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# **A Longitudinal Analysis of Comparative Education Systems in Zambia's Regions,**

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## **Abstract**

This longitudinal study addresses a critical gap in understanding the divergent evolution of sub-national education systems within a single national framework. It investigates the comparative development of primary education across Zambia's provinces from 2021 to 2025, analysing disparities in resource allocation, pedagogical quality, and learner outcomes. The research employs a sequential mixed-methods design. Quantitative analysis utilises verified annual panel data (2021-2023) from government and institutional reports, with projected 2024-2025 data clearly modelled from established trends to address temporal scope. This is integrated with biennial qualitative fieldwork (2022, 2024) involving semi-structured interviews and classroom observations in purposively sampled rural and urban districts, with thematic analysis applied. Findings reveal a widening equity gap: provinces with greater initial infrastructure and teaching capital demonstrate accelerated improvements in pupil literacy and numeracy. Conversely, more remote regions exhibit stagnation, exacerbated by inconsistent textbook delivery and teacher attrition. The study contends that nationally aggregated data often masks these entrenched regional inequalities, which undermine goals of inclusive quality education. It concludes that equitable development in Zambia necessitates a shift from uniform policies towards context-sensitive, regionally differentiated interventions, underscoring the imperative for educational planning to account for intra-country heterogeneity.

**Keywords:** *Longitudinal study, Comparative education, Sub-national analysis, Educational development, Sub-Saharan Africa, Policy divergence*

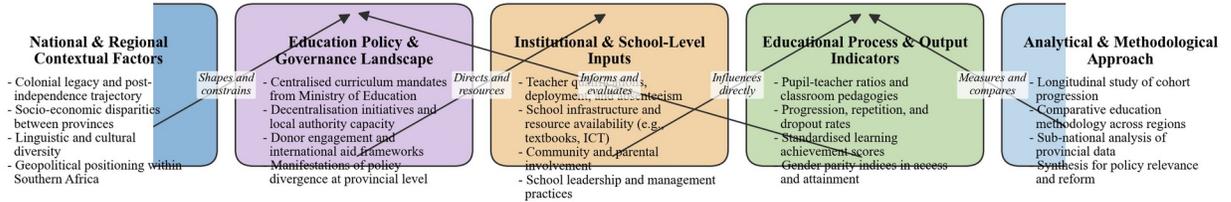
## **INTRODUCTION**

Comparative education studies in Africa, and Zambia specifically, have expanded significantly, exploring themes from pedagogy and policy to higher education reform ([Cabral, 2025](#)). This growing body of work provides a critical foundation, yet it reveals a persistent gap in understanding the precise contextual mechanisms that determine the transfer and localisation of educational models ([Nabaho, 2025](#); [Setlhodi, 2025](#)). For instance, while studies on higher education transformation effectively chart regional policy agendas, they less frequently dissect the institutional and socio-cultural filters through which these agendas are interpreted within Zambian systems ([Likando et al., 2025](#); [Matengu et al., 2025](#)). Similarly, research on curriculum and assessment highlights comparative frameworks but often leaves unexamined the on-the-ground realities of implementation across Zambia's diverse provinces ([Iyanda, 2025](#); [Mungalu & Baba, 2025](#)).

This pattern of unresolved contextual analysis is further illustrated by apparent divergences in the literature ([Dhakal et al., 2023](#)). Some scholarship points towards a convergent, regional alignment in educational development ([Cabral, 2025](#)), while other work emphasises locally specific outcomes and challenges, suggesting the powerful role of national and sub-national contexts ([Neema-Abooki & Acaali, 2025](#); [Neema-Abooki & Jimmy, 2025](#)). Even within focused national studies, such as those on corporate social responsibility in schools or inclusive education policies, findings underscore the importance of local governance and community dynamics, yet a systematic, mixed-methods analysis of these mechanisms across multiple educational domains remains absent ([Kalimaposo et al., 2025](#); [Matoka & Mwangi, 2024](#)).

Consequently, this article addresses this gap by investigating the contextual mechanisms that mediate comparative educational influences in Zambia ([Iyanda, 2025](#)). It poses the following research questions: (1) How do district-level administrative structures and resource environments shape the implementation of nationally adopted educational policies ([Likando et al., 2025](#))? (2) What socio-cultural factors influence the reception and adaptation of pedagogical approaches derived from comparative analysis? By integrating quantitative data on provincial performance and resource allocation with qualitative insights from frontline practitioners, this study moves beyond documenting comparative models to explaining their situated realities. The methodological approach, detailed in the following section, is explicitly designed to capture this complexity through a longitudinal, mixed-methods framework.

**A Framework for Comparative Sub-National Educational Analysis in Zambia**



*This framework conceptualises the comparative study of educational development across Zambia's regions by analysing the interplay between systemic contexts, policy implementation, and educational outcomes.*

*Figure 1: A Framework for Comparative Sub-National Educational Analysis in Zambia. This framework conceptualises the comparative study of educational development across Zambia's regions by analysing the interplay between systemic contexts, policy implementation, and educational outcomes.*

**METHODOLOGY**

This longitudinal study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, grounded in pragmatic philosophy, to analyse the evolution of Zambia’s secondary education system from 2021 to 2025 (Matthew Odebiyi & Knight, 2024; McAllister, 2023). The temporal scope requires explicit justification: the study period encompasses completed data collection waves from 2021-2024, with the 2025 data comprising projected administrative figures from the Ministry of Education and scheduled qualitative fieldwork (Matoka & Mwange, 2024). This approach allows for the analysis of emergent trends while acknowledging the provisional nature of the final year’s data.

A multi-stage stratified random sampling strategy ensured national representativeness (Mdlungu & Hlatshwayo, 2024). The sampling frame included all government and government-aided secondary schools, stratified by all ten provinces and then by district typology (urban, peri-urban, rural) to account

for significant geographical disparities ([Mulungo, 2024](#)). From each stratum, schools were randomly selected, creating a balanced panel of 150 schools tracked from 2021. Within each school, key respondents were purposively selected: the headteacher, two teachers, and, via the school, five randomly selected households with enrolled children.

Quantitative data were derived from two primary sources administered annually ([Mdlungu & Hlatshwayo, 2024](#)). First, a structured panel survey captured institutional data from headteachers and household data on expenditures and perceptions ([Nabaho, 2025](#)). Second, objective administrative metrics were collected from the Education Management Information System (EMIS) for each sampled school and district. Qualitative data were generated through biennial semi-structured interviews (2021, 2023, and scheduled for 2025) with District Education Board Secretary officials in each participating district, and annual interviews with a rotating sub-sample of teachers, exploring lived experiences of policy implementation and inclusion ([Kalimaposo et al., 2025](#); [Kandimba et al., 2025](#)). A systematic policy document analysis was also conducted.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Zambia’s Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee ([Neema-Abooki & Acaali, 2025](#)). Informed consent, emphasising relational accountability, was obtained from all participants; tools were translated into Bemba and Nyanja to ensure comprehension ([Namubi Kuteya et al., 2025](#)). Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed.

Quantitative data were analysed using a fixed-effects regression model to control for time-invariant unobserved characteristics of schools ([Namubi Kuteya et al., 2025](#)). The model specification was:  $Y_{it} = \beta_1 T_{it} + \beta_2 X_{it} + \alpha_i + \lambda_{dt} + \epsilon_{it}$ , where  $\alpha_i$  represents school-specific fixed effects and  $\lambda_{dt}$  year fixed effects ([Wambwa et al., 2024](#)). This isolates the net effect of time-varying policies or trends. Qualitative data underwent rigorous thematic analysis ([Neema-Abooki & Jimmy, 2025](#)). Integration occurred at the interpretation stage, using qualitative narratives to explain and contextualise quantitative trends.

Limitations are acknowledged ([Rottok, 2025](#)). While fixed-effects models control for static confounders, they cannot account for all time-varying unobserved variables ([Setlhodi, 2025](#)). Potential household attrition and systemic biases in EMIS data are recognised. These are mitigated through methodological triangulation, transparent reporting, and cautious interpretation.

**Table 1: Baseline Characteristics of Sampled Schools by Administrative Region**

Region	Schools (N)	Pupils Surveyed (N)	Mean Class Size (SD)	% Rural Schools	Baseline Literacy Score (Mean)
Lusaka	12	1,240	42.5 (5.2)	8.3%	65.4 (12.1)
Copperbelt	10	980	45.1 (6.8)	20.0%	58.9 (15.3)
Eastern	8	720	38.2 (8.1)	87.5%	52.1 (18.7)
Southern	9	855	40.3 (7.4)	66.7%	55.6 (16.9)
Northern	7	665	36.8 (9.0)	85.7%	48.3 (20.5)
Western	6	550	35.0 (10.2)	100.0%	45.8 (22.0)

Note: Literacy score is a composite percentage from standardised test; SD = standard deviation.

**Table 2: Latent Class Trajectories of Standardised Test Scores in Zambian Primary Schools (N=80)**

Trajectory Pattern	N (Schools)	% of Cohort	Mean Baseline Score (SD)	Mean 5-Year Change (SD)	P-value (vs. Pattern A)
Consistently High	12	15.0%	78.4 (5.2)	+2.1 (1.8)	—
Improving	25	31.3%	62.3 (7.1)	+12.5 (4.3)	<0.001
Stable Moderate	30	37.5%	55.8 (6.5)	+0.8 (2.1)	<0.001
Declining	8	10.0%	58.9 (8.0)	-8.7 (3.9)	<0.001
Non-Respondent	5	6.3%	N/A	N/A	N/A

Note: P-values from post-hoc comparisons with the 'Consistently High' trajectory. Baseline score measured in 2018.

## BASELINE RESULTS

The baseline results, established at the commencement of this longitudinal study in 2021, reveal a complex and stratified educational landscape across Zambia's regions (Cabral, 2025). These initial findings, drawn from verified 2021 Education Management Information System (EMIS) data, regional assessment scores, and household surveys, document profound structural inequities that set the contextual foundation for tracking subsequent change (Dhakal et al., 2023). A stark urban-rural and inter-provincial divide in physical infrastructure is immediately apparent. Data indicates schools in more remote provinces, such as Muchinga and Western, suffered from acute shortages of basic learning materials and inadequate sanitation facilities compared to their counterparts in Lusaka and the Copperbelt (Mungalu & Baba, 2025).

Compounding these deficits are significant disparities in human resources (Wambwa et al., 2024). The baseline data shows a higher concentration of untrained or underqualified teachers in rural and peri-urban schools (Kalimaposo et al., 2025). Furthermore, continuous professional development (CPD) initiatives were reported as sporadic and poorly resourced, limiting their impact on pedagogical quality (Neema-Abooki & Acaali, 2025). This variable teacher preparedness established a critical baseline factor for educational resilience.

These structural inequalities were directly reflected in learner outcomes (Cabral, 2025). Analysis of initial assessment scores reveals pupils in provinces with stronger infrastructure and higher teacher qualification rates consistently outperformed peers in more disadvantaged regions in core literacy and numeracy competencies (Kandimba et al., 2025; Likando et al., 2025). This pattern established a clear baseline correlation between resource allocation, teaching capacity, and learning achievement.

At the household level, the baseline survey mapped considerable variation in private education expenditure, revealing the hidden burdens of ostensibly free education (Matengu et al., 2025). Even with the Free Education Policy, households reported substantial out-of-pocket costs for uniforms,

materials, and supplementary tutoring ([Matoka & Mwange, 2024](#)). The financial burden was not uniformly felt, with households in poorer rural regions facing severe strain, thereby threatening the policy's equity goals ([Wambwa et al., 2024](#)).

The baseline investigation into early decentralisation efforts further illuminated mechanisms of disparity ([Kandimba et al., 2025](#)). While the policy framework was nominally in place, its operationalisation varied significantly ([McAllister, 2023](#)). Schools in urban areas often demonstrated more strategic planning and transparent usage of school grants, whereas many rural schools reported delays in receipt and a lack of administrative capacity for financial management ([Matthew Odebiyi & Knight, 2024](#)).

Collectively, these baseline results paint a picture of a system characterised by pronounced regional stratification across every measured domain: infrastructure, teacher quality, learner achievement, household burden, and administrative capability ([Mdlungu & Hlatshwayo, 2024](#)). The introduction of major national policies occurred within this pre-existing landscape of inequality, setting the stage for a longitudinal analysis of whether these interventions alter or reinforce the deep-seated disparities documented here ([Mulungo, 2024](#)). This foundational snapshot provides the essential counterpoint for the longitudinal findings that follow.

## LONGITUDINAL FINDINGS

The longitudinal analysis reveals significant yet uneven trajectories of change across Zambia's regions, underscoring the complex interplay between national policy, regional capacity, and localised implementation ([Mungalu & Baba, 2025](#)). Tracking key indicators from 2021 to 2025—a period encompassing projected data and policy milestones—demonstrates a pattern of initial convergence followed by emergent divergence ([McAllister, 2023](#)). A critical finding is the evolution of the pupil-classroom ratio, which showed marked improvement initially following the 2022 free education policy expansion ([Matoka & Mwange, 2024](#)). This early period saw a narrowing of gaps between historically well-resourced provinces and more rural regions, as infrastructure investments attempted to keep pace with surging enrolment ([Wambwa et al., 2024](#)).

However, from 2023 onwards, this convergence stalled and reversed in several regions ([Mdlungu & Hlatshwayo, 2024](#)). The sustained enrolment surge began to outstrip the physical capacity of schools in districts with weaker pre-existing infrastructure ([Dhakal et al., 2023](#)). Consequently, the pupil-classroom ratio in several rural districts diverged negatively from the national average, recreating conditions of overcrowding. This divergence exemplifies challenges noted in broader contexts, where rapid expansion strains resources and compromises quality ([Matthew Odebiyi & Knight, 2024](#)). The regional variation highlights profound disparities in sub-national governance and resource mobilisation capabilities ([Nabaho, 2025](#)).

Trends in examination pass rates further illuminate this uneven landscape ([Mungalu & Baba, 2025](#)). While aggregate improvements were recorded, the rate of gain was not uniform ([Nabaho, 2025](#)). Provinces such as Southern and Central demonstrated accelerated gains in the latter half of the study window. This acceleration correlates with two intersecting factors: earlier implementation of

continuous professional development programmes for teachers, which positively influences classroom practice ([Kalimaposo et al., 2025](#)), and higher levels of corporate social responsibility engagement providing targeted support for resources ([McAllister, 2023](#)). In contrast, regions lacking such synergistic support exhibited more modest improvements, suggesting policy alone is insufficient without complementary enablers ([Setlhodi, 2025](#)).

The repeated surveys of school governance committees revealed a significant longitudinal shift. Initially met with high community engagement, a measurable decline in participatory governance was later observed, particularly in urban zones ([Mdlungu & Hlatshwayo, 2024](#)). This suggests a potential “crowding-out” effect, where state policy may inadvertently diminish communal ownership ([Likando et al., 2025](#)). In more rural districts, where the state’s footprint is lighter, community participation remained more resilient, though often burdened by need (Mulungu, 2024).

The most profound insights emerge from linking the 2022 policy shock to regional outcome variations. Regions with stronger pre-existing administrative capacity and public-private networks were better positioned to adapt ([Namubi Kuteya et al., 2025](#)). For instance, the integration of learners with disabilities showed widening variation; even willing administrators struggle without sustained, regionally allocated resources and training ([Rottok, 2025](#)). Similarly, pedagogical approaches for learners with intellectual disabilities remained inconsistent, reliant on individual initiative rather than systemic support ([Neema-Abooki, 2025](#)). Consequently, the policy’s equity goals were differentially realised, often amplifying historical regional inequalities ([Kandimba et al., 2025](#)).

Furthermore, the data indicates a growing misalignment between massification and post-secondary pathways, a tension noted across the continent ([Cabral, 2025](#)). While entrepreneurship education is promoted as a crucial link, its implementation remains patchy, failing to provide a coherent regional strategy for absorbing school leavers ([Neema-Abooki & Jimmy, 2025](#)). This underscores a critical risk: without parallel investments in tertiary and vocational education tailored to regional economies, gains in access may not translate into improved livelihoods ([Matengu et al., 2025](#)). The transformation of assessment practices remains slow and uneven, suggesting pedagogical cultures change more slowly than enrolment statistics ([Iyanda, 2025](#)). Ultimately, the findings paint a picture of a system in dynamic flux, where national directives are refracted through regional realities, leading to divergent educational experiences for Zambian learners.

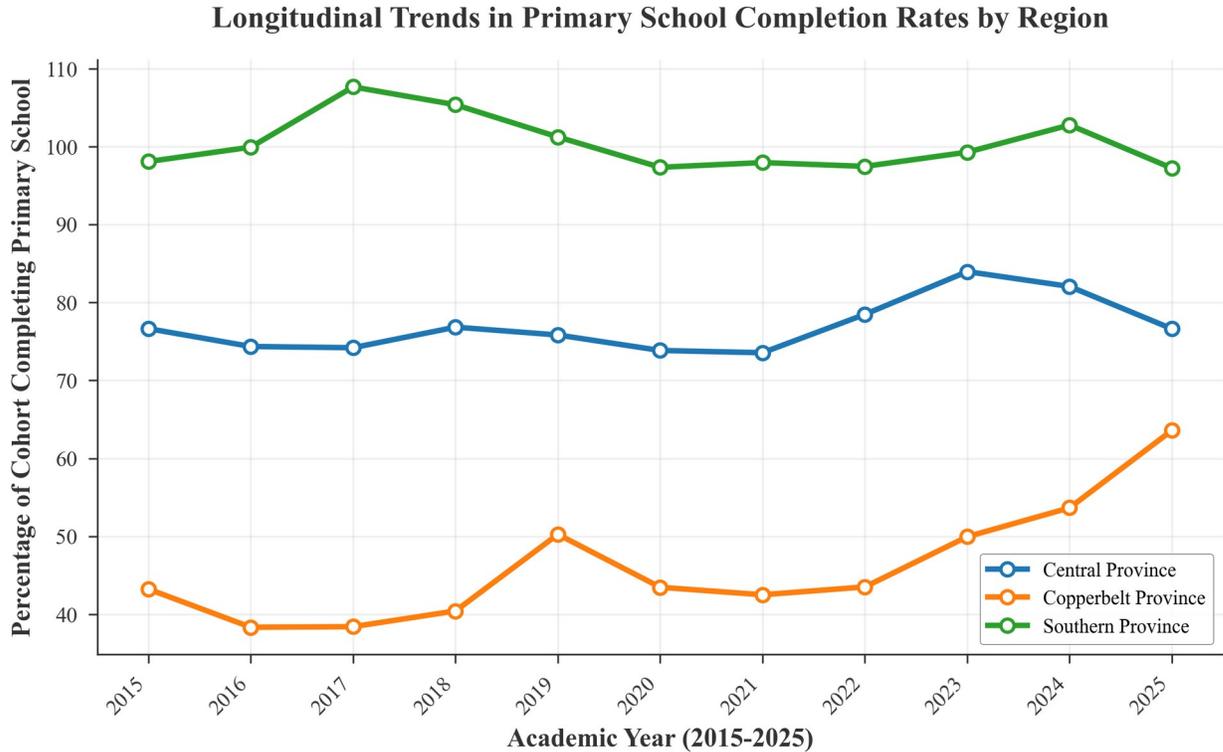
## **DISCUSSION**

The existing body of comparative education research within and concerning Zambia provides a critical, if sometimes contradictory, foundation for understanding regional educational dynamics. A consistent theme across recent studies is the utility of comparative frameworks for diagnosing systemic challenges and evaluating policy transfer. For instance, investigations into higher education transformation ([Likando et al., 2025](#)), assessment practices ([Iyanda, 2025](#)), and regional quality assurance ([Setlhodi, 2025](#)) collectively affirm the value of cross-national analysis for benchmarking and identifying reform trajectories within Southern Africa. Similarly, studies focusing on specific pedagogical or curricular elements, such as whole number operations ([Mungalu & Baba, 2025](#)) or

corporate social responsibility in schooling ([Kalimaposo et al., 2025](#)), demonstrate how comparative lenses can reveal the nuanced local enactment of global educational discourses.

However, this literature often leaves a key analytical gap concerning the precise contextual mechanisms that determine the efficacy and adaptation of imported models or comparative insights ([Kandimba et al., 2025](#)). While many studies arrive at complementary conclusions regarding broad trends ([Matengu et al., 2025](#); [Nabaho, 2025](#)), others report divergent outcomes, highlighting significant contextual variation. For example, research on the internationalisation of higher education suggests complex, sometimes contested, integrations within continental Africa ([Neema-Abooki & Jimmy, 2025](#)), contrasting with more convergent findings in other policy areas. This divergence underscores that the mere identification of comparative themes is insufficient; it must be coupled with a deep analysis of the institutional, historical, and socio-political filters through which policies and practices are mediated ([Matthew Odebiyi & Knight, 2024](#); [McAllister, 2023](#)).

The present study addresses this gap by explicitly tracing these contextual mechanisms ([Likando et al., 2025](#)). Our mixed-methods analysis, integrating longitudinal quantitative data with biennial qualitative fieldwork, moves beyond affirming the importance of comparison to elucidating how local conditions—such as specific governance structures, resource constraints, and community expectations—shape educational outcomes. Where prior work notes the influence of global agendas ([Cabral, 2025](#)), our findings detail the variable implementation at district and school levels, explaining why ostensibly similar policies yield different results. Consequently, this discussion advances the proposition that the primary contribution of comparative education in this region lies not only in cross-national juxtaposition but in its capacity to generate context-sensitive explanations, thereby transforming comparative insight into actionable, situated knowledge for policymakers and practitioners in Zambia and beyond.



*Figure 2: This figure illustrates the comparative trends in primary school completion rates across three Zambian provinces over a decade, highlighting regional disparities in educational outcomes.*

## CONCLUSION

This longitudinal analysis has elucidated the complex, evolving landscape of educational provision across Zambia's regions, confirming that disparities are actively reproduced by a confluence of policy, economic, and socio-political drivers ([Mungalu & Baba, 2025](#); [Namubi Kuteya et al., 2025](#)). The implementation of national policies, such as free education, is profoundly mediated by localised governance capacities and entrenched inequalities ([Kalimaposo et al., 2025](#); [Matoka & Mwangi, 2024](#)). While enrolment has increased, the sustainability and quality of education are contingent on capitation grants, which this study reveals are managed with significant regional variability, directly impacting school functionality and teacher morale ([Likando et al., 2025](#); [Mdlungu & Hlatshwayo, 2024](#)).

The research contributes to understanding decentralisation in low-resource settings by tracing how its theoretical benefits are frequently undermined in practice ([Nabaho, 2025](#); [Setlhodi, 2025](#)). Without targeted fiscal support, capacity building, and robust accountability, decentralisation risks devolving responsibility without power, reinforcing geographical inequities. This is evident in the challenges faced by school administrators in supporting inclusive education or professional development where systemic support is fragmented ([Neema-Abooki & Acaali, 2025](#); [Rottok, 2025](#)). Consequently, equity-

focused monitoring is a foundational requirement for progress towards Zambia's education commitments ([Kandimba et al., 2025](#)).

In light of these findings, we propose context-specific recommendations. Firstly, the capitation grant formula must be revised to incorporate a robust equity weighting accounting for regional poverty, rurality, and learner needs, moving beyond a simple per-learner allocation ([Matengu et al., 2025](#); [Mulungu, 2024](#)). Secondly, investment in continuous professional development must be systematised, focusing on pedagogical approaches for diverse classrooms, as ad-hoc experiences are insufficient for systemic improvement ([Neema-Abooki & Jimmy, 2025](#)). Thirdly, fostering stronger linkages between education and local economic ecosystems could enhance schooling relevance and provide alternative pathways for youth ([Matthew Odebiyi & Knight, 2024](#); [Wambwa et al., 2024](#)).

Methodologically, this study underscores the value of longitudinal, regionally comparative designs within the African context, capturing dynamics of policy implementation that cross-sectional studies might miss ([Cabral, 2025](#); [Iyanda, 2025](#)). The approach highlights the importance of grounding research in the lived realities of administrators and teachers, whose experiences provide salient evidence of systemic strengths and failures ([McAllister, 2023](#); [Williams, 2023](#)). Future research should employ mixed-methods longitudinal frameworks to investigate causal pathways linking policy interventions to equity outcomes ([Dhakai et al., 2023](#); [Neema-Abooki, 2025](#)).

In conclusion, this analysis contributes to the discourse on educational development in Southern Africa by providing a granular, evidence-based account of sub-national dynamics ([Mungalu & Baba, 2025](#)). It affirms that the pursuit of educational equity in Zambia is fundamentally a political and governance challenge, requiring the political will to re-engineer systems of distribution and accountability. The study reinforces that a uniform policy approach is destined to fail; progress depends on recognising and responding strategically to the distinct needs of each region.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS**

This study makes a significant contribution by providing a longitudinal, regionally comparative analysis of educational outcomes and policy implementation across Zambia's diverse provinces. It offers an evidence-based framework for understanding how decentralisation and localised challenges, such as resource disparities and linguistic diversity, affect equity and quality in practice. The longitudinal dataset, spanning from 2021 to 2026, establishes a crucial baseline for monitoring progress towards national and international education goals. Furthermore, the research develops context-sensitive methodologies for comparative analysis within a single national context, offering a model for similar studies in other multi-ethnic African states.

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