

Impact of Fee-Free Basic Education on Student Retention Rates in Tanzania: A Comprehensive Evaluation

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Abstract

This study examined the extent to which the implementation of the Fee-Free Basic Education Policy (FBEP) between 2016 and 2020 influenced student retention in lower secondary schools. A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating qualitative and quantitative data collected from eight secondary schools in the Dar es Salaam and Pwani regions. Primary data were gathered through key informant interviews and triangulated with secondary data obtained from documentary reviews. The findings reveal that, by 2020, dropout rates remained relatively high and had not declined significantly following the introduction of the FBEP. The study concludes that removing tuition fees alone is insufficient to improve student retention in Tanzania's basic education system and underscores the need to address additional factors, including household poverty, cultural practices, and the quality of education.

Key words: *Dropout, Fee-free Basic Education Program, free education, retention rates, Sustainable Development Goals, tuition fees.*

1.0 Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims at ensuring equitable quality education for all children. Following the introduction of this goal in 2015, several countries have made efforts to realise it. These efforts made policy choices to ensure equitable access to basic education. Many governments worldwide address the problem of unequal access to basic education by removing tuition fees. For example, it is reported that equity in basic education is a priority for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. OECD countries conduct joint studies to develop policies that work to address school failure and unequal access. Actually, across OECD countries, almost 20% of students do not reach a basic minimum level of skills required to function in today's societies. Specifically, students from low socio-economic backgrounds are twice as likely to be low performers, suggesting that personal or social circumstances are obstacles to achieving their educational potential. At the same time, a lack of inclusion and fairness manifests most vividly in high dropout rates (OECD, 2012).

Evidence of policies aimed at removing fees for basic education is also found in Europe and Asia. The government of India, for example, passed the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), focusing on relieving poor households of the burden

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of paying for education. In response to the spirit of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, India released its National Education Policy of 2020 to provide universal, high-quality education (Government of India, 2020). The policy praises the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, for laying the legal underpinnings for achieving universal elementary education in India (Jha & Parvati, 2010; Bhattacharya, 2012).

In fact, some countries began implementing policy measures to ensure universal and equitable access to basic education. In Ghana, for example, basic education is a right guaranteed by the Constitution, and underpins other national development goals, including development of a more equitable society (Darvas & Balwanz, 2014; Ekundayo, 2018). Specifically, the government of Ghana launched the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) in October 1996. The policy was to be implemented over 10 years, from 1996 to 2005. This was in line with the Fourth Republican Constitution's mandate to draw up a program for the provision of Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education. The FCUBE policy sought to 'expand access to good quality basic education' (Ekundayo, 2018). After tracing a long history of educational institutional development in Ghana, the author argues that the legal provisions adopted by the government of Ghana regarding free basic education offer important lessons for other African countries.

In 2016, the government of Tanzania introduced the Fee-Free Basic Education Circular (FBEC) to reduce inequality in accessing quality basic education. This is the government's flagship program to expand equitable access to basic education. The introduction of the FBEP in 2016 was indeed in line with the 2014 Education and Training Policy, which issued Education Circular 5 of 2015, declaring the government's intention to offer fee-free education from kindergarten through secondary school. The 2014 policy makes it clear that the aim is to ensure that each Tanzanian child of school age has the opportunity, without any constraints associated with school fees or other contributions. Education Circular number 3 of 2016 (URT, 2016) directed the implementation of the Fee-Free Basic Education Program (FBEP), which eliminated fees in government primary and secondary schools to ensure equality of access to quality basic education in Tanzania (URT, 2019; URT, 1995; Komba, 2012). The paper, therefore, intended to address the question: to what extent did the implementation of the FBEP improve student retention in lower secondary schools in Tanzania?

2.0 Review of Literature

After evaluating the implementation of the Fee-free Basic Education studies in Tanzania conducted by various scholars, including TWaweza (2016), Mbawala (2017), Masamalo (2017), Ndunguru (2018), Ndibalema (2019), Doriye (2020), Shukia (2020) and HakiElimu (2021), findings have shown that the ambition is not becoming a reality. Implementers face challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate funding, an increase in the number of unqualified teachers, a shortage of teaching and learning materials, and high dropout and failure rates. Specifically, one problem that stands out is the high dropout rate among students in the basic education system. Many children enrolled in basic education in Tanzania do not complete their programs. This reality raises concerns about how the government's decision to remove fees could improve student retention in this system.

Basic Education Retention Rate (BERR) is a mathematical measure that predicts the percentage of children entering primary school who will complete lower secondary education (Form IV). Alternatively, this is referred to as Basic Education Survival Rate (BESR). This is calculated by combining the Primary Survival Rate, the Transition Rate from primary to secondary (TR) and the Lower Secondary Survival Rate (LSSR). The Lower Secondary Retention Rate predicts the percentage of children currently entering Form I who will complete the last grade of lower secondary education (Form IV), assuming that current rates of grade-to-grade promotion, repetition and drop-out continue unchanged during the child's four years of lower secondary schooling. BESR is one of the Key Performance Indicators in Tanzania's 5-year Education Sector Development Plan (URT, 2019). This concept forms the basic unit of analysis for this paper.

High school dropout rates have been reported as a significant problem in Tanzania. For example, Masamalo (2017) studied the persistence of boys' high dropout ratio from secondary schools in Makete district. The author focused on factors that contributed to this persistence and found that economic factors, as well as parents' and guardians' negative attitudes towards secondary education, were the main drivers of school dropout in Makete district. The economic activities included tree farming, the chief activity that kept boys in Makete out of school. The author further noted that, despite the removal of fees and efforts by many donors and government agencies focused on secondary education in Makete, the school dropout rate remained high, especially among boys. This study was conducted a year after the introduction of the FBEP in 2016. The findings call for further research on the impact of the FBEP on reducing school dropout rates over time.

More evidence was found from Ouma et al. (2017), who studied the significant causes of school dropouts in artisanal mining areas of Nyarugusu village, Geita Region, Tanzania. The authors reported that dropout rates remained high in 2017, a year after the introduction of the FBEP. These authors found the factors causing high rates of dropout from school in the basic education system to include loss of interest in education, death or separation of parents, community's negative perception of the importance of basic education, lack of school necessities, peer pressure, family work, as well as early pregnancies and marriages.

Both independent researchers and the government have reported trends in high school dropout rates. In 2019, the government of Tanzania indicated that school dropout remains a significant problem affecting the provision of basic education in the country. Tables 1 and 2 present data from government reports on the actual dropout rates in the country between 2016 and 2019.

Table 2.1: Primary Retention rate 2016 – 2019

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019
Boys	45.38%	61.65%	86.72%	78.36%
Girls	53.34%	67.08%	90.53%	83.82%
Total	49.32%	64.39%	88.63%	81.06%

Source: URT (2019, pg. 20)

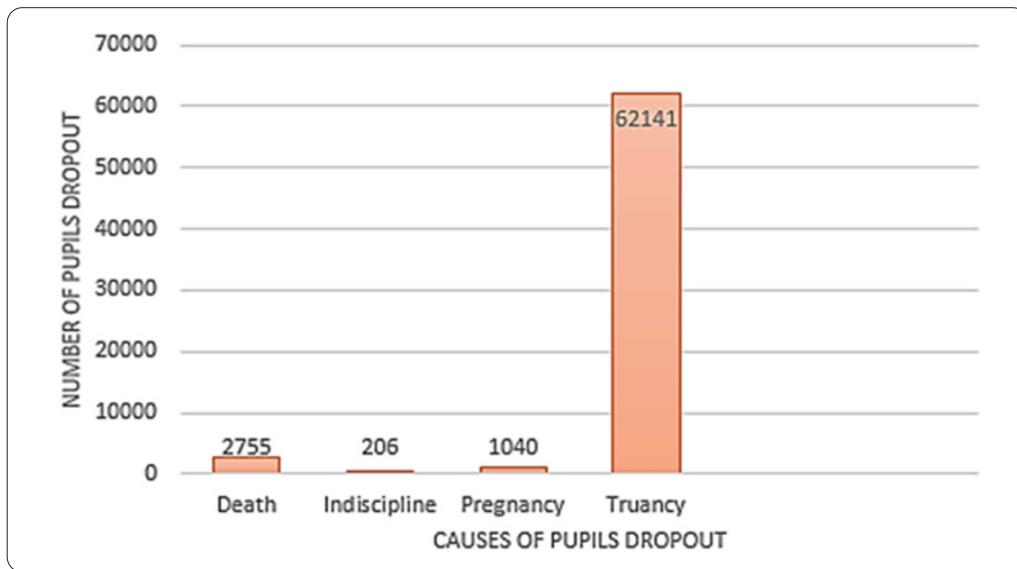
Table 2.2: Lower Secondary Retention rate 2016–2019

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019
Boys	70.76%	72.71%	75.90%	72.18%
Girls	73.93%	75.77%	77.71%	75.72%
Total	72.33%	74.25%	76.83%	74.00%

Source: URT (2019, pg. 29)

For the four years recorded in tables 2.1 and 2.2, the average retention rate for primary schools was 70.85%, and for lower secondary schools, it was 74.35%. This means that nearly 30% of pupils enrolled in primary schools in Tanzania did not complete primary education. For lower secondary schools, more than 25% of children enrolled did not finish form four. None of these dropouts can be considered to have reached their respective educational levels. Access should not be counted at the entry level but at the exit point. The dropped-out children are therefore victims of inequality of access to basic education.

In addition, government reports attribute the high rates to truancy in both primary and secondary schools. Truancy implies that the students left school for reasons unknown to the teachers. In these cases, students are labelled truants because their whereabouts are unknown. The role of truancy in driving high school dropout rates is shown in Figure 1. This report presents truancy as the cause of school dropout, but it does not explain why students choose to drop out. It was therefore important to assess the impact of the government's proposed solution to curb high school dropout rates.

**Figure 1: Truancy as the Major Cause of School Dropout in Tanzania**

Source: URT (2018)

Kalinga (2013) made two important arguments about high dropout rates in Tanzanian schools. The first argument is that 'despite the efforts undertaken by the government to improve the quality of secondary education over the years, there has been a growing concern

throughout the country that many pupils (up to 12.5 per cent) do not complete secondary school education, especially in community secondary schools.' The second argument is that the change in education policy, the introduction of school fees and contributions, was one of the significant factors behind high dropout rates in secondary schools in the regions of Mbeya, Kilimanjaro, and Dar es Salaam. The third argument is that dropout explicitly undermines the educational equality of vulnerable children.

Suppose Kalinga was right in his argument about the effect of fees and contributions on dropout rates; the removal of fees and contributions in Tanzania's basic education system must have led to improvements in retention rates, thereby reducing dropout rates. Therefore, this study assessed the impact of removing tuition fees in secondary schools on students' retention rates. Specifically, the study answered one central question: "Did the removal of fees for basic education in Tanzania improve retention rates in public secondary schools and consequently reduce high dropout rates?"

3.0 Methodology

According to URT (2019), Pwani is among the regions with the highest national lower secondary retention rate. There are also only five regions with a Lower Secondary Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) of over 60% (i.e. significantly above the national average). These are Kilimanjaro (70.6%), Iringa (66.4%), Pwani (64.7%), Dar es Salaam (61.8%) and Mbeya (60.7%). In terms of Lower Secondary retention rate, in Dar es Salaam and Pwani Regions, over 60% of children who start Standard I in primary school are expected to complete 11 years of basic education. So, Pwani and Dar es Salaam are among the regions with the highest national lower secondary retention rates. This study, therefore, chose to focus on the regions of Dar es Salaam and Pwani.

This study used a mixed-methods approach, collecting and analysing both qualitative and quantitative data. Primary data was collected through key informant interviews. The respondents were heads of secondary schools and researchers/experts from non-governmental organisations involved in education- and human rights-related research. The first batch of key informants, i.e., those from specific NGOs, was deliberately selected for their expertise and roles in education policy research and advocacy. These are TWaweza, HAKIELIMU and TGNP. The remaining key informants were the heads of 5 secondary public schools in the Pwani region (Mkuranga and Kibaha TC) and in the Dar es Salaam region (Ilala and Ubungo). Four schools were picked randomly from each region – two from the list of schools in each district.

Qualitative data were analysed using content analysis. Quantitative data on enrollment and graduation before and after the introduction of the FBEP were analysed using Microsoft Excel. The results were used to complement qualitative results by triangulation. A total of 8 key informant interviews were conducted. The key informants were the heads of 5 public secondary schools in the Pwani region (Mkuranga and Kibaha TC) and in the Dar es Salaam region (Ilala and Ubungo). Three schools were randomly selected from Dar es Salaam, and two from the Pwani region.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Effect of the FBEP on Retention Rates

An efficient education system results in minimal student dropout rates. The Heads of Schools were asked to provide information on enrollment, graduation and dropout between 2011 and 2021. This question aimed to collect quantitative data. The responses from all five schools are presented in Tables 4.1 and 4.2 and summarised in Figures 3 and 4. These are analysed and discussed, triangulated with qualitative findings.

Table 4.1: Total Enrolment and Dropout Numbers for the Five Schools from 2011 to 2019

Year	A		B		C		D		E		Total	
	Enrolled	Dropped										
2011	225	97	0	0	234	35	120	1	160	12	739	145
2012	240	99	379	0	159	24	120	1	218	10	1116	134
2013	296	220	370	8	300	50	120	3	140	9	1226	290
2014	347	289	333	3	234	84	80	0	220	12	1214	388
2015	298	204	261	6	210	87	120	4	230	27	1119	328
2016	233	49	346	0	300	90	80	6	196	18	1155	163
2017	221	112	538	1	217	19	120	4	150	14	1246	150
2018	270	188	452	1	290	56	120	3	246	16	1378	264
2019	208	134	277	2	200	27	80	1	274	6	1039	170

Source: Field data, 2023

Table 4.2: Dropout and Retention Rates from 2011 to 2019

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Total Dropout	145	134	290	388	328	163	150	264	170
Total enrolment	739	1,116	1,226	1,214	1,119	1,155	1,246	1,378	1,039
Dropout rate	19.62	12.00	23.65	31.96	29.31	14.11	12.03	19.15	16.36
Retention rate	80.38	88	76.35	68.04	70.69	85.89	87.97	80.85	83.64

Source: Field data, 2023

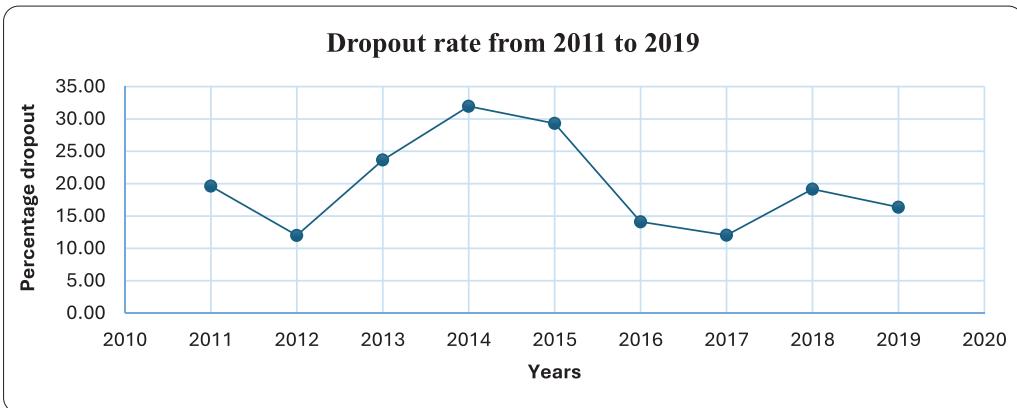


Figure 3: Trend of Dropout Rates in the Selected Schools (2011 to 2019)

Source: Field data

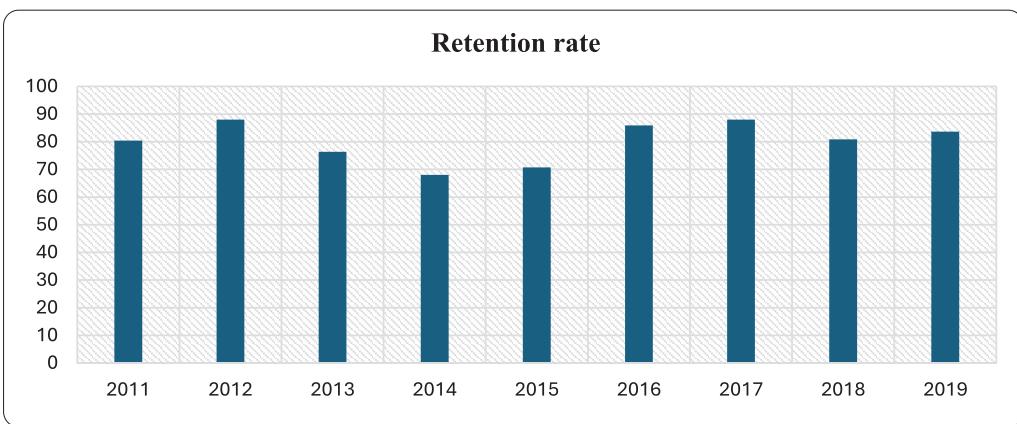


Figure 4: Lower secondary retention rate for the five selected schools

Source: Field data, 2023

The data presented in Figure 3 suggest that, with the introduction of the FBEP, parents and guardians may have been excited and sent their children to public schools in large numbers. This is why, on average, enrolment levels improved between 2015 and 2020. Nevertheless, the increase in enrolment came with unintended consequences, including pressure on educational quality. This fall in educational quality manifested as low teacher-student ratios, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient dormitories, insufficient toilets, and inadequate facilities such as books and desks (Mwakalukwa, 2019). All of these affected the quality of education and the overall learning environment. This fall in educational quality, coupled with other pull and push factors already documented in the literature (Kalinga, 2013; Masamalo, 2017), may have led to high dropout rates from government schools. This is evident in the increase in dropout rates from 2,138 to 2,318 between years 10 and 11 (2019 and 2020).

The second way of interpreting the data in Figure 4.2 is that the removal of fees did not necessarily imply that students from poor families would have all their school needs met because access to basic education is ultimately a poverty issue. The idea that removing fees would solve the problem of accessing basic education was not entirely correct. As data on dropout rates indicate, the implementation of the FBEP, which focused on fee removal, did not automatically reduce dropout rates. The argument here is that all the students who drop out of the basic education system before graduation cannot be considered to have 'accessed' the intended education at their respective levels. They may have been enrolled, but enrollment does not guarantee access to the intended knowledge if the students do not remain in the system to completion.

The students feel that parents' shoulders are far beyond what the capitation fee could cover. Students need transport fare, food, textbooks, exercise books, uniforms (clothes and shoes), etc. In addition, girls have needs that are different from those of boys. There are also students with disabilities who need even more intensive and more expensive care. So, the removal of fees and other contributions did not fully relieve parents and guardians of the burden of education costs.

4.2 Effect of the FBEP on the Retention Rate in Lower Secondary Schools

As the data show, since the introduction of the FBEP in 2016, students' retention in Tanzania's lower secondary section of the basic education system has followed a wavy pattern. Although retention rates improved in 2017 (87.97%) after the introduction of the FBEP, they fell again in 2018 (80.85%). Dropout rates increased from 12.03% in 2017 to 19.15% in 2018, leading to this effect. Actually, the data for this study were collected from 2011 to 2019. Findings show that in 2012, the retention rate for lower secondary schools was 88%, higher than in 2016 (85.89%) and as high as in 2017 (87.97%). This fact makes it difficult to conclude that the introduction of the FBEP has had a positive effect on retention rates in Tanzania's lower secondary education system. In general, the rate maintained the same trend it had before the program was introduced.

One possible explanation for this stabilisation in retention rates is that, in 2016, both parents and children had high hopes and therefore enrolled in secondary education in large numbers. Nevertheless, after a year of participating in the system, these parents and children realised that there was no accompanying improvement in classroom quality, the availability of books, or the number of qualified teachers, etc. In the end, these parents and children decided to opt out of the system in favour of other options. This argument could be supported by government data and by this study, which shows that enrolment rates in lower secondary schools in Tanzania increased substantially in 2017. Data from this study further show that this increase did not persist. After hiking in 2017, the enrolment rate in the selected schools declined consistently from 2017 to 2019.

It is also arguable that the FBEP came with the illusion that removing fees would bring relief to poor families and encourage children to join and remain in school. This was indicated in the response from head of school F, who said:

"Capitation funds are not enough. Parents are still required to pay for food and other school contributions" (20th December, 2022).

This view was also shared by the respondent from school B, who thought that:

"Students leave school because of poor participation of parents in giving students bus fare and money for food" (22nd December, 2022).

These responses show that the belief that removing fees would reduce dropout rates is a quick temptation for any policy analyst who goes deep enough to unearth the reality of the FBEP's effect on retention rates. Even HAKIELIMU (2021) in their *Critical Analysis of the Education and Training Policy (ETP) 2014* fell into the mistake of supposing that FBEP increased retention rates by removing tuition fees. The findings presented above prove that this claim is a wrong supposition. The introduction of the FBEP did not reduce school dropout rates. Therefore, this study supports Kalinga's (2013) first argument that many students enrolled in lower secondary education in community schools still fail to complete their education. Nevertheless, the study contradicts the supposition that school fees and other contributions were the major factors causing high dropout rates in Tanzania's public secondary schools.

4.3 Implications on Equality of Access

In general, access means that children joining the lower secondary school system in Tanzania should be able to exit at the end, satisfied with the system's contribution to improving their knowledge and skills for better life outcomes. Once retention rates dwindle, children fail to complete the grooming process necessary for these life outcomes. They leave the system unsatisfied and unequipped for life outcomes. The implication of these findings for equality of access to basic education is that all Tanzanian children who fail to complete their lower basic education program do not enjoy the intended inclusiveness that the government policy and SDG 4 were ambitious to achieve. Dropping out of the system before earning the Form Four certificate amounts to failure of the program's primary objective (FBEP) to the same extent. These children cannot be said to have accessed basic education. They were enrolled but did not receive the necessary education.

4.4 Major Causes of Dropout

Respondents to the interviews (Heads of Schools) were asked to comment on factors contributing to the high student dropout rates in secondary schools, even after the introduction of the FBEP. In this question, the Heads of Schools provided their views on the causes of persistently high dropout rates. Most of their responses highlighted factors beyond the students' control.

As shown earlier, the government considers truancy the leading cause of school dropout among both primary and secondary school children. The duty to monitor and follow up on students' school attendance and academic progress is assigned to the office of the District Commissioner in subsection 3.4(iii) of Education Circular Number 3 of 2016. In section 3.11 of the Circular, community leaders at the village and street levels (mtaa) have the duty to encourage parents to send their children to school and to monitor students' behaviour to curb truancy. The community also has the duty to ensure that students do not roam around during school time.

Nevertheless, although respondents mentioned truancy as one of the causes of high school dropout rates, this factor cannot stand alone. Truancy is only what the government, community, parents and teachers see when they cannot explain why children refuse to go to school. A closer look at the factors mentioned reveals two major groups. The first is a group of pull factors, which are attractive alternatives to school that children encounter in their communities. For example, the respondent from School G said:

"The significant causes of school dropout include truancy, pregnancy, family poverty and other family problems like divorce".

The respondent from school D said:

"Students drop out of school for several reasons. They include Family problems, pregnancies for girls and failure in form two examinations".

In addition, the respondent from school H opined that:

"Dropout comes when the students are not satisfied. There are many factors. We cannot blame the students only because some factors are beyond their control. These include issues such as school locations, attractive economic activities, and the area's social background".

Therefore, push factors force children out of school even when they are eager to continue with studies - these factors are beyond the children's control, and they include; family poverty, community cultural attitudes towards education in general and education for girls in particular, shortage of teachers, overcrowded classes, inadequate capitation funds to cater for the needs of children while at school (including books, desks, water, lunch, security, etc), other family complications like separation of parents and location of schools. This study supports the findings of Masamalo (2017) and Ouma et al. (2017).

5.0 Conclusion

This paper was set to assess the extent to which the introduction and implementation of the Fee-Free Basic Education Program (FBEP), which removed fees in secondary schools in Tanzania, reduced dropout rates. Results show that school dropout rates remain high in Tanzania's lower secondary public schools. Evidence from eight schools studied in Dar es Salaam and Pwani attests to this reality. Evaluated five years after its introduction, the FBEP was unable to improve student retention in lower secondary schools, and therefore, equality of access is unlikely to be achieved. From the findings, it can be concluded that the introduction of the FBEP in 2016 and its subsequent implementation did not effectively achieve its objective of expanding access to basic education, as they failed to reduce dropout rates and, consequently, improve retention rates. The system is too porous. It is still too weak to hold its inputs to the end of the process. It allows too many enrolled children to feel dissatisfied and opt out of the system. Dropout pull factors indicate that ensuring access through retention will require more than removing fees, while push factors underscore the need to improve enrolled children's confidence by enhancing the quality of both the education service and the learning environment. It is equally important to note that, in the final analysis, equality of access to basic education in Tanzania is a poverty reduction issue.

6.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends urgent improvements to the quality of both family and school life for students. Family life quality can be improved through poverty-reduction efforts, as outlined in government strategies and national visions. School life quality encompasses both the school environment and the delivery of knowledge. This improvement in the quality of school life will require additional investment through the national education budget. As shown, capitation funds are nowhere near adequate. Schools need more funds for books, classrooms, teacher salaries, lunch, and dormitories, among other expenses. One way to improve the education budget is to develop strategies to engage the private sector in funding public education through public-private partnerships. Another way could be to allow parents to contribute through tuition fees to improve the quality of basic education. This was also evident in the study by TWaweza (2016), which found that parents were willing to pay tuition fees rather than compromise on the quality of education.

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