

## Fee-Free Education in Tanzania: A Narrative Review of the Wicked Problem in Achieving Educational Equity

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**Abstract:** Despite the fact that education is a fundamental human right, the realization of equity in the provision of this right has remained a wicked problem in many countries. Although Tanzania has attempted to ensure equity by offering Fee-Free Education (FFE) from kindergarten to secondary school, equity concerns still persist. This narrative review aims to explore the wicked problem of equity in education within the Tanzania's FFE framework using the Wicked Problems as a theoretical framework. Through a systematic narrative literature review, this study synthesizes and analyzes 26 peer-reviewed studies published between 2016 and 2025, focusing on equity challenges in the implementation of FFE. Findings indicate that FFE in Tanzania exemplifies classic wicked problems, characterized by definitional complexity and interconnected challenges. Key issues include inadequate capitation grant allocation, increased teacher workloads that compromise educational quality, and systematic marginalization of economically disadvantaged and disabled students. These challenges highlight the difficulties of finding straightforward solutions, as addressing one issue often creates others. The review concludes that achieving equity in the context of FFE in Tanzania necessitates recognition of its wicked nature thereby calling for adaptive rather than technical solutions. Current capitation grants are insufficient, especially for low-enrolment public schools, and this exacerbates resource scarcity. Recommendations include differentiated resource allocation strategies that specifically target marginalized groups and iterative, and adaptive policymaking approaches that acknowledge the evolving nature of equity challenges. The novelty of this review lies in its application of the Wicked Problems framework to analyse education policy thereby offering new theoretical insights into persistent equity issues. Future research should leverage this framework to understand stakeholder perspectives and develop context-sensitive interventions.

**Keywords:** Fee-Free Education, Educational Equity, Marginalized Group, Wicked Problem, Tanzania

### 1. Introduction

Equity in education is a pivotal pillar of any education policy, and punctuates human rights discourse worldwide. Scholars have underscored the need for all children to have equal access to high-quality education, irrespective of their socio-economic background, geographic location, gender or physical abilities (Dowd, 2019; Chukwuma and Ibe, 2024; Coleman, 1968; Levinson et al., 2022; Madani, 2019; Nyaphisi, 2021).

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As a basic human right, education has impelled numerous international initiatives that envision universal access to quality education. Nevertheless, the pursuit for equity in education remains a wicked problem typified by complexity, inconsistencies and resistance to direct solutions. In Tanzania, the quest for equal educational opportunities has been a national main concern since independence in 1961, and the government has actively aligned its educational policies with international frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4). This goal envisions inclusive and equitable quality education and thus, promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. In this course, the substantial initiative is the Fee-Free Education (FFE) policy that extends from primary to secondary education.

Despite the highly creditable efforts, the implementation of FFE has provided incompatible evidence regarding its effectiveness towards equitable educational opportunities. Besides, the policy has evolved into a wicked problem, manifested by interrelated challenges that disregard uncomplicated solutions. For instance, studies have documented substantial challenges related to teaching and learning materials coupled with the dearth of infrastructure under the FFE policy (Daniel, 2020; Herry, 2020; Lazaro & Matiku, 2022; Magesa & Mtebe, 2022; Martin, 2023). Moreover, Daniel et al. (2024) found a shortage of specialized teachers for students with special needs, and scarcity of instructional materials tailored to their requirements. Nevertheless, Sanga et al. (2022) have reported positive effects on the access to educational supplies for incapacitated students.

Furthermore, Boniphace and Ngusa (2022) noted that the capitation grants for facility maintenance remain insufficient, signalling urgent need for improved government funding to enhance learning conditions. Lindsjö (2018) have also reported that students from poor families, particularly in rural areas, face challenges in covering costs beyond the scope of the fee-free initiative. In contrast, some studies acknowledge that FFE has increased school enrolment while reducing parental financial burden (Lyanga & Chen, 2020; Mwakisambwe & Msoka, 2024; Ntwima, 2022).

The varied findings demonstrate the complexity of achieving equitable educational opportunities in Tanzania, emphasizing the wicked nature of this problem whereby solutions of some situations often leave others unattended. While studies have explored distinctive aspects of the FFE policy in Tanzania (Herry, 2020; Kapinga, 2023; Marwa, 2019; Shemwelekwana & Kahangwa, 2021; Mwinuka, 2023; Sanga et al., 2022), the knowledge base remains fragmented, and lacks comprehensive synthesis.

Critical gaps exist in the current literature: First, there is paucity of comprehensive reviews which have examined FFE in Tanzania through the theoretical lens of wicked problems. Second, the existing studies on wicked problems in education leave a theoretical gap regarding the complexity of FFE. For example, Armstrong (2021) focused on behavioural issues in schools; and Earle and Leyva-de la Hiz (2021) studied wicked problems in teaching using design thinking, with a focus on different contexts. Third, current research lacks systematic analysis of how challenges in the implementation of FFE interconnect and perpetuate inequities, particularly with reference to marginalized groups and geographical disparities.

The complexity of the ongoing implementation of FFE reveals fundamental flaws: funds are distributed uniformly without special consideration for marginalized groups and geographical disparities. Similarly, capitation grants are apportioned based solely on student enrolment, ignoring variations in operational

costs and family income levels - an approach that may inadvertently perpetuate rather than address educational inequities.

This narrative literature review aims to explore, analyze, and synthesize studies on the Tanzania's FFE program through the conceptual lens of wicked problems in achieving equity in education. The novelty of this review lies in the systematic application of the Wicked Problems theoretical framework to understand the complexities of educational equity in the context of the Tanzania's FFE. By identifying patterns, inconsistencies, and gaps across the existing literature, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges in realizing educational equity under FFE in Tanzania, ultimately informing more effective policy approaches that acknowledge the wicked nature of the challenges of educational equity

## **2. Theoretical Orientation**

This study is grounded on “A Wicked Problem”, a theoretical framework which is particularly relevant for scrutinizing the intricacies of the FFE in Tanzania. According to Rittel and Webber (1973), Wicked Problems are personified by their versatile nature, intersected issues and resistance to direct solutions (Krause, 2012, p. 286). Thus, in the context of educational equity, the implementation of fee-free education, unveils deep-rooted intricacies, taking into account resource allocation without special contemplations which may set out the challenge of insufficient infrastructure and uneven levels of stakeholders’ understanding and awareness. These challenges are not isolated since they intermingle in a manner that worsens the difficulties of realizing authentic educational equity.

In the same veins, the wicked problems framework stresses on the dynamic and changing nature of educational challenges of which policies can lead to unanticipated after-effects. This is because stakeholders, including government officials, educators, parents and students, bring about a variety of acuties that thwart implementation efforts. In this manner, efforts to address one component of this wicked problem often create or deepen issues in other areas, enlightening the complex web of interdependencies within the educational system.

Through the lens of this framework, the study critically analyses the wicked problems in relation to the implementation of FFE in Tanzania. Besides, the framework synthesizes the existing literature with a view to heightening an understanding of equity in educational settings in which capitation grants are allocated evenly without regard to students' abilities to cover additional costs or geographical disparities of schools. Therefore, this qualitative narrative review elucidates how these intersected challenges impede the realization of equitable educational opportunities.

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employed a narrative literature review to synthesize and analyze existing studies on FFE in Tanzania, with a specific focus on equity in educational settings. The approach is apt for this study given its effectiveness in examining complex social phenomena that incorporate numerous aspects and

perspectives (Stanley, 2008; Usman et al., 2025). Moreover, the review accelerates a thorough synthesis of various findings and theoretical frameworks within the discourse of educational equity in Tanzania.

### **3.2 Search Strategy**

This literature search involved multiple academic databases such as Google Scholar, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine and African Journals Online. Besides, the key search terms used in this study were "FFE in Tanzania," "educational equity in Tanzania," "equal educational opportunities in Tanzania," "educational policy in Tanzania," "educational wicked problems," and "SDG4 implementation in Tanzania." Moreover, the search focused on 26 peer-reviewed studies published between 2016 and 2025 in that the FFE policy started in Tanzania in 2016.

### **3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Studies were incorporated in the current study if: (1) they focused on FFE in Tanzania; (2) they addressed aspects of equity in education; (3) they were empirical, policy analysis or comprehensive theoretical works and (4) they were published in the English language. On the other hand, studies were excluded if: (1) they focused solely on higher education; (2) they addressed FFE outside Tanzania without comparative analysis; (3) they were opinion pieces lacking significant evidence or analysis or (4) they were not published in the English language.

### **3.5 Data Extraction and Analysis**

Pertinent data was extricated from the selected studies, grounded on their research methods, sample characteristics, key findings and theoretical frameworks. Besides, a thematic analysis approach was used to ascertain recurrent patterns, inconsistencies and gaps across literatures (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Special emphasis was given to findings related to the wicked problem characteristics with reference to FFE implementation, its intricacies, interconnectedness of aspects and tenacity of challenges despite policy intercessions.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

This section presents the findings of the attempted review of literature on FFE in Tanzania as analyzed through the lens of wicked problems as the theoretical framework. As defined by Rittel and Webber (1973), wicked problems are characterized by complexity, interconnectedness, and resistance to direct solutions. Thus, the analysis discloses how the Tanzania's FFE initiative expresses these characteristics across four interrelated proportionalities, namely resource allocation mechanisms, teaching environment dynamics, inclusion of marginalized populations and implementation disparities. Each theme demonstrates how FFE creates complex challenges that exemplify the defining attributes of wicked problems as summarized in Table 1

Table1: Themes and Sub-Themes of Wicked Problems in Tanzania's FFE System

Theme	Sub-Theme	Key Authors
The wicked problem of educational funding and quality constraints	Standardized educational funding and financial management	Boniphace & Ngusa (2022), Herbert (2022), Katabazi & Kamugisha (2022), Luvanga & Mhagama (2022), Shukia (2022),
	Quality trade-offs constrain	Bankimeza (2021), Lazaro and Matiku (2022), Lucumay & Matete (2024), Lucumay & Matete (2024), Ndaula et al. (2025)
Teaching environment: the wicked problem of quality vs. access	Workload expansion without proportional support	Herbert (2022), Lyanga & Chen (2020), Lucumay & Matete (2024),
	Teacher motivation	Bankimeza (2021), Lazaro and Matiku (2022), Lucumay and Matete (2024), Mwakisambwe and Msoka (2024)
Persistent marginalization	Gender and students with disabilities	Awinia (2019), Daniel et al. (2024), Lyanga & Chen (2020), Lucumay & Matete (2024), Manea & Naso (2020), Sanga et al. (2022)
	Economic marginalization	Lindsjö (2018), Mwangota (2019)
Implementation Disparities:	Stakeholder misunderstanding	Godha (2018), Kindyamtima (2017), Lucumay and Matete (2024), Shukia (2020), Martin (2023)
	Urban-rural implementation disparities	Lindsjö (2018), Nkoronko et al. (2025)

#### 4.1 The Wicked Problem of Educational Funding and Quality Constraints

This section reflects interrelated issues regarding funding inadequacies and challenges of maintaining equity of education within the FFE framework in Tanzania. From the literature review the section details the wicked problems of standardized educational funding and financial management. Additionally, the section includes the wicked problem of constraints and quality trade-offs.

#### **4.1.1 The wicked problem of standardized educational funding and financial management**

Several of the reviewed studies reveal that the capitation grants allocated to schools under the FFE policy are not adequate to construct necessary physical facilities. For example, Boniphace and Ngusa (2022) pointed out that the grants allocated to Ukerewe District were not sufficient for school infrastructure. Besides, Katabazi and Kamugisha (2022) noted that the allocation of 600 TZS per student is insufficient and thus, heads of schools had to use personal funds to cover essential expenses. Similarly, Herbert (2022) reported lack of sufficient capitation grants in Mbeya hampered procurement of crucial teaching and learning materials. Emphasizing this, Shukia (2020) argued that the amount disbursed is unsatisfactory for both administrative and academic operations. However, these studies do not explain why standardized funding persists despite evident failures. Moreover, the studies offer superficial solutions - increasing allocations- without questioning the underlying assumption that uniform distribution can achieve equitable outcomes. These findings corroborates evidence from Machinyise et al. (2023) in Zambia, which demonstrates similar failures, suggesting systemic flaws in standardized approaches across contexts. Therefore, funding needs to be commensurate with actual needs rather than policy directives.

Moreover, the intricacy of funding typifies what Rittel and Webber (1973) classified as a wicked problem - defined by interrelated aspects that resist simple solutions. Accentuating this intricacy, Shukia (2020, p. 125) asserts that "Even though we fully support FFE, it is unfair to treat all schools in the same way. Therefore, allocation of capitation grants should take into account the unique needs of each school for equity in the provision of education to be realized." Shukia exposes this theoretical weakness - studies describe symptoms without analyzing the political economy sustaining inequitable structures. Thus, the inequitable distribution system leads to allocation of more funds to schools with high enrolment rate, while schools with few students struggle with administrative costs like security and utilities. Consequently, this justifies the wicked nature of standardized funding approaches.

Furthermore, the wicked problem becomes complicated when it comes to fiscal management at the school level. As pointed out by Luvanga and Mhagama (2022), for example, 78% of school heads in the surveyed schools reported poor management and control of capitation grants. Therefore, the problem is not just inadequate funding but rather systemic capacity failures. The squandering of grants validates what Krause (2012) refers to as the "interconnectedness" feature of wicked problems where solutions compel stakeholders to address multiple interconnected factors concurrently. Subsequently, Luvanga and Mhagama (2022) suggested that educational managers, including heads of schools, should be trained on financial skills to better manage the limited amount of funds allocated at the school level. Training teachers has also been proposed by Foli (2019) in a study conducted in Ghana. However, training head teachers without addressing others factors, including standardized funding, may not enough to explain why similar interventions repeatedly fail across contexts. This reveals theoretical poverty in understanding the resistance of the wicked problems to technical solutions.

Along the same lines, disparities of cost across regions further thwart matters as equal allocations yield different outcomes across geographical contexts. As pointed out by Luvanga and Mhagama (2022, p. 105) for the case of Karatu District, "The government allocates the flat rate amounting to 10\$ (2,500 TSHS) as a grant to each student per month without taking into account where the school is located. For

that matter, most schools located in peripheral areas generally suffer since they experience the deficit in the budget, which leads to poor performance of students academically". This disparity exemplifies what Rittel and Webber characterize as the "unique" nature of wicked problems in that each instance has idiosyncratic features. This requires tailored approaches rather than systematized solutions, particularly in relation to equity in education in Tanzania as advocated by the FFE policy.

Despite the sound intention of the Tanzanian government, the provision of capitation grants under FFE has been unsuccessful as operational costs vary substantially between urban and rural schools thereby initiating an intrinsic inequity in the system design. Correspondingly, the funding procedure also does not consider inflation rate, which inexplicably distracts schools in different contexts. The systematized approach thus creates what Rittel and Webber (1973) regarded as a "no stopping rule" characteristic of wicked problems whereby resolving one aspect discloses new aspect, also compelling attention. In that regard, as schools address immediate operational needs with inadequate funds, they certainly create shortfalls in other critical areas, consequently compromising the educational equity under the FFE policy program.

Pertinent data from several areas, including Ukerewe, Mbeya, Karatu and Morogoro, depicts how the equitable intent of the FFE policy in the provision of uniform educational access unexpectedly creates inequitable repercussions due to the uniform funding procedure that neglects circumstantial differences. In other words, the "one size fits all" funding model fails to admit the contextual variances thereby creating inequities despite the government's intention. For the case of Morogoro, for example, Lazaro and Matiku (2022) recommend that the government should recuperate the modality of allocating capitation grants in schools. In this manner, the underlying strain between standardization and contextualization depicts a critical negation in Tanzania's quest for educational equity through the FFE policy and its subsequent program. This underscores the extremely wicked nature of educational reforms in resource-constrained environments. As redress, Levinson et al. (2022) emphasized prioritizing the needs of disadvantaged children and families, especially when addressing resource inequalities.

#### **4.1.2 The wicked problem of constraints and quality trade-offs**

Universally, it is well-known that the ratio of classrooms in relation to pupils has implications for delivery of quality education. This can as well lead to inequitable delivery of quality education even when education is fee free thereby triggering a wicked problem. In that regard, the infrastructure challenge typifies what Rittel and Webber (1973) identified as the "contradictory certitudes" feature of wicked problems, where stakeholders scrutinize the situation through diverse lenses. Specifically, while policymakers applaud the rise of students' enrolment as a success, educators perceive the same aftermaths as a crisis for it compromises the quality of the education provided in the country.

Regional differences in infrastructure further unveil the complexity of the wicked problem. Accordingly, numerous studies denote erratic degrees of challenges in building educational facilities as some regions encounter stern constraints. For instance, Bankimeza (2021) reported escalation in the teacher-student ratio in Dar es Salaam as a result of the implementation of FFE, with the classroom ratio mounting from 1:47 to 1:52, against the proposed ratio of 1:40 to 1:50.

Inequity is even more noticeable in Shinyanga Region, where Lucumay and Matete (2024) found in one school enormous increase of students from 800 to 3500, while in another school the number increased from 700 to 3400 students after the introduction of FFE policy in Tanzania. Lucumay and Rose (2024) correspondingly found that the teacher-pupil ratio in one school was 1:106, exceeding the proposed ratio of 1:40 to 1:50. In addition to the fact that students were overcrowded in classes, in some schools, students sat on the floor due to inadequate furniture. Moreover, some literature affirmed that teaching activities have been affected in some schools as pointed out by Lazaro and Matiku (2022) in Morogoro where schools had a desk distribution ratio of 1:5.

Relatedly, infrastructure constrictions depict another characteristic of wicked problems, which Rittel and Webber (1973) marked as "no definitive formulation" since the problem cannot be absolutely specified since comprehending the problem is interlinked with ideas about how to resolve it. For instance, do the issues have absolute formulations such as inadequate classrooms, too many students, inadequate funding or inappropriate resource allocation? With reference to infrastructure constraints, each definition points to dissimilar solutions, elucidating the wicked nature of the problem.

Along similar lines, Ndaula et al. (2025) further noted that the capitation grants allocated to public schools did not consider the inflation rate despite a 32% rise in educational material costs over three years, leading to inadequate physical facilities in schools. This short-lived dimension of wicked problems, where solutions must adjust to varying conditions, creates constant implementation challenges even when original resources seem adequate. For example, Conklin (2006) observed that the "no stopping rule" of wicked problems, where the process of addressing the challenge has no clear endpoint, has been as a result of contextual factors which are continually evolving and hence, compromise the educational equity in the country as exemplified by different scholars in the reviewed literature.

All in all, the infrastructure constrictions resulting from the implementation of FFE depict how a policy intended to improve educational access can carelessly compromise the quality of the provided education through congestion and resource attenuation. In view of this, the trade-off between educational access and quality symbolizes an underlying dilemma in educational policy, pointing out how the solutions undertaken to wicked problems often create new problems which demand instantaneous attention.

## **4.2 Teaching Environment: The Wicked Problem of Quality Versus Access**

This theme demonstrates how FFE creates what Rittel and Webber (1973) termed "contradictory requirements" whereby carrying out one goal (access) destabilizes another equally important goal (quality), which is a crucial feature of wicked problems.

### **4.2.1 Workload expansion without proportional support: A wicked problem**

The implementation of FFE has generated what Krause (2012) identified as a "ripple effect", which is a feature of wicked problems whereby modifications in one part of the system (enrolment) generate cascading outcomes in a distinct place (teaching quality). In this manner, the ripple effect demonstrates the interrelated nature of wicked problems whereby the undertaken solutions regularly generate new challenges throughout the educational bionetwork.

In the same vein, Herbert (2022) recorded that due to the dearth of the capitation grants allocated at school level by the government, it has been very difficult for heads of schools to procure sufficient school facilities to run schools smoothly. A similar problem has been reported in Zanzibar as reported by Shindano and Babune (2023); that sometimes delay of fund disbursement compels students to incur extra costs towards their learning. It has also been reported in Ghana that delay in the release of funds and inadequate funds affect smooth running of schools (Foli, 2019). In that regard, when resource constrictions link up with enrolment strains, they both create a deepening challenge for educational quality. In addition, the rising number of students, which has led to overcrowding of more than 100 students in one class in Shinyanga Region (Lucumay & Matete, 2024), exemplifies the enormity of the problem since the high teacher-student ratio beyond recommended levels implies that teachers are inadequate in schools compared to the number of enrolled students. However, studies critically fail to explain why seemingly obvious solutions, such as hiring more teachers and building classrooms, remain unimplemented.

The workload intensification signifies what Rittel and Webber (1973) termed a "consequence of attempted solutions" the policy success of improved access generates the unintentional after-effects of irresistible existing human resources. Therefore, the teachers' increased duties without proportionate support points out how wicked problems often counterattack direct intercessions as solutions to one facet (access) consequently creating new challenges in another aspect (quality) thereby compromising the educational equity. In Kenya, Mbalaka et al. (2022) also reported that overworking of the available teachers was caused by a shortage of teachers.

Comparably, the contrasting findings between localized studies depicting quality decline and national data demonstrating performance improvements underscore what Brown et al. (2010) identified as the "perspective-dependent" nature of wicked problems. Distinctive measurement frameworks, timeframes and geographic scopes generate conflicting conclusions about the same policy implementation, further thwarting assessment and amendment efforts. This analytical tension demonstrates how wicked problems counter attack ultimate assessment, as evidence itself becomes challenging among stakeholders with diverse priorities and viewpoints.

Nevertheless, negating the comprehensive nature of this challenge, Lyanga and Chen (2020), sourcing from the national data, found progress in pupils' academic performance in public schools despite the scarcity of classrooms. This inconsistency signifies additional feature of wicked problems as they manifest inversely across contexts based on local capacity and leadership, repelling systematized analysis or solutions. This is what Head and Alford (2015) refer to as a "contextual complexity", which happens to be apparent as the implementation aftermaths differ notably between regions despite similar policy frameworks.

In general, the workload spiraling without fair support signifies not simply a resource allocation issue but a multifaceted socio-technical challenge where determining "success" happens to be intrinsically problematic, which is an extra feature of the wicked problem framework. On a similar note, the contrasted responses to related tension across varied educational contexts suggest that local adaptive capacity and leadership approaches may be as substantial as funding levels in shaping FFE implementation outcomes.

#### 4.2.2 Teacher motivation as a systemic wicked problem

The increasing enrolment of students after the execution of FFE policy has undeviating propositions on teachers' workloads. Thus, the indispensable question transpires: are teachers motivated to handle the workload, specifically the increased marking and teaching periods? This question lies at the core aspect of a wicked problem where enrolment success generates spill out challenges throughout the educational system, signifying the interrelated nature of educational reform which compromises the educational equity between schools in terms of students' enrolment.

Quite a good number of the reviewed studies found that teacher morale is muffled due to stress and lack of reward following the increased student enrolment triggered by implementation of the FFE policy. Among those studies include Mwakisambwe and Msoka (2024) in Dodoma, Tanzania; Gyimah (2023) in Ghana; and Mbalaka et al. (2022) as well as Mutinda and Ochieng (2022) in Kenya. The latter, for instance, reported that Free Primary Education doubled teacher-pupil ratios thereby hindering teachers' ability to effectively engage students in presentations, discussions, debates, and simulations. Therefore, the problem is not resource scarcity per se, but a combination of factors, including the political impossibility of addressing multiple interconnected challenges simultaneously.

Teachers have also reported to have been disappointed, thus generating what Rittel and Webber (1973) marked an "unintended consequence" of the policy whereby resolving one challenge (access) creates new challenges (teacher dissatisfaction) due to the increased workload. Besides, this situation shows what Rittel and Webber (1973) marked as the "no immediate and ultimate test", a feature of wicked problems of which success cannot be ultimately measured since advances in access metrics correspond with weakening in quality metrics with no agreed-upon ways to equalize these conflicting values. The impact of the policy has led to dubious territory, with different stakeholders prioritizing different outcomes and timeframe for evaluation of implementation of the FFE policy.

In the same veins, regional disparities in recommended solutions further typify the wicked nature of this challenge. For example, for Mbeya District, Herbert (2022) in Mbeya District suggested enhancing teachers' morale, while for Morogoro, Lazaro and Matiku (2022) urged improving working conditions via proper reimbursement and housing for teachers. Similarly, for Shinyanga, Lucumay and Matete (2024) proposed hiring more teachers in Shinyanga, whereas for Kinondoni District, Herry (2020) stressed on supply of teaching and learning resources. Moreover, Bankimeza (2021) argued that more classrooms should be availed. Other studies include Shindano and Babune (2023) in Zanzibar, which reported teachers were demoralized due to inadequate teaching and learning materials, which also affected their delivery. In Zambia, shortages of teachers have also been reported (Machinyise et al., 2023). These conflicting recommendations underscore another facet of the wicked problems as they have no absolute formulation as stakeholders hypothesize both problems and solutions inversely based on their perspectives and contexts in relation to FFE policy.

Despite these challenges, Mashala (2019) highlighted that the government must prioritize education quality in conjunction with increased enrolment so as to guarantee effectual learning outcomes. The commendation admits the pressure amid the access and quality that feature educational reform, but provides constrained guidance on how to solve the conflicting aspects. In Zambia, it has also been

recommended that the government should *recruit new teachers by to normalize the teacher- pupil and material- pupil ratios* (Machinyise et al., 2023). For that reason, the dearth of apparent prioritization procedures signifies what Conklin (2006) termed the "social complexity" dimension of wicked problems, whereby numerous authentic viewpoints must somehow be reconciled in spite of underlying variations in values and objectives.

Along similar lines, teachers' motivation has come out not simply as an idiosyncratic psychological issue but rather as a systemic challenge demanding multilevel intercessions. The wicked problem framework depicts how this challenge counter attacks technical solutions single-handedly, as it encompasses multifaceted socio-economic and political dimensions that act together in a manner that creates unforeseen outcomes. The diversity of the suggested intercessions across regions, signifies how context-specific factors influence both problem distinctiveness and prospective solutions, further clarifying why standardized approaches regularly fail to address wicked problems effectively and efficiently in relation to FFE policy

#### **4.3 Persistent Marginalization: The Wicked Problem of Equity Beyond Access**

This theme explores how FFE exhibits one more feature of Wicked Problems as "solutions" can generate new forms of exclusion, validating that Wicked Problems are under no circumstances truly resolved but rather re-solved endlessly (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Consequently, this demands addressing numerous procedures concurrently rather than single-factor intercessions as reported from the existent literature.

##### **4.3.1 Gender and students with disabilities: Contradictory impacts as a wicked problem**

The implementation of FFE has yielded conflicting impacts across demographic groups, illustrating the "essentially unique" nature of wicked problems as described by Rittel and Webber (1973). These inconsistencies highlight the limitations of standardized approaches to complex educational challenges, thereby compromising educational equity.

Regarding gender equity, research presents contradictory findings that exemplify this wicked problem. For example, Manea and Naso (2020) and Lyanga and Chen (2020) argue that FFE benefits females more than males. On the other hand, Lucumay and Matete (2024) contend that cultural barriers and inadequate infrastructure continue to hinder girls' access to education. This contradiction reveals a critical gap: gender equity is often measured solely by enrolment statistics, neglecting the structural exclusion mechanisms at play.

The persistence of dropout rates among girls illustrates what Krause (2012) termed "social complexity," where technical solutions like fee elimination fail to address deep-rooted social issues. Awinia (2019) identifies pregnancy as a primary dropout factor, a finding supported by evidence from Zanzibar (Shindano & Babune, 2023) and Kenya (Wawire, 2021). Thus, the current research lacks theoretical frameworks to explain why educational policies consistently fail to transform social relations. Specifically, the inability of these policies to significantly reduce dropout rates underscores a fundamental principle of wicked problems: financial interventions alone cannot resolve underlying social determinants.

For handicapped students, the implementation of FFE depicts correspondingly conflicting after-effects. As Sanga et al. (2022) noted that, currently, in some specialized schools, handicapped students attain improved resources under FFE than before with a 45% rise in assistive technologies in schools studied in Dar es Salaam. On the other hand, Daniel et al. (2024) recorded continual shortages of indispensable specialized resources in mainstreaming schools, making efforts to implement inclusion. While the Tanzania Education and Training policy of 2014, 2023 Edition insists inclusion in schools, an even resource allocation fails to account for the substantively sky-rockets costs of educating handicapped children. In Bukoba, for instance, schools obtain similar capitation grants irrespective of student needs thereby generating a state of affairs where inclusion turn out to be a financial burden rather than an opportunity to better the provision of education in the country (Daniel et al., 2024, p. 89). This contradiction is not a research problem but a wicked problem characteristic—solutions in one area create problems elsewhere. These contradictions reflect the characteristics of wicked problems, where solutions in one area lead to challenges in another. Wawire (2021) also notes significant disparities in dropout and completion rates for girls with disabilities in poorer regions of Kenya compared to wealthier areas.

The conflicting outcomes from different scholars exemplify what Rittel and Webber stated as "every wicked problem is essentially unique" in that the similar policy which generates noticeably distinctive aftermaths across contexts, demands customized solutions rather than standardized approaches. This is because the standardized funding model generates what Head and Alford (2015) termed "institutional complexity," where organizational structures and resource allocation procedures intended for the majority unintentionally merit minority populations in the particular educational setting.

The incompatible findings with regard to both gender equity and inclusion in relation to handicapped students underscore the intrinsic pressure in educational policy implementation since what fits in one context fails in another; and what is useful in one group might be the opposite in another group. Besides, the solutions to instant challenges may create the long-term hurdles. These strains demonstrate the underlying nature of wicked problems in education whereby the rival values, circumstantial disparities and implementation constrictions interrelate in a way that battles exhaustively successful intercessions so as to uphold equity in educational settings.

#### **4.3.2 Economic marginalization despite "Fee Free" education**

The fundamental deception of FFE emerges starkly: Lindsjö (2018) critically, found that rural families in Iringa spent 15% of household income on "hidden educational costs", exposing how policy terminology masks deeper exclusion mechanisms. This is not implementation failure but systematic policy design that perpetuates inequality while claiming to address it. The revelation that additional costs exceed previous direct fees for 30% of poorest households demonstrates what current research fails to theorize - how "free" policies can intensify economic barriers for those most needing support.

Cross-national evidence reveals systematic theoretical blindness; for instance, comparative studies from Zambia (Thelma et al., 2024), Zanzibar (Shindano & Babune, 2023), and Ghana (Casely-Hayford et al., 2025) document identical patterns of persistent economic barriers despite fee elimination policies. Yet, research consistently treats these as contextual problems rather than recognizing the inherent contradiction in addressing poverty through policies that ignore structural inequality.

Mwangota (2019) recommended school feeding programs, illustrating the critical theoretical gap - proposing technical solutions to wicked problems without acknowledging that each intervention creates new dependencies and exclusions. This exemplifies Rittel and Webber's (1973) "no definitive solution" characteristic, where wicked problems resist resolution because they are symptoms of deeper structural contradictions that policies cannot address without fundamental system transformation that existing power structures inherently resist.

#### **4.4 Implementation Disparities: A Wicked Problem of Stakeholder Misunderstanding and Urban-Rural Gaps**

This theme scrutinizes how the implementation disproportions signify what Rittel and Webber (1973) termed the "no stopping rule" of which each endeavour at policy implementation has substantial outcomes that cannot be undone, and immediate resolutions compel future options.

##### **4.4.1 Stakeholder misunderstanding and implementation gaps**

The policy with regard to "Fee-Free Education" brought about disagreement among stakeholders. Shukia (2020) and Godda (2018) specifically, recorded how a good number of parents misunderstood this policy as absolutely cost-free, leading to hesitancy in paying indispensable contributions. For instance, in Singida, Godda (2018) found that some parents were certain that they should incur no costs whatsoever for their children's education. This has been further reaffirmed in Shinyanga, where Lucumay and Matete (2024) underscored perplexity in relation to Circular No. 5 of 2016 which clearly provides guidelines about FFE policy. While the circular restrains contributions, it does not excuse parents from buying vital school supplies such as exercise books, uniforms and other notable teaching and learning resources.

The state of affairs became even more complex during the implementation process; Kindyamtima (2017), for instance, noted that hasty implementation in Dodoma left stakeholders without apparent knowledge with regard to their responsibilities, with 82% of school committee members reporting misperception about their key roles. However, research critically fails to question why policy clarity remains elusive despite multiple intervention attempts. Thus, the pervasive delusion spreads ahead of parents to incorporate school committees, signifying a systemic challenge in policy communication.

Conversely, in Songea District, Martin (2023) has stressed on the necessity for better understanding of FFE policy, noting that little is well-known about it among different stakeholders. This contradiction highlights the crucial need for enhanced communication and education concerning the policy. Furthermore, Tarimo (2020) recorded vague policies relating to community participation in educational issues as evidenced in Manyara, and suggests improved consciousness with regard to the community roles in order to promote cooperation. This recommendation underscores the significance of stakeholder engagement and commitment for effective policy implementation.

This awry situation among stakeholders reveals what Krause (2012) termed the "problem of problem definition" in wicked problems. The absence of an accord on what "Free Education" involves thwarts its implementation, making it intrinsically challenged. Such misperceptions are intensely rooted in social and historical contexts that shape how intercessions are indorsed for practice. Addressing these issues

requires a complex approach that incorporates patent communication, stakeholder education and community participation so as to guarantee that the intention of FFE policy is fully realized thereby propagating educational equity in the community as a whole.

#### **4.4.2 Disparities in urban-rural implementation of FFE policy**

The reviewed literature divulges substantial disparities in the implementations of the FFE policy between rural and urban localities. This further clarifies the "no stopping rule" as the implementation revealed the limitations of the problem, informing inherent intricacies. Accordingly, Lindsjö (2018) stressed that rural schools in Iringa encounter significant challenges, specifically in acquiring sufficient learning materials in that many rural families have been impoverished for a long time and thus are incapable to fund basic school supplies for smooth educational practices. This reveals how the current research inadequately theorizes why policies consistently fail to address systemic inequalities. Comparative evidence from Kenya (Olang'o et al., 2021) suggests theoretical rather than contextual limitations.

In addition, a study by Nkoronko et al. (2025) verifies this view by revealing that the elimination of fees by itself does not ensure quality education. Deferred enrolment and continuing indigence among parents suggest that the policy has failed to effectively fund students who are truly in need, as substantial expenses and barricades to quality education continue to compromise educational equity in the country. This state of affairs signifies the "shared responsibility" feature of wicked problems, where no single unit holds comprehensive right or power to solve the challenge.

In rural settings, the complex nature of these challenges demands cooperation among different stakeholders, including government agencies, educational institutions and community organizations since each unit plays a part in addressing the systemic barricades that hamper successful implementation. Nevertheless, without synchronized endeavours and a collective discernment of the intricacies implicated, differences amid urban and rural education will likely remain and widen.

Furthermore, the urban-rural differences not only replicate the challenges of policy implementation but also highlight wider social inequities that affect educational results. Thus, addressing these aspects, needs a broader approach that exceeds mere policy amendments, integrating stratagems that take into account local settings and the definite necessities of rural communities. Therefore, within such a wide-ranging framework, the assurance of the FFE policy can be achieved for all students, irrespective of their geographic setting or socio-economic status.

### **5. Conclusion**

This narrative literature review has explored educational equity in Tanzania's FFE system through the lens of the Wicked Problems Framework. The analysis has pointed out four dimensions in which equity challenges were apparent as wicked problems, namely inequitable resource allocation, constraints in the teaching environment, the persistent marginalization of vulnerable populations and implementation disparities. Using the Wicked Problems Framework, the review found that unvarying capitation grants have created new inequities in that they benefit schools with high enrolment rate while weakening schools with few students and sidelined groups. Besides, the increased enrolment without proportionate

staffing usually weakens educational quality and fosters gender inequalities, along with persistence in hurdles for handicapped students despite the abolition of school fees.

The findings from the current literature review demonstrate how wicked problems counter attack standardized solutions thus requiring permanent attention. Moreover, the implications for policymakers are substantial as they must forsake common approaches in favour of context-sensitive strategies. Furthermore, allocation of capitation grants should consider special and sidelined groups and schools in terms of geographical variations. In addition, teachers' support must take into account both workload and professional development concurrently, while intercessions for pathetic populations should deal with both direct and indirect educational barricades for educational equity to be realized.

Finally, the limitations of this study incorporate dependence on existing literature which, in one way or another, could not pick up the complete continuum of equity challenges across Tanzania's varied educational landscape. The restrained number of the reviewed studies limit generalizability, given that there were substantial disparities in implementation across regions. In that regard, future research employing the Wicked Problems framework should prioritize special concerns under FFE policy grants allocation as the current modes of capitation grants do not effectively address the apparent needs in schools. Furthermore, isolation should also be taken into account. Moreover, comparative studies exploring regional disparities and research focused on sidelined demographic are of paramount importance for developing targeted interventions that address the continuing inequities in the Tanzania's FFE system.

## 6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this narrative literature review, several key recommendations could be advanced to enhance educational equity within the Tanzania's Fee-Free Education system. First, it is essential to revise the allocation of capitation grants to ensure that schools in marginalized areas receive adequate funding. According, a formula that considers geographical disparities and specific needs of vulnerable populations should be developed to prevent further disadvantages for schools with low enrolment rates. Second, policymakers must adopt context-sensitive strategies that address the unique challenges faced by different regions and schools, and this demands thorough local assessments to tailor interventions that effectively respond to specific educational barriers. Finally, it is crucial to increase support for teachers, and this could include addressing workload issues and providing professional development focused on inclusive education practices. Additionally, targeted interventions for vulnerable populations are necessary to tackle both direct and indirect barriers to educational equity. By focusing on these critical recommendations, stakeholders can effectively address the complex challenges within the Tanzania's FFE system thereby fostering a more equitable educational landscape for all students.

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