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Compliance without performance: Financial management practices and systemic constraints in public secondary schools in Lusaka District, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Financial management is central to accountability, transparency and efficient use of resources in decentralised education systems. However, public secondary schools may comply with budgeting, reporting and audit procedures without necessarily achieving financial management effectiveness. This study investigated financial management practices and barriers affecting their implementation in public secondary schools in Lusaka District, Zambia. Specifically, it examined the financial management practices used by school financial actors, analysed implementation barriers, and developed a policy-oriented framework for improving practice. The study adopted a quantitative-dominant concurrent mixed-methods design. The target population comprised head teachers, deputy head teachers, heads of department, bursars/accounts officers and other school-level actors involved in financial processes. Seventy-five questionnaires were administered using random sampling among eligible school-level respondents, of which 70 were returned and analysed, giving a 93.3% response rate. In addition, 39 interview participants were purposively selected because of their direct involvement in budgeting, procurement, reporting and oversight. Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used to collect data. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies, percentages and binary logistic regression, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings show that budgeting was the most reported practice (44.3%), followed by fund allocation (27.1%), financial reporting (17.1%) and auditing (11.4%). Although 81.4% of respondents perceived financial management practices as effective, interview evidence showed that effectiveness was commonly understood as procedural compliance rather than value for money or improved institutional performance. Delayed fund disbursement was the leading barrier (55.7%), followed by misallocation of funds (20.0%) and inadequate oversight (15.7%). Logistic regression showed that financial management training ($p = 0.025$; OR = 3.37) and auditing practices ($p = 0.038$; OR = 2.81) were positively associated with perceived effectiveness, while delayed funding was negatively associated with perceived effectiveness ($p = 0.015$; OR = 0.23). The study concludes that financial management challenges are governance-related and arise from the interaction of resource flows, accountability mechanisms and school-level practices. It recommends predictable funding, strengthened internal controls, routine auditing, contextualised training and performance-oriented accountability.

Keywords: Accountability, Auditing, Education Finance, Financial Management, Fund Disbursement, Public Secondary Schools, Zambia

I. INTRODUCTION

Decentralised education financing has increased the responsibility of schools for planning, spending, recording and reporting public resources. Internationally, school-level financial management is viewed as one mechanism through which education systems connect public expenditure to learning materials, infrastructure, staffing support and school improvement. The OECD (2017) argues that the design of school funding arrangements matters because resources must be directed to where they can make the greatest difference. Similarly, UNESCO (2017) emphasises that accountability in education should help actors meet their responsibilities and improve effectiveness, efficiency and equity.

In many Sub-Saharan African education systems, decentralisation has expanded the role of school administrators in budgeting, procurement, expenditure control and financial reporting. However, the transfer of financial responsibilities to schools has not always been matched by adequate institutional capacity, predictable funding, or strong internal control systems. The World Bank (2018) stresses that education systems work when actors are aligned around learning and when resources, accountability and implementation capacity reinforce one another. Where these conditions are weak, schools may comply with formal requirements without achieving intended performance outcomes.

In Zambia, public secondary schools manage grants and other school-level financial resources within broader public financial management rules. Schools are expected to prepare budgets, procure goods and services, maintain records, retire funds and respond to audit requirements. Yet public audit evidence continues to show weaknesses in documentation, controls and compliance in public sector financial management. The Report of the Auditor General on the Accounts of the Republic for the financial year ended 31 December 2022 identifies the Auditor General's constitutional and statutory responsibility to audit public accounts and promote accountability in public resource management (Office of the Auditor General, 2022). These accountability requirements create a strong compliance environment for schools.

The problem, however, is that compliance does not always translate into performance. A school may prepare a budget, submit a report, keep receipts and avoid immediate sanctions, while still facing delayed procurement, poor expenditure control, weak internal checks and inefficient resource use. This study refers to this condition as compliance without performance. The study was conducted in Lusaka District because it is an urban district with many public secondary schools, higher enrolment pressure, complex school administration and increased accountability demands. This article examines financial management practices, barriers affecting implementation and a policy-oriented framework for improving financial management in public secondary schools in Lusaka District. The study contributes to education finance literature by showing that financial management challenges should not be understood only as individual capacity problems. They are also shaped by funding reliability, internal controls, auditing practices and accountability relationships within schools.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Financial management systems in public secondary schools are expected to support realistic budgeting, efficient resource allocation, proper procurement, accurate record keeping, and accountable use of public funds. Ideally, schools should have clear budgets, timely procurement processes, reliable financial reports, routine internal controls, and regular audits to ensure that financial resources contribute effectively to educational service delivery (Republic of Zambia, 2022). Sound public financial management practices have been recognized as fundamental to improving transparency, accountability, and institutional performance in public sector organizations, including educational institutions (Yussuf & Abdul, 2022).

In practice, however, many public secondary schools continue to experience delayed funding, weak oversight, incomplete financial documentation, and recurring audit-related concerns. The central problem is not merely the absence of financial procedures. Many schools prepare budgets, maintain accounting records, and submit financial reports as required by government regulations. The concern is that these procedures may not necessarily translate into effective financial performance. Schools may appear compliant because statutory financial documents are prepared and submitted, yet still experience procurement delays, weak expenditure monitoring, poor cash-flow management, and inefficient utilization of available resources (Mutua & Musau, 2026; Johnson, 2023).

Previous studies and policy discussions have largely attributed school financial management challenges to inadequate funding, insufficient financial management skills, weak supervision, and increasingly complex financial reporting requirements. While these explanations are important, they have frequently been examined in isolation. Consequently, there remains limited empirical evidence on how administrative capacity, accountability mechanisms, and resource-related constraints interact to influence financial performance in public secondary schools, particularly within Lusaka District, Zambia. This study therefore seeks to examine these interrelationships and explain how they collectively shape perceived financial management effectiveness in public secondary schools.

1.2 Research Objectives

i. To examine the financial management practices employed by financial actors in public secondary schools.
ii. To analyse the barriers associated with implementation of financial management practices in public secondary schools.
iii. To develop a policy-oriented framework for improving financial management practices in public secondary schools.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

Agency Theory explains situations in which one party delegates authority to another party to act on its behalf. Jensen and Meckling (1976) describe agency relationships as involving delegation, information asymmetry and potential conflict between principals and agents. In public secondary schools, government and education authorities act as principals, while head teachers, bursars, accounts officers and school administrators act as agents responsible for managing public resources at school level. Agency Theory is relevant because school-level actors possess more information about daily financial decisions than external authorities. At the same time, external authorities retain the power to demand reports, conduct audits and impose sanctions. This can encourage school administrators to become risk-averse. They may centralise financial decision-making and focus on producing acceptable documentation in order to avoid audit queries. Such behaviour may protect administrators from sanctions but may also reduce participatory financial governance within schools.

Accountability Theory complements Agency Theory by focusing on the obligation of public actors to explain and justify their decisions. Bovens (2007) defines accountability as a relationship in which an actor is required to explain conduct to a forum that may ask questions and impose consequences. In schools, accountability mechanisms include budgeting, financial reporting, internal controls, external audits and monitoring by education authorities. These mechanisms should improve transparency and performance, but when accountability is reduced to paperwork and audit checklists, it may encourage procedural compliance rather than strategic financial management. Together, Agency Theory and Accountability Theory explain why financial management can become compliance-oriented. If schools are judged mainly by the availability of documents and absence of audit queries, financial actors may focus on evidence that satisfies external oversight rather than on whether funds are used efficiently and strategically. These theories therefore support the central argument of this study: perceived effectiveness may be high even where delayed funding, weak internal controls and procurement problems continue to affect financial performance.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Financial Management Practices in Public Secondary Schools

Empirical literature shows that school financial management commonly includes budgeting, procurement, expenditure control, financial reporting, internal controls and auditing. OECD (2017) reports that school funding systems are more effective when funding allocation, budgeting and accountability are aligned with educational goals. This means that financial management should not only demonstrate compliance but should also support the efficient use of resources and school improvement.

Budgeting is generally considered the starting point of school financial management because it connects school priorities to available resources. Where funding is predictable and school actors are trained, budgeting can support planning, prioritisation and expenditure control. In contrast, where funds are delayed or unpredictable, budgets may become formal documents rather than practical planning tools. The World Bank (2018) emphasises that schools work better when resources and implementation capacity are aligned around learning. In the context of this study, the issue is whether budgeting in Lusaka schools is used strategically or mainly as a procedural requirement.

Procurement and expenditure control determine how financial resources are converted into goods and services. In school systems, procurement delays can affect the availability of books, maintenance materials and other inputs needed for service delivery. Aina and Du Plessis (2023), in a study of fee-paying public schools in South Africa, found that financial management responsibilities and decision-making processes are shaped by stakeholder capacity, governance rules and the influence of school governing bodies. Their findings show that financial management depends not only on rules but also on who participates in financial decisions and how roles are distributed.

Financial reporting provides evidence of how resources are used. It is important for accountability, but it may become compliance-driven when reports are prepared mainly for external authorities rather than internal decision-making. Dwangu and Mahlangu (2021) found that accountability mechanisms in school financial management may fail when they do not make principals and school structures fully answerable for financial decisions. Their study indicates that accountability systems require more than documentation; they need clear responsibility and consequences. Auditing and internal controls are expected to verify expenditure, detect irregularities and strengthen financial discipline. Garcer and Mestry (2024), studying internal financial control processes in South African public schools, found that school financial actors recognised transparency and accountability as important but experienced challenges implementing internal processes. Their findings are relevant to this study because they show that internal controls may exist formally but remain weak in practice when expertise and routine monitoring are limited.

2.2.2 Barriers to Effective Financial Management

The empirical literature identifies several barriers to effective financial management. The first is limited administrative capacity. School leaders and accounts staff may be expected to manage budgets, procurement, grants and reporting without sufficient practical training. Training improves confidence and compliance, but the literature also shows that training alone cannot resolve problems caused by delayed funding and weak systems. The second barrier is delayed and unpredictable funding. When schools do not receive funds on time, budgets lose practical value and procurement becomes reactive. Activities may be postponed or implemented hurriedly once funds arrive. This creates pressure on documentation, reporting and expenditure control. OECD (2017) notes that funding systems must be aligned with governance structures and planning procedures if resources are to be used effectively.

The third barrier is weak oversight and irregular auditing. Accountability in education should help actors meet responsibilities and improve effectiveness (UNESCO, 2017). However, if audits are irregular and internal controls are weak, schools may focus on preparing documentation only when external inspections are expected. This reduces the preventive value of auditing and creates a reactive accountability culture. The fourth barrier is complexity in reporting and unclear expenditure guidelines. Technical reporting formats, manual record systems and unclear rules can create avoidable errors. These challenges are particularly important in grant management because grant funds often come with stricter conditions and more detailed reporting requirements. Therefore, the current study examines whether financial management barriers in Lusaka schools are isolated problems or interrelated constraints that affect the whole financial management cycle.

2.2.3 Policy-Oriented Frameworks for Improving Financial Management

Empirical and policy literature suggest that improving school financial management requires coordinated reforms rather than isolated interventions (Mutua & Musau, 2026). Key factors contributing to success include predictable funding for credible budgeting, practical training for financial procedures, strengthened internal controls, and simplified reporting guidelines (Tallam et al., 2025; John, 2025; Yussuf & Abdul, 2022; National Public Financial Management Reform Secretariat, 2024).

The research gap addressed by this study lies in the limited analysis of how these components interact in public secondary schools in Lusaka District. Existing literature provides evidence on school financial management, accountability and funding systems, but there is still limited context-specific evidence on the relationship between administrative capacity, accountability mechanisms, resource flows and perceived financial management effectiveness. This study fills that gap by linking quantitative and qualitative evidence to develop a policy-oriented framework for school financial management improvement.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative-dominant concurrent mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were used to establish patterns, frequencies and relationships among key variables, while qualitative data were used to explain the practical experiences behind the numerical findings. The concurrent design was appropriate because questionnaire and interview data were collected during the same phase of the study and integrated during interpretation. This design allowed the study to examine both the measurable distribution of financial management practices and the institutional reasons behind those patterns.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Lusaka District, Lusaka Province, Zambia. Lusaka District was selected because it has many public secondary schools and represents an urban education management context with high enrolment pressure, complex administrative demands and strong accountability expectations. Schools in the district manage grants and other public resources and are expected to comply with budgeting, procurement, financial reporting and audit requirements.

3.3 Target Population

The target population comprised school-level actors directly involved in financial management processes in selected public secondary schools in Lusaka District. These included head teachers, deputy head teachers, heads of department, bursars/accounts officers and other staff involved in budgeting, procurement, financial reporting, fund allocation and oversight activities.

3.4 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The quantitative component targeted 75 respondents from selected public secondary schools. Seventy questionnaires were completed and returned, producing a response rate of 93.3%. Random sampling was used for the questionnaire component among eligible school-level respondents to improve representativeness. For the qualitative component, 39 participants were purposively selected because they had direct knowledge of budgeting, procurement, reporting, grant management or oversight. Purposive sampling was appropriate for interviews because the study required information-rich participants who could explain how financial management was implemented in practice.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Data were collected using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The questionnaire collected quantitative information on respondents' background characteristics, financial management practices, perceived effectiveness, training, external grants and barriers affecting financial management. The semi-structured interview guide explored financial decision-making, reporting culture, funding delays, internal controls, audit preparation and strategies for improvement. Document analysis was used to supplement the primary data by reviewing relevant school financial records and reports where available.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analysed using descriptive statistics and binary logistic regression. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarise respondent characteristics, financial management practices, perceived effectiveness and barriers. The dependent variable was perceived effectiveness of financial management practices. For logistic regression, responses of very effective and effective were coded as effective, while neutral responses were coded as not effective. No respondent selected ineffective or very ineffective. Independent variables included financial management training, delayed fund disbursement, auditing practices and work experience. Qualitative data were analysed thematically by identifying recurring patterns related to roles and involvement, perceived effectiveness, delayed funding, weak oversight and reporting challenges. Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during interpretation.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from relevant authorities and participating schools. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage. Due to the sensitive nature of financial management and audit-related information, names of participants and schools were not disclosed. Data were used only for academic and publication purposes.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Respondent Characteristics

A total of 70 questionnaires were analysed. The respondents included school-level actors involved in financial management processes. Thirty-six respondents (51.4%) were male and 34 (48.6%) were female. Most respondents were aged between 36 and 55 years. Head teachers and deputy head teachers formed the largest respondent category, while most respondents had more than six years of work experience. This suggests that the data were collected from respondents with substantial exposure to school financial management processes.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 70)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	36	51.4
	Female	34	48.6
Age	18-25	2	2.9
	26-35	1	1.4
	36-45	21	30.0
	46-55	32	45.7
	56-65	14	20.0
Position	Head teacher/deputy	29	41.4
	Bursar/accounts officer	11	15.7
	Teacher/HoD	14	20.0
	Other	16	22.9
Work experience	<1 year	7	10.0
	1-3 years	8	11.4
	4-6 years	11	15.7
	>6 years	44	62.9
School location	Urban	70	100.0

4.2 Financial Management Practices and Perceived Effectiveness

Table one examined the financial management practices employed by school financial actors. The findings show that budgeting was the most commonly reported practice, mentioned by 31 respondents (44.3%). Fund allocation was reported by 19 respondents (27.1%), financial reporting by 12 respondents (17.1%) and auditing by 8 respondents (11.4%). The results indicate that planning-related practices were more visible than accountability-related practices. The low reporting of auditing suggests that routine verification and internal control remain weak in many schools.

Table 2

Financial Management Practices Employed in Public Secondary Schools

Practice	Frequency (N=70)	Percentage (%)
Budgeting	31	44.3
Fund allocation	19	27.1
Financial reporting	12	17.1
Auditing	8	11.4
Total	**70**	**100.00**

Multiple-response item; percentages represent the proportion of respondents selecting each practice.

Perceived effectiveness was the dependent variable of the study. The majority of respondents rated financial management practices positively. Thirty-nine respondents (55.7%) rated them as effective, while 18 (25.7%) rated them as very effective. Thirteen respondents (18.6%) were neutral, and no respondent rated the practices as ineffective. However, interview evidence showed that perceived effectiveness was frequently linked to compliance with procedures, availability of records and avoidance of audit queries rather than actual value for money or improved school performance.

Table 3

Perceived Effectiveness of Financial Management Practices

Effectiveness rating	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very effective	18	25.7
Effective	39	55.7
Neutral	13	18.6
Ineffective	0	0.0
Very ineffective	0	0.0
Total	**70**	**100.0**

This finding supports the idea that financial management practices may be present and positively perceived even where substantive performance remains limited. In line with UNESCO (2017), accountability should improve effectiveness and efficiency, but the results suggest that accountability in the schools studied was often interpreted as documentation and audit preparedness.

4.3 Independent Variables Affecting Financial Management Practices

4.3.1 Administrative Capacity: Financial Management Training

Administrative capacity was assessed partly through financial management training. Forty-six respondents reported having received training, while 24 had not. Those who had received training generally described it as beneficial. Respondents who had not received training also indicated that training would be useful. This suggests that financial management training is recognised as an important support mechanism for school financial actors.

Table 4

Financial Management Training and Perceived Benefit

Training status	Very beneficial	Beneficial	Neutral	Total
Received training	25	19	2	46
Not received training	24	0	0	24
Total	**49**	**19**	**2**	**70**

Although training was important, qualitative evidence showed that training alone was not enough where funds were delayed or reporting requirements were complex. This supports the empirical literature which shows that administrative capacity must be supported by reliable systems and resources.

4.3.2 Resource Factors: Delayed Fund Disbursement and Grant Management

Resource-related factors were central to the findings. Delayed fund disbursement was the most frequently reported barrier, identified by 39 respondents (55.7%). Misallocation of funds was reported by 14 respondents (20.0%), inadequate oversight by 11 respondents (15.7%), complex reporting requirements by 7 respondents (10.0%) and unclear financial guidelines by 4 respondents (5.7%).

Table 5

Barriers to Effective Financial Management Practices

Barrier	Frequency (N=70)	Percentage (%)
Delayed fund disbursement	39	55.7
Misallocation of funds	14	20.0
Inadequate oversight	11	15.7
Complex reporting requirements	7	10.0
Unclear financial guidelines	4	5.7

Multiple-response item; percentages represent the proportion of respondents selecting each barrier. Source:

Interview participants explained that when funds arrived late, schools postponed planned activities and later rushed procurement and reporting. One participant noted that funds sometimes arrived when the term had already advanced, forcing the school to revise activities that had earlier been planned. This confirms that delayed funding affects the entire financial management cycle, from budgeting to procurement and reporting. Most respondents also reported that their schools received external grants. Fifty-eight respondents (82.9%) indicated that their schools received grants or donations. Among these, 48 respondents rated grant management as good or very good, while 10 rated it as fair. Although poor grant management was not reported, the fair ratings suggest that grant administration still faced moderate weaknesses, especially in reporting and documentation.

Table 6

External Grant Management Ratings among Schools Receiving Grants

Rating	Frequency (N=58)	Percentage (%)
Very good	20	34.5
Good	28	48.3
Fair	10	17.2
Poor	0	0.0
Very poor	0	0.0
Total	**58**	**100.0**

4.3.3 Accountability Mechanisms: Auditing and Oversight

Auditing was reported by only 11.4% of respondents as a financial management practice. Qualitative evidence showed that auditing was often reactive rather than routine. Several participants indicated that schools became more careful with documentation when external inspectors or auditors were expected. This finding is consistent with Dwangu and Mahlangu (2021), who found that accountability mechanisms may fail when they do not ensure continuous responsibility for financial management. It also aligns with Garcer and Mestry (2024), who emphasise the need for internal financial control processes in schools.

4.4 Logistic Regression Results

Binary logistic regression was conducted to examine predictors of perceived financial management effectiveness. The independent variables were financial management training, delayed fund disbursement, auditing practices and work experience. The results show that financial management training and auditing practices were positively associated with perceived effectiveness, while delayed fund disbursement was negatively associated with perceived effectiveness. Work experience was not statistically significant.

Table 7

Binary Logistic Regression Results on Perceived Effectiveness

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	p-value	Exp(B)
Financial management training	1.214	0.542	5.02	0.025	3.37
Delayed fund disbursement	-1.486	0.611	5.91	0.015	0.23
Auditing practices	1.032	0.498	4.29	0.038	2.81
Work experience (>6 years)	0.417	0.463	0.81	0.368	1.52
Constant	-0.924	0.702	1.73	0.188	-

Dependent variable: perceived effectiveness coded as effective = 1 and not effective = 0. Source: Field data (2025).

Respondents with financial management training were more likely to perceive financial management practices as effective ($p = 0.025$; OR = 3.37). Auditing practices were also positively associated with perceived effectiveness ($p = 0.038$; OR = 2.81). In contrast, delayed fund disbursement reduced the likelihood of perceived effectiveness ($p = 0.015$; OR = 0.23). This means that, even where schools had procedures and trained actors, delayed funding substantially weakened implementation. The result strengthens the argument that financial management effectiveness depends on the interaction of capacity, accountability and resource reliability.

4.5 Qualitative Findings Linked to the Variables

4.5.1 Centralised Financial Roles

Interviews showed that financial decision-making was largely centralised around head teachers and accounts officers. Teachers and heads of department could submit departmental requests, but final decisions were usually made by senior administration. Participants linked this centralisation to audit risk because head teachers were the ones held accountable when questions arose. This pattern reflects Agency Theory, where agents under monitoring pressure may restrict participation to reduce exposure to sanctions.

4.5.2 Compliance as Perceived Effectiveness

Interview evidence explained why perceived effectiveness was high despite weak auditing. Many respondents understood effective financial management as the ability to follow procedures, maintain receipts, retire funds and avoid audit queries. This suggests that effectiveness was often measured through compliance indicators rather than value for money or school improvement. The finding is important because it explains the difference between positive ratings in Table 3 and the continuing barriers shown in Table 5.

4.5.3 Delayed Funding and Reactive Auditing

Delayed funding emerged as the most disruptive practical challenge. Participants reported that funding delays affected procurement, implementation of activities and reporting. Schools were sometimes forced to spend quickly after funds arrived, increasing the risk of documentation errors. Auditing was also described as externally driven and episodic. This created a reactive accountability culture rather than routine internal financial control.

4.6 Policy-Oriented Framework for Improvement

Based on the findings, a policy-oriented framework for improving financial management in public secondary schools should combine five mutually reinforcing components: predictable funding, practical training, internal controls, routine auditing and performance-oriented accountability. These components are interrelated. Predictable funding supports credible budgeting. Training improves the competence of school financial actors. Internal controls and routine auditing strengthen accountability. Performance-oriented accountability shifts attention from paperwork alone to efficient use of funds and school improvement.

Table 8

Policy-Oriented Framework for Improving Financial Management Practices

Framework component	Problem addressed	Expected improvement
Predictable funding	Delayed disbursement and disrupted budgets	More credible budgeting and timely procurement
Practical training	Limited financial management capacity	Improved budgeting, reporting and compliance skills
Internal controls	Weak oversight and documentation errors	Earlier detection of errors and stronger financial discipline
Routine auditing	Reactive audit preparation	Continuous monitoring and reduced audit queries
Performance-oriented accountability	Overemphasis on paperwork	Greater focus on value for money and school improvement

4.7 Discussion

The findings show that public secondary schools in Lusaka District practice budgeting, fund allocation and financial reporting more visibly than auditing. This supports international education finance literature which identifies budgeting and reporting as common elements of decentralised school financial management (OECD, 2017; UNESCO, 2017). However, the low reporting of auditing suggests that internal control mechanisms are less institutionalised than planning and reporting practices. The finding that 81.4% of respondents perceived financial management as effective must be interpreted cautiously. Qualitative data showed that respondents often associated effectiveness with compliance, such as proper documentation and absence of audit queries. This finding extends the accountability literature by demonstrating that school financial management may appear effective when assessed through procedural indicators, even where efficiency and value for money remain uncertain.

Delayed fund disbursement was the main barrier and was negatively associated with perceived effectiveness. This finding is consistent with the OECD (2017) argument that funding systems must be aligned with planning and governance structures. When funds are delayed, budgets become less useful as planning tools and procurement becomes reactive. This explains why funding delays affected not only resource availability but also reporting quality and audit preparedness.

The positive association between training and perceived effectiveness confirms the importance of administrative capacity. However, the study also shows that training is not sufficient on its own. A trained head teacher or accounts officer may still fail to implement planned activities when resources are delayed or when reporting requirements are unclear. Therefore, financial management reform must address both individual capacity and institutional conditions. The findings on auditing and centralised decision-making can be explained by Agency Theory and Accountability Theory. Agency Theory explains why administrators may centralise decision-making when they are responsible for audit queries. Accountability Theory explains why documentation and reporting become dominant when schools are judged mainly through audit and compliance procedures. The study therefore supports a governance interpretation of financial management problems rather than a purely technical interpretation.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined financial management practices and barriers affecting implementation in public secondary schools in Lusaka District. The findings show that budgeting, fund allocation and financial reporting were practiced, while auditing and internal control systems were comparatively weak. Although most respondents perceived financial management practices as effective, qualitative findings showed that effectiveness was often understood in terms of compliance with procedures and avoidance of audit queries rather than efficient resource use or improved school performance.

The main barrier affecting financial management was delayed fund disbursement. Delays disrupted planning, procurement, implementation and reporting. Training and auditing were positively associated with perceived effectiveness, while delayed funding was negatively associated with perceived effectiveness. The study therefore concludes that financial management challenges in public secondary schools are not only technical capacity problems. They are also governance problems linked to funding reliability, accountability mechanisms, audit practices and internal controls. The study further concludes that improving financial management requires an integrated framework. Training is necessary but must be supported by predictable funding, routine auditing, strong internal controls, simplified reporting and performance-oriented accountability. Without these system-level improvements, schools may continue to demonstrate paper compliance without achieving financial performance.

5.2 Recommendations

The Ministry of Education should strengthen the predictability and timeliness of school fund disbursement. Funds should be released in line with school planning and implementation cycles so that budgets can guide real activities rather than remain formal documents. Predictable funding would reduce rushed procurement, improve expenditure planning and strengthen reporting accuracy. Public secondary schools should institutionalise stronger internal control systems. This should include clear segregation of duties, routine verification of financial documents, regular review of expenditure records and active participation of school-level financial monitoring structures. Internal controls should be treated as part of everyday financial governance rather than as preparation for external inspections.

Auditing should be strengthened as a continuous governance practice. Schools should conduct routine internal checks and receive technical support from district education offices before external audits occur. This would help identify errors early, reduce repeated audit queries and improve confidence in financial reporting. Financial management training should be practical and continuous. Training should target head teachers, deputy head teachers, bursars, accounts officers and heads of department, with emphasis on budgeting, procurement, grant management, reporting, documentation and audit preparation. Training should use real school financial scenarios rather than general theory alone.

Reporting and expenditure guidelines should be simplified and clearly communicated to schools. Where grant funds or regulated expenditure categories are involved, schools should receive clear templates and examples of acceptable documentation. This would reduce uncertainty and prevent avoidable audit queries caused by misunderstanding of procedures. Schools should progressively adopt digital financial management tools to improve record keeping, reporting accuracy and transparency. Digital tools would help reduce missing documentation, improve transaction tracking and make it easier for school administrators and oversight authorities to monitor expenditure. Accountability frameworks should move beyond procedural compliance and include indicators of performance, value for money and contribution to school improvement. Schools should not be assessed only on whether documents are available, but also on whether financial resources are used efficiently and support educational priorities.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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