Assessing the Impact of Educational Policies on Illiteracy Levels Reduction in Zambia

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***Abstract:** This study aimed to assess the impact of educational policies on reducing illiteracy levels in Zambia, guided by Human Capital Theory and Diffusion of Innovations Theory. Employing a descriptive survey design integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study examined existing policies, their impact, and factors influencing their effectiveness. The sample comprised 68 participants selected through purposive and simple random sampling techniques. Findings revealed a range of educational policies, including the 2014 Zambian Revised Literacy Policy, the National Literacy Framework, Adult Learning and Education programs, and the Primary Reading Programme. While some policies showed promise in improving literacy outcomes, challenges such as implementation gaps and resource constraints hindered their effectiveness. Notably, the 2014 Zambian Revised Literacy Policy aimed at improving comprehension and learning across subjects, while the National Literacy Framework, though positive in concept, faced challenges in practical application. Similarly, the Adult Learning and Education programs empowered adults to enhance job prospects, but difficulties in reaching all in need persisted. The Primary Reading Programme, implemented in 1998, did not yield significant improvements in literacy levels among Zambian learners. From these findings, conclusions were drawn regarding the need for enhanced policy implementation, targeted interventions to address implementation challenges, and sustained investment in literacy programs. Recommendations include strengthening teacher training, improving language policy implementation, fostering community engagement, addressing socio-economic barriers, and ensuring sustainable funding for literacy initiatives.*

Keywords*: Educational Policies, Illiteracy Levels, Human Capital Theory, Diffusion of Innovations Theory*

1 Introduction

Education plays a pivotal role in shaping the social, economic, and political landscape of any nation. In Zambia, like many developing countries, the challenge of illiteracy has been a persistent obstacle to progress. Illiteracy rates in Zambia have remained stubbornly high, particularly among marginalized populations in rural areas. Despite decades of effort and numerous educational policies implemented by the Zambian government, achieving significant reductions in illiteracy levels has proven to be a formidable task.

Since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1964, Zambia has grappled with addressing widespread illiteracy among its population. The roots of illiteracy in Zambia can be traced back to historical factors such as limited access to education during the colonial era, which primarily served the interests of the colonial administration and the elite minority (Simwaba, 2016). During this time, access to education was limited, and the majority of the population, especially in rural areas, did not have the opportunity to attend school. This lack of education had long-lasting effects on the country's literacy levels. As a result, the majority of the population, particularly in rural areas, lacked access to quality education. According to Mwelwa and Sichali (2017), the legacy of colonial education policies contributed to the perpetuation of illiteracy in Zambia, with limited resources allocated to rural schools and a lack of indigenous language instruction further exacerbating the problem. After Zambia gained independence in 1964, the government made efforts to improve access to education and reduce illiteracy. However, challenges such as lack of infrastructure, teacher shortages, and poverty continued to hinder progress. As a result, illiteracy levels remained high, particularly in rural areas where access to schools and educational resources was limited. Chansa and Mulenga (2019) noted that Zambia faced challenges in expanding educational opportunities to marginalized communities due the named factors. Throughout the post-independence period, various educational policies and initiatives have been implemented in Zambia to tackle illiteracy. For instance, the introduction of free primary education in the 1970s aimed to increase enrollment rates and improve literacy levels among children. However, despite these efforts, illiteracy remained prevalent, particularly among adults who missed out on formal education opportunities during their youth.

One of the key factors contributing to high illiteracy levels in Zambia is poverty. Many families could not afford to send their children to school, leading to high dropout rates and low levels of literacy. Additionally, cultural factors, such as early marriage and gender discrimination, also play a role in perpetuating illiteracy in the country (Mwelwa & Sichali, 2017). The lack of resources and infrastructure in rural areas further exacerbates the issue of illiteracy in Zambia. Many schools in these areas lack basic amenities such as electricity, textbooks, and trained teachers, making it difficult for children to receive a quality education. As a result, illiteracy rates are higher in rural areas compared to urban areas.

According to Zulu & Chikukula (2020) the adult literacy rate (individuals aged 15 and above who can read and write with comprehension) reached 52% in 2020. This signifies a positive trend, considering historical fluctuations. However, the picture isn't entirely rosy. Adsum Foundation (2020) highlights a critical aspect: the substantial gender disparity (Adsum Foundation (2020). Female illiteracy remains higher compared to males. Additionally, there are concerns about the quality of education. World Vision International reports that a significant portion of grade 2 learners struggle with reading fluency (World Vision International, 2020), suggesting potential limitations in early grade reading instruction.

The persistence of high illiteracy rates in Zambia underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of the issue, influenced by factors such as poverty, gender disparities, and limited access to educational resources in rural areas. The effectiveness of educational policies in addressing illiteracy in Zambia remains a subject of debate and inquiry. Understanding the impact of these policies is crucial for informing future strategies and interventions aimed at reducing illiteracy rates and promoting inclusive education. By assessing the outcomes of past policies and identifying successful approaches, the study sought to make evidence-based strategies tailored to the unique socio-economic context of Zambia.

A. Statement of the problem

Zambia has made strides in improving literacy rates, particularly among adults. However, despite numerous educational policies implemented by the Zambian government, illiteracy levels in the country remain persistently high, particularly among with vary gaps between urban and in rural areas. Studies have highlighted the multifaceted nature of the problem, citing factors various factors contributing to the challenge (Chansa & Mulenga, 2019; Simwaba, 2016). According to statistics from these studies, illiteracy rates in Zambia have remained stubbornly high, standing at 48% among adults, with a significant proportion of the population lacking basic literacy skills (Mwelwa & Sichali, 2017; Tembo, 2018). If left unattended, the high levels of illiteracy in Zambia will continue to perpetuate cycles of poverty, hinder socioeconomic development, and exacerbate inequalities within society. Individuals and communities affected by illiteracy face limited opportunities for education, employment, and civic participation, further marginalizing them from mainstream society. This study sought to assess the impact of educational policies on illiteracy level reduction in Zambia by examining the outcomes of past policies, identifying barriers to their effective implementation, and exploring potential strategies for improving literacy outcomes. By understanding the factors that influence the success or failure of educational policies in addressing illiteracy, this study aimed to inform evidence-based decision-making and contribute to the development of more effective interventions tailored to the needs of Zambia's diverse population.

B. Objectives

i. To identify existing educational policies on reducing illiteracy levels in Zambia.

ii. To explore the impact of educational policies on illiteracy levels reduction in Zambia.

iii. To identify factors affecting the effectiveness of educational policies on reducing illiteracy levels in Zambia.

C. Research questions

i   What are the existing educational policies on reducing illiteracy levels in Zambia?
ii What is the impact of educational policies on illiteracy levels reduction in Zambia?
iii What are the factors affecting the effectiveness of educational policies on reducing illiteracy levels in Zambia?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The concept of literacy

Literacy is commonly defined as the ability to read, write, and understand written language proficiently. This encompasses not only the basic skills of decoding and encoding written symbols but also the capacity to comprehend and interpret various forms of written communication, such as books, newspapers, and digital media (UNESCO, 2020). Illiteracy, on the other hand, refers to the lack of these essential literacy skills. Individuals who are illiterate face significant barriers in accessing information, participating fully in society, and engaging in activities that require reading and writing. Illiteracy can manifest in different forms, including functional illiteracy, where individuals may possess basic reading and writing skills but struggle to apply them effectively in real-world contexts (Trochim & Donnelly, 2018). These definitions highlight the fundamental importance of literacy in empowering individuals and communities, facilitating learning and development, and promoting social inclusion and equity.

B. Theoretical Review

The study was guided by tow theories, Human Capital Theory and Diffusion of Innovations Theory.

Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory, proposed by economists Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz, posits that investments in education and training lead to increased productivity and economic growth (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961). According to this theory, individuals acquire human capital through education, which enhances their skills, knowledge, and abilities, making them more productive members of society. According to Becker, individuals invest in their own human capital through education, training, and other forms of skill development to increase their future earning potential and improve their standard of living. Similarly, Theodore Schultz emphasized the importance of human capital formation in economic development. Schultz argued that investments in education and health contribute to the development of a skilled and healthy workforce, which is essential for driving technological progress, innovation, and sustained economic growth (Schultz, 1961).

Human capital theory highlights the significance of education as a driver of social and economic advancement. It underscores the importance of policies and interventions aimed at expanding access to quality education, reducing disparities in educational attainment, and enhancing the skills and capabilities of the workforce. By investing in human capital, societies can empower individuals to realize their full potential, participate more fully in the economy, and contribute to overall prosperity.

In the context of the study, human capital theory suggested that educational policies aimed at reducing illiteracy levels contribute to the accumulation of human capital among the population, thereby fostering economic development and social progress. By assessing the impact of educational policies on literacy outcomes, the study provided empirical evidence to support or challenge the assumptions of human capital theory, informing policy decisions and resource allocation in the education sector.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory

Diffusion of innovations theory, proposed by sociologist Everett Rogers, explores how new ideas, technologies, and practices spread within a social system over time (Rogers, 1962). The theory identifies various stages of the innovation adoption process, including awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption, influenced by factors such as communication channels, social networks, and perceived characteristics of the innovation.

Rogers identified five stages in the diffusion process: Firstly, during the "Knowledge" stage, individuals become cognizant of the innovation and its potential advantages. This initial phase involves the dissemination of information about the innovation, raising awareness among the target audience.
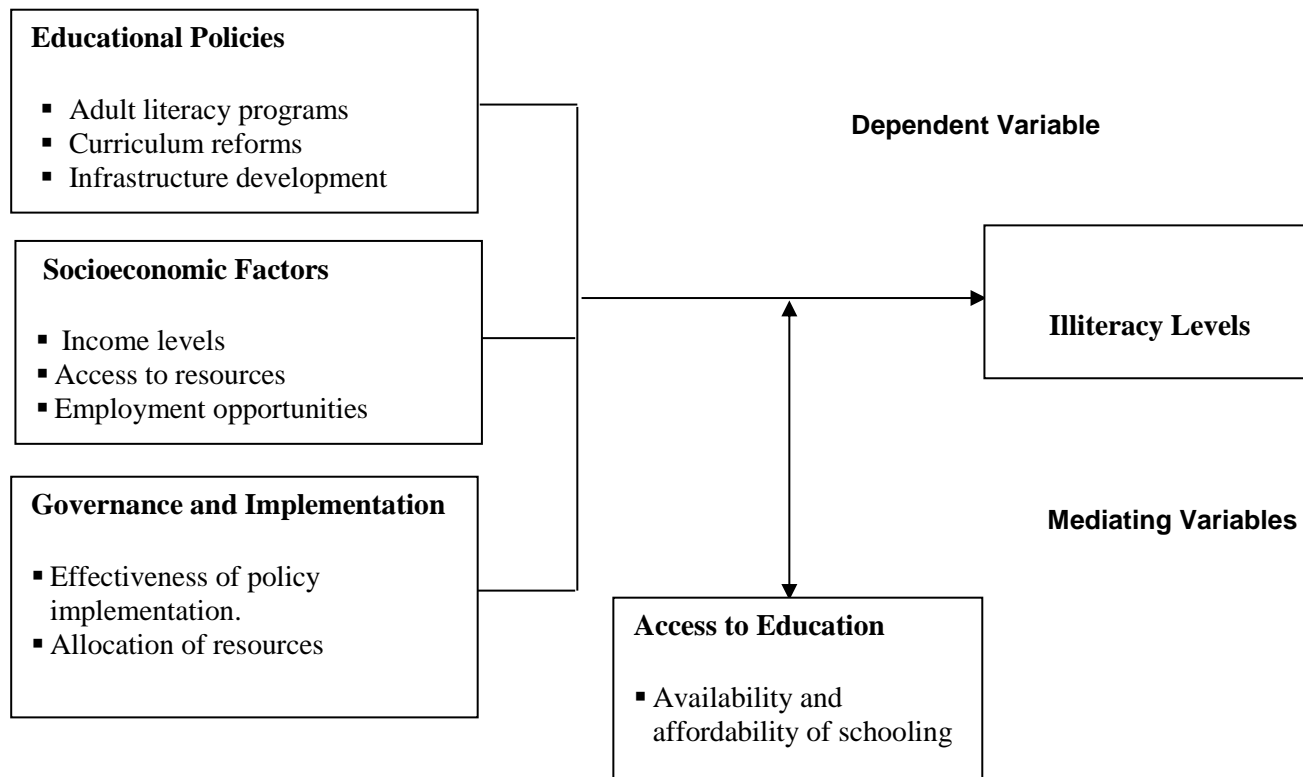
Following the Knowledge stage, the "Persuasion" phase ensues. Here, individuals actively seek out information regarding the innovation, scrutinizing its merits and assessing its applicability to their circumstances. This stage is marked by a process of evaluation and deliberation as individuals weigh the potential benefits against any perceived drawbacks. Subsequently, the "Decision" stage emerges, where individuals deliberate on whether to adopt or reject the innovation. This decision-making process hinges on an assessment of the innovation's relevance and compatibility with existing practices, reflecting a critical juncture in the diffusion process. Upon reaching a decision to adopt the innovation, individuals transition to the "Implementation" stage. Here, they begin to integrate the innovation into their daily routines or work practices, translating intention into action. Finally, the "Confirmation" stage unfolds as individuals evaluate the outcomes of adopting the innovation. Based on this assessment, they determine whether to persist with its use or revert to prior practices. This stage serves as a feedback loop, informing subsequent iterations of the diffusion process (Rogers, 1962).

In the context of assessing the impact of educational policies on illiteracy level reduction in Zambia, diffusion of innovations theory offered valuable insights into the processes through which policies are introduced, disseminated, and adopted within the education system and broader society. By examining factors such as communication channels, social networks, and perceived characteristics of the innovation, the study identified barriers and facilitators to policy implementation and develop strategies to enhance the diffusion and uptake of effective educational interventions aimed at reducing illiteracy.

C. Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework is a theoretical structure that guides the research process by providing a coherent and systematic approach to understanding the relationships between key concepts or variables within a study. It serves as a foundation for formulating research questions, designing data collection methods, analyzing findings, and drawing conclusions (Trochim & Donnelly, 2018).

Independent Variables

Educational Policies

- Adult literacy programs
- Curriculum reforms
- Infrastructure development

Dependent Variable

Socioeconomic Factors

- Income levels
- Access to resources
- Employment opportunities

Illiteracy Levels

Governance and Implementation

- Effectiveness of policy implementation.
- Allocation of resources

Mediating Variables

Access to Education

- Availability and affordability of schooling

The nature and implementation of educational policies directly impact literacy rates. Effective policies can lead to reductions in illiteracy by increasing access to education and improving its quality. Socioeconomic status influences the effectiveness of educational policies. Poverty may hinder access to education despite policies aiming for universal coverage. Policies addressing economic disparities can enhance educational outcomes. Cultural attitudes towards education affect policy reception and implementation. Policies sensitive to cultural contexts, such as bilingual education initiatives, may be more successful in reducing illiteracy. Effective governance ensures proper allocation of resources, transparent policymaking, and efficient implementation. Weak governance can undermine policy effectiveness, leading to disparities in literacy levels. Improved access to education, facilitated by policies like free primary education and distance learning programs, directly correlates with reduced illiteracy levels. Policies focusing on improving teaching standards, updating curricula, and providing adequate learning materials enhance literacy rates by ensuring students receive quality education. Public awareness campaigns supported by educational policies can encourage participation in literacy programs, leading to a reduction in illiteracy levels. This conceptual framework illustrates the complex interplay between various factors influencing illiteracy levels and the role of educational policies in addressing this challenge within the Zambian context.

D. Empirical literature

The impact of educational policies on illiteracy levels has been a subject of extensive empirical investigation. Numerous studies have explored the effectiveness of various educational policies in reducing illiteracy rates across different contexts, shedding light on the nuanced relationships between policy interventions and literacy outcomes. One significant area of research focuses on the impact of policies aimed at increasing access to education. For instance, Krejci & Morgan, (2020) analyzed the effects of government initiatives to provide free primary education in developing countries. Their findings highlighted a significant reduction in illiteracy rates following the implementation of such policies, emphasizing the critical role of access in improving literacy levels.

Moreover, the quality of education has emerged as a crucial factor in addressing illiteracy. Trochim, & Donnelly (2018) examined the impact of curriculum reforms on literacy outcomes in urban schools. They found that targeted policies to enhance the quality of instruction and align curriculum with students' needs led to notable improvements in literacy rates among primary school children. In addition to access and quality, the socio-economic context shapes the effectiveness of educational policies on literacy. A study by Whiteley, James & Antoniou (2014) investigated the interaction between poverty alleviation programs and literacy initiatives in rural communities. Their results underscored the importance of holistic approaches that integrate educational interventions with broader socio-economic development strategies to tackle illiteracy effectively. Furthermore, cultural considerations play a significant role in policy implementation and literacy outcomes. Matimbe (2014) examined the impact of culturally sensitive pedagogical approaches on literacy rates among indigenous populations. Their study demonstrated that policies incorporating indigenous languages and cultural practices into the curriculum were more successful in engaging learners and reducing illiteracy within these communities.

Governance and institutional factors also influence the impact of educational policies on literacy. A study by Adsum Foundation (2020) investigated the role of effective governance mechanisms in ensuring the successful implementation of literacy programs in urban areas. Their findings underscored the importance of transparent governance structures and accountability mechanisms in maximizing the impact of educational policies on reducing illiteracy. Overall, empirical literature highlights the multifaceted nature of the relationship between educational policies and illiteracy levels. While access, quality, socio-economic factors, cultural considerations, and governance play critical roles, the effectiveness of policies depends on their alignment with local contexts and the integration of complementary interventions to address the complex challenges of illiteracy.

E. Research gap

Despite the wealth of empirical literature exploring the impact of educational policies on illiteracy levels globally, there remains a notable research gap regarding the specific context of Zambia. While existing studies provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of educational interventions in various settings, there is a lack of research focused specifically on the Zambian context. Zambia faces unique socio-economic, cultural, and governance challenges that may influence the efficacy of educational policies in reducing illiteracy. However, existing literature predominantly draws on experiences from other countries, potentially overlooking the contextual factors that shape policy outcomes in Zambia. Therefore, a research gap exists in systematically assessing the impact of educational policies on illiteracy levels reduction in Zambia. This gap necessitates empirical investigations that examine the implementation, effectiveness, and outcomes of educational policies tailored to the Zambian context. Such research could provide valuable insights into the mechanisms through which policies influence literacy outcomes in Zambia and inform evidence-based policy-making to address the country's specific literacy challenges.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a descriptive survey design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gather insights into the impact of educational policies on illiteracy levels in Zambia. The sample size comprised 68 participants, selected through purposive and simple random sampling techniques to ensure representation from key stakeholders. Among the participants were 5 officials from the Ministry of Education, 30 teachers (with 10 from each school), 3 school administrators, and 30 community members. Data collection was conducted using a combination of questionnaires and interview guides, tailored to elicit responses pertinent to the study objectives. The questionnaire allowed for structured responses to quantitative inquiries, while the interview guides facilitated in-depth exploration of qualitative perspectives. Following data collection, analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics for quantitative data, enabling the summarization and interpretation of numerical findings. Additionally, thematic analysis was employed for qualitative data, identifying recurrent patterns and themes within the responses to uncover deeper insights into the impact of educational policies on illiteracy levels. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study, with measures including obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring voluntary participation, and maintaining confidentiality of responses. By employing a mixed-methods approach and adhering to ethical principles, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics surrounding educational policies and their influence on illiteracy reduction in Zambia, thus contributing to evidence-based decision-making in the education sector.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 4. 1 Educational policies on reducing illiteracy levels in Zambia and their impact.

SN	Educational policies	Year	Impact

1.	The 2014 Zambian Revised Literacy Policy	2014	Improved comprehension and learning across subjects.
2.	National Literacy Framework	2013	The framework itself was a positive step, but its success relied on its practical application.
3.	Adult Learning and Education	2004	Empowered adults to improve their job prospects but reaching all who need these programs can be difficult
4.	The primary reading programme	1998	Did not improve literacy levels among Zambian learners

The study established several key findings regarding the impact of educational policies on reducing illiteracy levels in Zambia. Specifically, the examination of the 2014 Revised Literacy Policy and the National Literacy Framework revealed significant shifts in primary school literacy education. By prioritizing local languages as the primary medium of instruction and gradually introducing English, these policies aimed to provide a solid foundation for students, potentially enhancing their comprehension and learning outcomes. However, challenges were identified, including delays in teacher training and difficulties in ensuring sufficient resources in local languages. Additionally, the balance between proficiency in local languages and later English proficiency for higher education emerged as a point of ongoing discussion.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the importance of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) Programs initiated in 2004. These programs, designed to address illiteracy among adults, provided vital opportunities for individuals who missed out on formal education. By offering structured learning experiences, ALE programs empowered adults to enhance their employment prospects, engage more actively in their communities, and potentially support their children's education. Nevertheless, challenges persisted in reaching all adults in need of these programs and securing adequate funding for their sustainability. Additionally, the study underscored the significance of the Primary Reading Programme (PRP), implemented in 1998. While not directly linked to the 2014 policy, the PRP laid the groundwork for subsequent literacy initiatives by introducing specific methodologies and resources for literacy instruction. This early program played a foundational role in shaping the trajectory of literacy education in Zambia, setting the stage for future advancements in the field. Overall, the study illuminated the multifaceted nature of educational policies aimed at reducing illiteracy levels in Zambia, highlighting both their potential benefits and persistent challenges. By examining the implementation and impact of these policies, the study provided valuable insights into the complexities of addressing illiteracy and informed discussions on future policy strategies to enhance literacy outcomes in the country.

Table 4.2 Factors affecting the effectiveness of educational policies on reducing illiteracy levels in Zambia.

SN	Factors	%
1.	Teacher Training and Resources	5.8%
2.	Language Policy and Implementation	14.7%
3.	Community Engagement and Support	20.6%
4.	Socioeconomic Factors	11.8%
5.	Monitoring and Evaluation	14.7%
6.	Sustainability and Funding	35%3

The table provides a breakdown of factors affecting the effectiveness of educational policies aimed at reducing illiteracy levels in Zambia, presented as percentages of the total factors identified. Teacher Training and Resources (5.8%): This category highlights the importance of adequately training teachers and providing them with the necessary resources to effectively implement literacy-focused policies. The relatively lower percentage suggests that while teacher training and resources are essential, they may not be perceived as the most significant factors influencing policy effectiveness.

Language Policy and Implementation (14.7%): Language plays a critical role in education, especially in multilingual contexts like Zambia. The percentage allocation indicates that language policy and its effective implementation significantly impact the success of literacy initiatives. This finding underscores the importance of aligning language policies with the linguistic diversity of the population to enhance literacy outcomes.

Community Engagement and Support (20.6%): Community involvement emerged as a key factor, with a relatively high percentage allocation. This suggests that active engagement and support from communities are crucial for the success of literacy programs. Communities can provide valuable support by encouraging participation, providing resources, and creating conducive learning environments, thereby bolstering the effectiveness of educational policies.

Socioeconomic Factors (11.8%): Socioeconomic factors, including poverty levels, access to resources, and employment opportunities, were recognized as influential determinants of literacy outcomes. While the percentage allocation is lower compared to other factors, it still highlights the significance of addressing socio-economic disparities in the context of literacy-focused policies.

Monitoring and Evaluation (14.7%): Effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are essential for assessing the progress and impact of educational policies on literacy levels. The percentage allocation suggests that robust monitoring and evaluation systems are considered important but may not be perceived as the most critical factor in policy effectiveness.

Sustainability and Funding (35.3%): Sustainability and funding emerge as the most significant factor, with the highest percentage allocation. This underscores the critical importance of securing adequate resources and ensuring the long-term sustainability of literacy initiatives. Adequate funding enables the implementation of comprehensive programs, while sustainability measures ensure continued progress in reducing illiteracy levels over time.

Overall, the analysis and interpretation of these findings emphasize the multifaceted nature of factors influencing the effectiveness of educational policies on reducing illiteracy levels in Zambia. While each factor plays a distinct role, their combined impact underscores the need for holistic approaches that address diverse challenges to achieve meaningful progress in literacy outcomes.

5. COLLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion,

The study aimed to investigate existing educational policies aimed at reducing illiteracy levels in Zambia, explore their impact on literacy reduction, and identify factors influencing their effectiveness. Through the analysis of key factors, several conclusions were be drawn. The study identified significant educational policies in Zambia focused on literacy reduction, including the 2014 Revised Literacy Policy, the National Literacy Framework, Adult Learning and Education (ALE) Programs, and the Primary Reading Programme (PRP). These policies underscored the importance of language policy, teacher training, community engagement, and adult education in addressing illiteracy. Secondly, the impact of these policies on illiteracy reduction varied. While initiatives such as prioritizing local languages in instruction and adult education programs showed promise in enhancing literacy outcomes, challenges such as inadequate resources, teacher training gaps, and socio-economic disparities hindered their effectiveness. Finally, factors affecting the effectiveness of educational policies on reducing illiteracy levels were identified, including language policy and implementation, community engagement, socio-economic factors, monitoring and evaluation, and sustainability and funding. These findings highlight the complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and governance factors in shaping literacy outcomes and underscore the need for comprehensive and sustainable approaches to address illiteracy effectively. Thus, the study underscores the importance of evidence-based policy-making and holistic strategies that address the multi-dimensional challenges of illiteracy in Zambia. By identifying existing policies, assessing their impact, and understanding key factors influencing effectiveness, this research contributes valuable insights to the ongoing efforts to enhance literacy outcomes and promote education for all in Zambia.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study made the following recommendations to schools and the government through the ministry of education:

i.   Enhance Teacher Training: Invest in comprehensive and ongoing training programs for educators to ensure they are equipped with the necessary skills and resources to effectively implement literacy-focused policies.

ii.   Strengthen Language Policy Implementation: Prioritize the effective implementation of language policies that promote the use of local languages as the primary medium of instruction, while also ensuring a gradual transition to proficiency in English for higher education.

iii. Foster Community Engagement: Encourage active involvement of communities in literacy initiatives by fostering partnerships, promoting parental involvement, and leveraging community resources to create supportive learning environments.

iv.   Address Socio-Economic Barriers: Implement targeted interventions to address socio-economic disparities that hinder access to education, such as providing financial support for vulnerable families and ensuring equitable distribution of resources across schools.

v.   Ensure Sustainable Funding: Allocate sufficient and sustainable funding for literacy programs to support the long-term implementation and effectiveness of educational policies aimed at reducing illiteracy levels. Additionally, explore innovative funding mechanisms and partnerships to enhance financial resources for literacy initiatives.

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