

Recognizing and empowering volunteer teachers in rural Zambia



A Policy Brief from World Vision Zambia, with The Open University UK

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Volunteer teachers are crucial in sustaining education in Zambia's rural communities, ensuring children can access schooling where government resources are limited. Their deep connection to local contexts, commitment to learners, and ability to maintain community-school links have been central to providing education, especially in remote areas.

The recent upgrading of many community schools into government primary schools - though designed to address systemic inequities - has led to the marginalisation of untrained volunteer teachers. Often, they have been replaced by trained teachers who may lack familiarity with local languages, cultural norms, and community needs.

Drawing on the lived experiences of volunteer teachers, this policy brief explores the challenges they face and the unintended consequences of the upgrading process. To uphold educational equity and quality, it recommends formally recognising and valuing the contributions of volunteer teachers, improving their livelihoods, and creating structured pathways for their professional development and inclusion in the formal education system.

INTRODUCTION

Ministry of Education (MoE) policy recognises the historic role played by volunteer teachers in underserved rural and remote communities (Educating Our Future [1996; 117]):

Qualified grade 1-7 teachers are over concentrated in towns and cities, while rural schools are understaffed. In order to maintain their operations, rural schools (such as community schools) have to depend much more extensively than urban schools on the services of untrained teachers.¹

Many volunteer teachers have founded and sustained community schools, offering education where government schools were inaccessible (Maier et al, 2017), often achieving impressive results over many years. The government's efforts, since 2022, to mainstream community schools by deploying qualified teachers have inadvertently marginalized some of the volunteers who started these institutions. The experience of some volunteer teachers, as captured in research by the Empowering Teachers Initiative through the Achieving Quality, Equity, Efficiency and Sustainability in TPD@Scale in Zambia project, illustrates the precarious conditions these teachers face: lack of recognition, insufficient pay, limited professional development opportunities, and systemic neglect. As trained government teachers replace volunteer teachers in community schools, valuable expertise is being lost from some of the communities in most need of support, threatening the quality and continuity of education in these areas.

What we did

This brief draws on questionnaire data collected in 178 community schools across five districts in Zambia's Central Province. The questionnaires captured the experiences, working conditions, and professional needs of teachers in community schools. Focus group discussions with some teachers offered deeper insights into lived experiences, emerging patterns, and the contextual factors shaping volunteer teachers' roles and challenges. The research provides a clear understanding of the unique challenges faced by volunteer teachers, particularly in recently upgraded primary schools. These findings demonstrate the systemic neglect of this essential group of educators and highlight critical areas for intervention.

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Lack of Recognition and Compensation

- During upgrade to government institutions, volunteer teachers in community schools, who previously played significant leadership and instructional roles, have been marginalised or excluded due to their lack of formal qualifications. Volunteer teachers were identified in approximately 1 in every 6 community schools.
- The 29 volunteer teachers remaining in our sample were unqualified and unpaid by the government, despite their critical contributions to education in some of the most underserved areas.

These findings reflect a system that prioritises formal qualifications over community-rooted teaching experience. While the emphasis on formal qualifications rightly aligns with national policy priorities (MoE, 2022), the process can unintentionally overlook the valuable, community-rooted experience that passionate, long-serving successful, volunteers bring. Without policy mechanisms to acknowledge informal teaching pathways, the transition may disrupt local relationships and continuity in education delivery. Recognizing and integrating such experience alongside formal qualifications could strengthen education provision in rural areas and help maintain local ownership of the schooling process. Qualification-based exclusion threatens volunteer teachers' livelihoods and creates instability in the education system especially in hard-to-reach rural areas.

► Gender Disparities Among Volunteers

- Women are disproportionately impacted by systemic challenges.
- Female volunteer teachers are often over-represented among unqualified educators, yet they face compounded barriers to career progression compared to their male counterparts. This gender imbalance is also evident in school leadership, with only 32% of headship positions held by women, compared to 68% held by men, despite the proportion of female teachers in the total of 178 schools being much higher than that of males.

Female volunteers face unique challenges that compound their marginalization, including disproportionate family responsibilities, limited mobility, limited access to leadership opportunities and constrained access to qualification programs and formal development opportunities. Notably, gender disparities among volunteer teachers are not simply a matter of unequal leadership representation - they are symptoms of deeper structural inequities within the education system (UNESCO, 2019). Addressing these barriers is crucial for creating equitable opportunities for women in education. The under-representation of women in headship roles in the data reflects how entrenched gendered expectations intersect with the informal status of volunteer teaching. Targeted support mechanisms, including childcare or flexible training pathways, are needed to support female educators into leadership.

► Displacement in Upgraded Schools

- Volunteer teachers are frequently displaced during the process of school upgrading. Available data reveal that none of the volunteer teachers retained their former positions following such upgrades, as these roles were assumed by formally qualified personnel. In many instances, volunteer teachers are reassigned to teach lower primary classes, predominantly preschool learners, or are informed that their services are no longer required, diminishing their professional stability and role continuity within the education system.
- This displacement often results in a loss of valuable local knowledge, disrupting established teacher-student relationships, negatively affecting educational outcomes.

This loss of context-specific knowledge and relational capital is eroding the community's educational foundation, affecting learning and negatively impacting student outcomes. Volunteer educators can serve as cultural and linguistic bridges between formal education systems and rural communities, supporting student engagement and retention in ways that are not easily and quickly replicated by newly posted staff (Mulkeen, 2009). The absence of a structured approach to integrate volunteers into upgraded schools disrupts schooling and reduces the effectiveness of newly deployed government teachers unfamiliar with the local context.

2. Barriers to Professional Development

- Volunteer teachers face significant obstacles in pursuing formal qualifications, including financial constraints, limited access to training programs, and unclear pathways for certification. These barriers leave many of them in precarious roles without opportunities for growth.
- Professional development initiatives (e.g. Zambian Education School Based Training (ZEST), Catch-Up,(CU), and Zambia Education Enhancement Program (ZEEP)) do not effectively address the needs of unqualified volunteer teachers due to the systemic requirements of formal qualifications for recognition. Most of the existing initiatives have been designed on the assumption of a baseline of formal training and qualifications, thereby potentially excluding volunteers from meaningful participation.
- While all teachers face challenges navigating the multiple, overlapping and sometimes uncoordinated initiatives within the same school, volunteer teachers - who are typically untrained and lack institutional support - are disproportionately affected. The complexity of this fragmented CPD landscape adds further barriers to their professional growth and integration into the formal education system.
- The participation of volunteer teachers in School-Based Continuing Professional Development (SBCPD) is impacted by the limited opportunities they receive to lead CPD sessions, as these are predominantly conducted by trained teachers. Volunteer teachers (with knowledge of the local context) who previously served as School In-service Coordinators (SIC) are often replaced by trained educators, even though the volunteer teacher has a proven record of successful teaching in the context.

The current landscape of SBCPD is fragmented and misaligned with the needs of volunteer teachers. Some educational initiatives prioritize schools with a higher number of formally employed teachers for effective implementation. Some initiatives are unable to entrust community schools with teaching and learning resources such as computers and tablets for fear of mishandling or loss. Their exclusion from these programs perpetuates their unqualified status, leaving them without a pathway to formal employment or career advancement. The proliferation of multiple donor-led initiatives, often with overlapping goals but inefficient coordination,² further complicates access and coherence. For volunteer teachers, who are already outside formal structures, this creates an intricate and fragmented system of expectations without support. It also reflects a missed opportunity: volunteers could serve as critical links between policy goals and local learning needs if effectively integrated.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Implications

The findings emphasize the urgent need for targeted policies that address the marginalization of volunteer teachers, provide equitable access to professional development, and recognize the value of their community-based expertise. In remote and under-served communities they represent a

significant proportion of the workforce (MOE, 2024). Empowering volunteer teachers can strengthen Zambia's education system, especially in rural areas. Ignoring them and their needs risks widening the rural-urban gap and harming student outcomes. Sustainable policies must value both formal training and local expertise.

Recommendations

1. Recognize Volunteer Teachers:

- Develop a framework for recognizing volunteers' contributions through formal acknowledgment, service awards, and inclusion in decision-making processes.

2. Stabilize Compensation:

- Introduce a standardized stipend or incentive scheme for volunteers to ensure consistent pay regardless of community support levels.

3. Facilitate Professional Development:

- Establish accessible, flexible, and affordable certification programs tailored to volunteers' needs, particularly for those with family commitments.
- Provide scholarships or subsidies to support diploma and degree pursuits (MoE 2023;27).

4. Promote Local Expertise:

- Retain experienced volunteers in upgraded schools as mentors for newly deployed teachers to leverage their community knowledge.
- Incorporate local expertise into teacher professional development programs.

5. Strengthen Community Engagement:

- Involve community leaders in developing policies that balance the introduction of qualified teachers with preserving local expertise.
- Encourage partnerships between communities, NGOs, and government to support volunteer teachers.

6. Re-evaluate Teacher Deployment Policies:

- Develop mechanisms to incentivize long-term retention of government teachers in rural schools.
- Allow volunteers with significant experience to qualify for formal teaching roles through alternative credentialing pathways.

CONCLUSION

Volunteer teachers represent the heart of Zambia's rural education system, ensuring learning opportunities for children in underserved communities. However, current policies undermine their contributions, leading to systemic exclusion, lack of recognition, and displacement in upgraded schools. Failing to support these educators perpetuates inequities and threatens the sustainability of quality education in rural areas.

To bridge the rural-urban education divide, policies must adapt to acknowledge their vital role, provide pathways for professional growth, and offer equitable opportunities for certification and financial stability. By recognizing, supporting, and empowering volunteer teachers, valuable expertise will be retained in the system and Zambia can build a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable education system that truly leaves no child behind.

Footnotes

¹ In this brief, the term “volunteer teachers” is used to refer primarily to untrained teachers working without formal pay or government recognition. While volunteer teachers may be trained in other contexts, in the Zambian setting explored here, many are typically untrained and operate outside the formal teaching service.

² UNESCO (2016) highlights that an evaluation of the Joint Assistance Strategy for Zambia (JASZ) 2007–2010 found limited capacity within the Ministry of Education to effectively coordinate donor-supported initiatives.

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