices within the country from civic organisations and political parties advocating for democratic reforms and the re-adoption of the multiparty system of governance. In the preceding years, the monarchy found itself faced with a permanent opposition from the old and emerging pro-democracy formations which applied pressure on the status quo to democratise.

The development of the Eswatini Constitution of 2005 came about as a result of the mounting pressure upon the monarch to reform. Although the adoption of the Constitution was not the ultimate victory for the pro-democracy formations, it became a landmark achievement to some burning demands that were raised against the monarch

which included the recognition of the Bill of Rights and the rectification of the 1948 United Nations declaration on Universal Primary Education (Dlamini 2013:5).

The question of whether Eswatini's financial position was stable enough to sustain some of the concessions made, is answered in the following paragraphs.

Simelane (2014:249250) wrote that Eswatini is one of the African countries that is experiencing some fiscal challenges. In 2010, around the same time when the FPE policy was introduced, Eswatini was confronted with serious fiscal difficulties largely due to fiscal indiscipline. The situation became worse in 2011 as the country's economy was on the brink of collapse. This was also around the same time when Eswatini approached the Republic of South Africa for a R2.4 billion bailout as liquidity problems engulfed the country. The crisis was so bad that the government was failing to meet some of its financial obligations such as payment for its suppliers and civil servant salaries.

An extract from a report by the African Development Bank (African Economic Outlook: 2018) observes that Eswatini's economic performance indicated by gross domestic product (GDP) growth, decreased by half a percentage point from 3.0% in 2013 to 2.5% in 2014. The figures, according to the report, suggest that the country has not fully recovered from the fiscal crisis of 2011. All these reports point to a policy which was implemented in a country confronted by a fiscal deficit. For the longest time, Eswatini's fiscus depended on the revenue from the South African Customs Union (SACU) involving South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Eswatini and Namibia. This revenue accounts for almost 43% of the annual national budget of Eswatini. According to Simelane (2014:253), the decline of the revenue from the Customs Union has seriously affected the fiscal structures of member states. Nxumalo and Hlophe (2018:2) inform of fiscal sustainability indicators reflecting a country which is on an unsustainable path with a primary gap and tax gap of about 7% of GDP. The authors attribute this to public expenditures that are rising at a faster pace than revenues thereby rendering government deficits unsustainable in the medium term.

## **STATUTORY AND POLICY FRAMEWORK UNDERPINNING FREE PRIMARY EDUCATION**

Perhaps it is important at this stage to identify the key legislated framework which gave effect to the FPE policy in Eswatini. Section 29(6) of the Constitution of 2005 provides that every Swazi child shall have a right to free education in a public school. According to the Constitution, FPE was supposed to be implemented in 2009 but it was officially



introduced in 2010. The FPE policy was implemented in 2010 beginning with the first and second grade and phased in on a staggered approach in the upcoming years.

2011 saw the development of a policy framework that would serve as a guideline to the FPE policy of Eswatini. The Swaziland Education and Training Sector Policy, issued in 2011, stated that the purpose of the policy was to ensure equitable access to inclusive, life-long quality education and training for all Swazi citizens through a sustained implementation and resourcing of a comprehensive training and education policy. The policy goes further to explain its goals as the provision of an equitable and inclusive education system that affords all learners access to free and compulsory basic education and senior secondary education of real quality, followed by the opportunity to continue with life-long education and training. The policy is thus enhancing learners' personal development and contributing to Eswatini's cultural development, socio-economic growth and global competitiveness (Swaziland Ministry of Education and Training 2011: iv).

However, as a concept, FPE dates back to 1948. Article 26(1) of the United Nations Human Rights Declaration of 1948, declared education as a basic human right and that it shall be free at least in the elementary and fundamental stages; implying that every child had a right to education (United Nations 2015:54). Similarly, Article 13 2(a) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, declares that primary education shall be compulsory and available free to all (ICESCR 2015:20). FPE was intended to provide access to education to every learner, irrespective of their financial background.

According to Dlamini (2017:6), as a policy, FPE is commendable as a means of cushioning children from poor socio-economic backgrounds from failing to participate in education or dropping out of school because of financial strain. The provisions for free and compulsory education are the substance of the political pledges made under the Dakar framework adopted at the World Education Forum regarding the national Education for All (EFA) action plan. This framework made a clarion call to the effect that all countries should have achieved Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2015 (Swaziland Ministry of Education and Training 2015). However, Mukeredzi (2009:48) submitted that the pressure to achieve FPE had adverse consequences on the economies of most developing countries, with most of them struggling to mobilise the necessary resources required to implement such a policy.

Eswatini is signatory to several international policies on universal education that provide for high quality basic education for all. The EFA commitment was demonstrated in Section 29(6) of the country's Constitution of 2005 which explicitly accords every child,



within three years of promulgation of the Constitution, a right to free education in all public schools – at least up to the end of primary level. Since then, a number of policies have been adopted by the government, all aimed at providing equal education opportunities to all children in the country. However, this provision was not enforced in Eswatini until the government was taken through a legal process by the Swaziland National Ex-Mine Workers Association. Subsequently, 2010 marked the implementation of the FPE policy in all public schools in Eswatini and the requirement for paying school fees was done away with for the Grade 1s and 2s. The following six years saw an incremental roll-out of this policy up to the last grade of primary school in 2016 (Steyn 2010:16).

Similar to most other countries which have adopted an FPE policy, the implementation of FPE in Eswatini came with its own challenges. From the onset, the Constitutional court challenge by the Eswatini National Ex-Miners Association of Eswatini, only granted FPE and not compulsory education as enshrined in the 1948 Human Rights Declaration and the Convention of the Right of the Child. The judgment indicated that every child attending primary school had the right to attend school free of charge, and that government had a constitutional obligation to provide FPE. The implication of this is that the policy enabled children who were not in school to enrol, resulting in a drastic increase in the enrolment rate of children in the system. Unfortunately, the government had no clear plan of dealing with the influx in terms of school infrastructure, teaching personnel and other learning enablers. In view of the expected increase in the enrolment of learners, concerns were raised on the quality of learning in public schools. As such, the implementation of this policy came on board while the government was unprepared for its consequences (Dlamini 2017:76).

Zwane and Malale (2018:12–15) noted that the implementation of FPE in Eswatini in 2010 became a stimulus for the introduction of inclusive education in the mainstream schools. With this, all the teachers from public schools in the country were expected to be competent enough to teach learners with a wide range of educational needs. However, the teachers did not receive adequate staff development training ahead of the implementation of the policy, resulting in the majority of teachers not being ready to mitigate the high influx of enrolments. Thus, the implementation of the policy unfolded against a government which was not capacitated to deal with its consequences.

In general, rural schools are negatively affected by the lack of resources and infrastructure. The Ka-Bhudla Primary School is among the rural public schools that were affected by the roll-out of FPE in Eswatini. As a school located in the deep rural area of the Manzini region, the school struggled to attract the best trained and qualified teachers because of its location. The teachers demonstrated a higher percentage of formal training



in urban areas compared to their rural counterparts. All these aspects are attributed to the government's lack of commitment in developing rural areas. The Ka-Bhudla Primary School indeed does not have the capacity to mitigate any risks associated with the FPE policy. A dire picture of the teaching and learning environment at the Ka-Bhudla Primary School is thus painted (Mushoriwa 2014:10).

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This research employed qualitative measures on retrieving the perceptions of teachers on the effects of FPE on education quality in Eswatini. Semi-structured interviews that remained focused on the aim of the research were used in generating data. The interviews provided an opportunity for the participants to explain freely how they felt about the effects of the FPE policy on education quality in public schools in Eswatini. For Cishe (2017:77) this method is efficient as the questions may be repeated or re-phrased if unclear and until saturation is reached.

### **Data collection challenges**

The proposed data gathering instrument for the study was semi-structured interviews with the principal and teachers of Ka-Bhudla Primary School. This data collection technique was chosen because it allowed the researcher sufficient time to retrieve information from the participants until all the interview and research questions were answered completely. However, the scheduled time of the interviews with the teachers from the Ka-Bhudla Primary School coincided with the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus in December 2019 (Covid-19). Eswatini, like the rest of the world, became affected by the devastating effects of the virus.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines Covid-19 as an infectious respiratory disease caused by a new virus that spreads from person to person. On 11 March 2020 the WHO declared Covid-19 a global pandemic. Following this declaration, the government of Eswatini announced a nationwide partial lockdown with citizens expected to observe social distancing and the closing of all schools. This development meant that face-to-face interviews were no longer possible since the teachers were not readily available to honour invitations for data collection. It is in this context that the researcher explored alternative online data collection instruments which would sufficiently retrieve information from the participants almost similar to semi-structured interviews. The adjustments to data collection methods limited the risks to the researcher of breaking Covid-19 regulations and prevented putting the researcher at risk of contracting or spreading the virus.



The researcher abided by the Covid-19 guidelines of Unisa (University of South Africa 2020:1–5).

With the new prevailing circumstances, the research questions along with the informed consent declarations were sent to the participants via emails and the MS Teams electronic platforms. Follow-up telephone calls were also made to ensure that the participants understood all the questions clearly and their right of consent was explained. The participants agreed to online interviews and they were requested to answer the interview questions adequately. The participants responded to the interview schedules on the same platform, and no lockdown laws or restrictions were transgressed.

## **Population and sampling techniques**

As hinted at above, the study was conducted with teachers from the Ka-Bhudla Primary School who have taught at the school for at least the past five years. The sampled teachers were purposely chosen based on their experience in the teaching and learning processes prior to and after the introduction of the FPE policy at the school. Salkind (2012:71) defined a sample as a subset of a population. In the same text, he offered a definition of a population as the total number of all individuals who have certain characteristics that are of interest to the researcher. For that reason, the researcher interviewed eight teachers from the Ka-Bhudla Primary School as well as the principal of the school. The sampling method employed for this research is a purposive sampling method. The results from the sample may be generalisable and made applicable to the experiences of all the teachers of the Ka-Bhudla Primary School.

## **DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATIONS AND FINDINGS**

The participants had a clear understanding of what the FPE policy is and what it seeks to achieve. The participants knew what quality education is, and the elements which should be in place to ensure its manifestation. Moreover, the participants were able to demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of the alienable rights of the learners to basic education. The participants also appreciated education as an instrument of social change.

### **Quality education in public primary schools in Eswatini**

All the participants, including the school principal and the teachers, agreed that the appointment of sufficient teachers and advanced teachers' skills and knowledge are



essential requirements for quality education. Being understaffed and appointing teachers with a lack of knowledge of the subjects being taught, jeopardises quality education. The majority of the teachers highlighted that the teaching and learning environment must be suitable for learning the curriculum. When requested to clarify further, one of the teachers stated that the availability of adequate, qualified and motivated teachers is one of the key components for the realisation of quality education. When asked what is meant by *adequate* teachers, the teacher mentioned compliance to the national benchmark of the learner-teacher ratio of 40 learners per teacher. The teachers described an enabling environment for learning as an environment that allows the free exchange of ideas without any intimidation and frustration. The school principal highlighted that the needs of the learners, including those with special needs, like impaired learners, learners with reading difficulties, chronic diseases or diabetes, are also catered for.

## Perceptions of teachers of the FPE policy

The majority of teachers observed the FPE policy in a good light, particularly its attempt to afford learners from poor backgrounds access to basic education. Vulnerable learners who were struggling with school fees were able to divert those funds to other essentials, like school uniforms, after the implementation of the FPE policy. Supporters of the FPE policy highlighted the fact that FPE fosters equality at schools. Various claims were made that all learners now have access to the same quality of education irrespective of their families' social standing. It was highlighted by the school principal that this aspect becomes a psychological booster to the learners since they view themselves as equals. Overall, the FPE policy is commended by the teachers because of its ability to level the ground where everyone has an equal opportunity to excel.

The school principal highlighted in the interview that, from a social perspective, it must be noted that the Government of Eswatini is providing food to the learners in public schools. She confirmed that this initiative enables children from poor backgrounds who were sitting at home (probably without food) because of a lack of funds, to now access educational resources at no personal expense.

However, there was also a noticeable negative view detected among the individual teachers as the majority hinted that the introduction of the FPE policy was done prematurely. The main argument was that before the implementation of the FPE policy, a high number of systems were not in place to bear such a resource-consuming policy. To support this point, some of the teachers raised the issue of infrastructure which was inadequate to accommodate the massive increase of learner enrolments. Inadequate learning aids, a shortage of school furniture and a lack of teacher recruitment were listed



as possible causes for a decline in quality education. Fundamentally, the main negative view gathered from the qualitative data was that the government introduced a policy ill-prepared for its financial implications.

## **Changes brought about by the introduction of FPE**

The implementation of the FPE policy resulted in all public primary schools experiencing a change in the manner in which they were run. The changes came in the form of severe increased enrolments of learners and the need for new infrastructure to mitigate the demands of the influx. The principal drew the researcher's attention to the fact that when this policy came into effect, there were no guidelines or restrictions in admissions. As a result, many learners with no previous educational background enrolled at the Ka-Bhudla Primary School. The administration had no record of how much school experience these children had, hence, it happened that they were placed in classes/grades they did not belong in. Unfortunately, children who could not previously afford any education, had to be placed in lower grades, with children eight years younger than them.

From a positive revelation, the principal indicated that following the introduction of the FPE policy, there has been a decline in absenteeism from learners. No debt of school fees resulted in a psychological boost and motivation to some learners to regularly attend school and to improve their marks since the humiliation of non-payment of fees has been eradicated by the government.

## **Consequences of increased learner enrolment**

According to the participants, the increased enrolment of learners has brought some challenges in teaching and learning at the Ka-Bhudla Primary School. A noticeable change was the overcrowding of classrooms. As a result, the classrooms lack enough and suitable furniture to accommodate every learner. When asked about the consequence of overcrowded classrooms, one of the teachers pointed to the difficulty of providing individual feedback in an overfull and noisy classroom. The lack of individual attention to diverse students regrettably adversely affects learners with special needs: resulting in a decline in quality education.

The study further found that the massive enrolment of learners was met with another problem, namely under-staffing of teachers in the school. The teachers confirmed that the teacher-learner ratio increased tremendously and it resulted in heavier workloads for the teachers. A need for additional teachers was and is evident. Regrettably, there is no



immediate solution to fast-track the appointment of appropriately skilled and knowledgeable teachers.

## Findings and conclusions

The first FPE graduates' average pass rate of 2016 has been compared with the results of 2010 to 2017 to draw a conclusion on whether or not the introduction of the FPE policy has any bearing on the overall performance of the school. It was found that: the first FPE graduates in 2016 and 2017 scored excellent grades compared with results from learners of previous years, in particular in 2010 and 2011 when the FPE policy started. During the following years as the policy was phased in, the grades became stable with no major variations in the pass rate. In summary: the first FPE graduates' pass percentage of 2016 (96%) was much better than the results recorded when the FPE policy started in 2010 (77%); between 2011 and 2017, the average pass rate of the Ka-Bhudla Primary School has been 94%; and in all the years, only a few learners managed to obtain a merit pass above 75% in their studies. A high pass percentage (96%) was obtained by the first FPE graduates in 2016 despite the shortcomings and inadequacies experienced by the school and the teachers.

It was established that quality education provides the outcomes needed for the learners to prosper in their communities, societies and the global village. It allows schools to align and integrate fully with their communities and access a range of services across sectors designed to support the educational development of their learners. Quality education is supported by three key pillars, namely ensuring access to quality teachers, providing use of quality learning materials, study tools and professional development and the establishment of safe and supportive quality learning environments.

The findings reflected that the teachers are very clear on what constitutes quality education and the measures that should be in place to ensure it. The significance of teachers' understanding of quality education is profound as it then becomes possible for the teachers to tell if the quality of education has been affected or not. The study revealed that quality education is not derived from a single aspect but from a variety of interrelated processes. These involve the learning environment, teachers' availability and competencies, classroom environment and the availability of teaching aids.

The introduction of the FPE policy was done prematurely and without proper consultation with all the stakeholders. This assertion is evident from the manner in which the teachers of the Ka-Bhudla Primary School have expressed their dissatisfaction on the unmanageable workload they are facing following the implementation of the

FPE policy. In addition, the school infrastructure was inadequate to accommodate the massive increase of learner enrolments. The teachers confirmed that the crowded classrooms led to a shift in the method of learning. The crowded classes do not afford an opportunity to attend to individual learners' needs. Learners are tasked with more homework instead of classwork since there is limited time for in-class assessments and feedback.

Based in one of the remote rural areas of the country, the Ka-Bhudla Primary School teachers have been confronted with the realities of the scourge of poverty. As such, the teachers understand that education is not affordable to the average Swazi child. This may then be attributed to the partial appreciation of the FPE policy for ensuring access to basic education irrespective of one's social standing. Partial in the sense that, though the teachers agree with the purpose of FPE and what the policy seeks to achieve, they are not oblivious to the fact that the policy has adversely affected the teaching and learning environment.

The teachers also hinted that the school has relied on the government's support since the FPE policy was introduced in 2010. Delays in the disbursing of funds negatively affect the Ka-Bhudla Primary School as much needed learning aids cannot be acquired. Furthermore, the findings suggest that teaching seems to have been adversely affected following the implementation of the FPE policy. Not only are the teachers unable to assist learners individually and attending to their special needs, but the reliance on the government for funding further strains the teaching processes as funding is disbursed very late; resulting in a shortage of teaching aids for most of the year. The unavailability of teaching aids has a negative effect on the quality of education at the school, as it is one of the important aspects which guarantees quality education.

The teachers have carried a huge administrative workload and their increased duties with great success, since the implementation of the FPE policy. Fortunately, inadequate learning aids, a shortage of school furniture, the absence of infrastructure and a lack of teacher recruitment did not negatively affect the pass rate of the first FPE graduates.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Government of Eswatini needs to make the funding of schools a priority. The government must invest in school infrastructure development by constructing more classrooms and making more furniture available to mitigate the surge in learner enrolments. This development will ensure that the acceptable teacher-learner ratio of 1:35 is realised to



allow a smooth and efficient learning process. In addition, any classroom-running and curriculum-building decisions must be put in the hands of the community.

The FPE policy has indeed been introduced in haste following a court judgment. However, this does not justify non-consultation of the main implementers of the policy. The Eswatini Government must ensure that all stakeholders are involved in education policy development, especially the teachers as one of the main implementers of education policy. Teachers are often first to realise when certain practices, policies and procedures are no longer practicable. In addition, it is the view of the teachers that the school curriculum needs to be reviewed regularly.

The problem of overcrowding in classrooms and the increased workload of the teachers will soon claim its toll. The picture painted from the responses of the teachers shows it is impossible to guarantee the social and personal development of individual learners in classes that had become too crowded to manage. Despite the improved pass percentages since the implementation of the FPE policy, the teachers carried a huge administrative burden. These challenges cannot be overlooked as it has the potential of demobilising quality education in the entire Eswatini. Therefore, the government needs to prioritise the hiring of teachers before the learning process becomes meaningless. The government needs to reverse the decision to freeze the appointment of new teachers. The recruitment of appropriately qualified and skilled teachers needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Teachers' training and development is equally important. Government should ensure that all the teachers receive regular refresher trainings aligned to the diverse special needs of the learners.

## CONCLUSIONS

The article determined the effects of the FPE policy implementation in the Kingdom of Eswatini on the quality of education. The findings revealed the emergence of adverse consequences following the implementation of the FPE policy in the Kingdom of Eswatini. The quality of education at the Ka-Bhudla Primary School declined drastically as a result of increased learner enrolments and a lack of support from the Eswatini government. It is concluded that some of the teachers display animosity towards the FPE policy. Among other reasons, the resentment was caused by the overcrowding of classrooms, shortage of resources and infrastructure, lowering of educational standards and more workload for teachers. Over and above that, teachers were incensed at not being consulted prior to the implementation of this policy.





## NOTE

- \* The article is partly based on the dissertation for a Master of Administration degree in the subject Public Administration under the supervision of Dr C Alers, titled: Motsamai, M.W. 2021. *Teachers' perspectives on the effects of Free Primary Education Policy of the Kingdom of Eswatini on education quality in public schools*. Unpublished MAdmin dissertation. Pretoria:University of South Africa.

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