

Navigating the Fee-Free Education Policy: Coping Strategies for Sustaining Curriculum Implementation in Secondary Schools in Moshi Municipality, Tanzania

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Abstract

This study examined the coping strategies used by public secondary schools in Moshi Municipality, Tanzania, to address the challenges that the implementation of the Fee-Free Education (FFE) policy has created for teaching and learning. Specifically, the study aimed to identify the strategies schools use to cope with these challenges and determine their relevance in sustaining teaching and learning. A total of 332 participants took part in the study, comprising 307 teachers, 13 heads of schools, and 12 parents. The study used different sampling procedures for each group: parents and heads of schools were purposely selected for interviews based on their direct involvement in supporting students' learning under the FFE policy. In contrast, the study selected 307 teachers using Yamane's formula and proportionate stratified random sampling. The study collected data through questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. SPSS was used to analyse the quantitative data, and thematic analysis was used for the qualitative data. The findings revealed several coping strategies that schools employed to sustain teaching and learning despite challenges such as overcrowding and inadequate instructional resources, which compromise the quality of education. The identified strategies were mixing teaching methods in classrooms, using remedial classes to provide extra hours, teacher improvisation, and hiring part-time teachers. However, the study concludes that these strategies cannot serve as permanent solutions. The government should therefore recognise and support schools' efforts, especially by increasing school funding and considering qualified part-time teachers for permanent employment. Policymakers could also use these findings in a policy review to develop a more flexible and supportive policy that enhances effective curriculum implementation for quality education.

Keywords: Fee-Free Education, Curriculum Implementation, Coping Strategies, Quality Education, Teaching and Learning

Introduction

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) recognises education as a fundamental human right (Veriava & Paterson, 2020). In

response, several global educational initiatives have been introduced to promote equitable access to education. These initiatives include Education for All (EFA), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), and various Fee-Free Education (FFE) policies aimed at ensuring inclusive and quality education for all. Countries have implemented fee-free and compulsory education policies in different ways. In Japan, for example, although nine years of compulsory education at public schools is free, families may still face some education-related costs (OECD, 2018). Various African countries have implemented similar access-expansion policies, although the extent and financing arrangements vary across national contexts.

Tanzania has long struggled to increase access to basic education, even before the current Fee-Free Education policy. The Arusha Declaration called for Universal Primary Education (Kisanga & Msoka, 2025). However, in the 1990s, cost-sharing reforms reintroduced household contributions to education (URT, 1995). In 2014, the government reintroduced free basic education in public schools and extended it to lower secondary education (Kisanga & Msoka, 2025). This paper focuses on the current stage of Fee-Free Education implementation.

Since its implementation in 2014, the FFE policy has produced several positive outcomes. Notably, it has substantially expanded access to education, as reflected in increased enrolment rates (Amani, 2021). The policy has also helped to narrow enrolment disparities between students from economically disadvantaged and affluent households, thereby enhancing equity in educational access (Lucumay & Matete, 2024). Moreover, removing school fees has reduced the financial burden on parents and guardians, enabling more families to participate in and support their children's education (HakiElimu, 2017).

However, despite these positive impacts, international experience shows that policies that remove school fees and expand access tend to place additional pressure on teachers, classrooms, and instructional resources when enrolment grows faster than system capacity. Similar resource pressures have been reported in most East African education systems (Avenstrup, Liang, & Nellemann, 2004), exposing these countries to implementation challenges.

In Tanzania, strategies for implementing the FFE policy have not been sufficiently aligned with available resources (PO-RALG, 2024), leading to overcrowded classrooms, substantial infrastructure deficits, and shortages of teaching and learning materials that compromise educational quality

(Kisanga & Msoka, 2025). Other reported challenges include an increased student–teacher ratio and low parental awareness of FFE, which hinders their full support for the policy (Lyanga & Chen, 2020; Uvambe & Msoroka, 2021).

Although previous Tanzanian studies have documented challenges associated with Fee-Free Education implementation (Uvambe & Msoroka, 2021; Lazaro & Matiku, 2022; Lucumay & Matete, 2024; Kisanga & Msoka, 2025), less is known about how schools respond to these constraints in day-to-day curriculum delivery. This study therefore sought to examine (1) the coping methods employed by public secondary schools in Moshi Municipality and (2) stakeholders’ perceptions of the relevance of these coping methods in sustaining teaching and learning.

The Theoretical Foundation

This study used the Educational Production Function perspective as an organising framework. The study treated teachers, classrooms, instructional materials, and financial resources as educational inputs. FFE-related enrolment pressures may strain these inputs, while school-level responses, such as pedagogical adaptation, remedial teaching, improvisation, and temporary teacher recruitment, represent coping responses to resource constraints. Because the study did not directly measure student achievement or curriculum outcomes, the framework interprets resource-response patterns rather than empirically testing an input-output production function.

Methodology

Research Philosophy

The study followed a pragmatic philosophy because the research problem required both numerical evidence on the prevalence of school coping strategies and qualitative accounts of how stakeholders implemented and perceived those strategies. This orientation supported integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence to build a practical understanding of FFE-related challenges and school responses. Pragmatism also emphasises the usefulness of findings for improving educational practice and informing policy decisions. It supports using multiple sources of evidence to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Research Approach and Design

The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed separately, and then compared during interpretation to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, or divergence. Integration was achieved

through a side-by-side comparison of the quantitative and qualitative results, and the findings of the two strands were examined together for each research objective. Where the findings converged, the qualitative evidence was used to interpret or support the quantitative findings; divergent findings were explored to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how schools adopted various coping strategies to implement the curriculum under the FFE policy.

Study Area

This study was conducted in public secondary schools in Moshi Municipality, Kilimanjaro Region, Tanzania. Kilimanjaro Region has a relatively high Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 78.8% (URT, 2025). This relatively high enrolment provides a relevant context for examining FFE-related coping methods, as increased access and enrolment could increase demands on teachers, instructional materials, classrooms, and other educational resources. The municipality is therefore a suitable setting for studying the challenges public secondary schools face in implementing FFE and their responses.

Population and Sample Size

Target Population

The study population comprised the 66 public secondary schools in Moshi Municipality. The individual target population comprised 66 heads of schools, 1,327 teachers, and 122 parents who were members of school boards, for a total of 1,515.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedures

The study employed different sampling procedures for the respective respondent categories, as follows:

Procedures for school selection

The 10–30% rule suggested by Mugenda and Mugenda (2013) was applied to obtain a manageable and adequately distributed sample of schools. Accordingly, 13 schools were selected, representing approximately 20% of the 66 public secondary schools in Moshi Municipality.

Procedures for selection of Teachers

For teachers, Yamane's formula was used to determine the sample size from the target population of 1,327 teachers at a 5% level of precision:

$$n = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$$

Where:

n = desired sample size

N = population of the study (1,327)

e = precision/sampling error (0.05)

Thus:

$$n = 1,327 / [1 + 1,327(0.05)^2]$$

$$n = 1,327 / [1 + 1,327(0.0025)]$$

$$n \approx 307$$

Accordingly, 307 teachers were targeted for participation in the study.

Sampling Procedures

Parents and Heads of Schools (HoS) were purposely selected for interviews based on their direct involvement in supporting students' learning under the Fee-Free Education policy. Purposive selection was appropriate because the study required participants with relevant experience and knowledge of policy implementation at the school level.

The study selected 307 teachers using proportionate stratified random sampling. Each of the 13 sampled schools constituted a stratum, and we determined the number of teachers selected from each school in proportion to the school's teacher population. We then used simple random sampling to select individual teachers within each school.

The allocation was calculated as:

$$n_i = (N_i / N) \times 307$$

where n_i = The number of teachers selected from school i ,

N_i = The number of teachers in school i ,

N = The total number of teachers in the 13 sampled schools, and

307 = the required teacher sample.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected using the following tools:

Questionnaire

The teacher questionnaire contained 30 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree). The researcher developed the items and reviewed them with 20 secondary school teachers from schools not involved in the study to assess

clarity and relevance. The internal consistency of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha before full administration. The value of 0.7 and above was used to accept reliability.

Interview

We conducted in-depth interviews with 13 heads of schools and 12 parents. We purposively selected participants based on their direct involvement in school management or support under FFE. We conducted interviews in Kiswahili, audio-recorded with permission, and each lasted about 20 minutes. We transcribed and translated the recordings into English for analysis.

We considered qualitative information adequate when responses were complete and relevant to the study objectives and when similar views recurred across interviews. We considered data collection sufficient when the information gathered addressed the research questions and provided recurring explanations of the challenges and coping methods associated with FFE.

Observation Technique

Researchers observed six teachers (two from each school) in their classrooms. The small number of schools and teachers was deliberate, as the observations were intended to provide contextual and complementary evidence rather than statistically representative estimates of classroom practices. The three schools were chosen to reflect variation in school contexts and to enable the researcher to observe teaching and learning practices under different classroom conditions. The six teachers were chosen to provide direct evidence from a variety of subject areas and teaching situations. Each teacher was observed three times, yielding 18 observed lessons in different subjects. Repeated observations of the same teacher were intended to provide a more reliable picture of classroom practice and to reduce the possibility that findings were attributable to an unusual or one-off lesson.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data for each coping strategy, were coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequencies and percentages were calculated as the proportion of teachers who selected Agree or Strongly agree on the corresponding item(s); respondents could endorse more than one strategy. Means and standard deviations were calculated for the five-point Likert items. Skewness was examined descriptively to assess the distribution of responses. Qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analysed thematically. The analysis involved familiarisation with the data, coding relevant segments, grouping related codes into categories, and

developing themes that captured recurring patterns and meanings in participants' responses. The themes were then interpreted in relation to the study objectives and used to complement the quantitative findings.

Ethical Consideration

This study followed several ethical principles. All participants received information about the study and provided written informed consent before participating. Participation was voluntary; respondents could withdraw without penalty, and the researcher removed or coded identifying information to protect confidentiality.

The researcher also ensured honesty and transparency throughout the research process. The study cited all sources to avoid plagiarism and reported findings accurately without falsification or data manipulation.

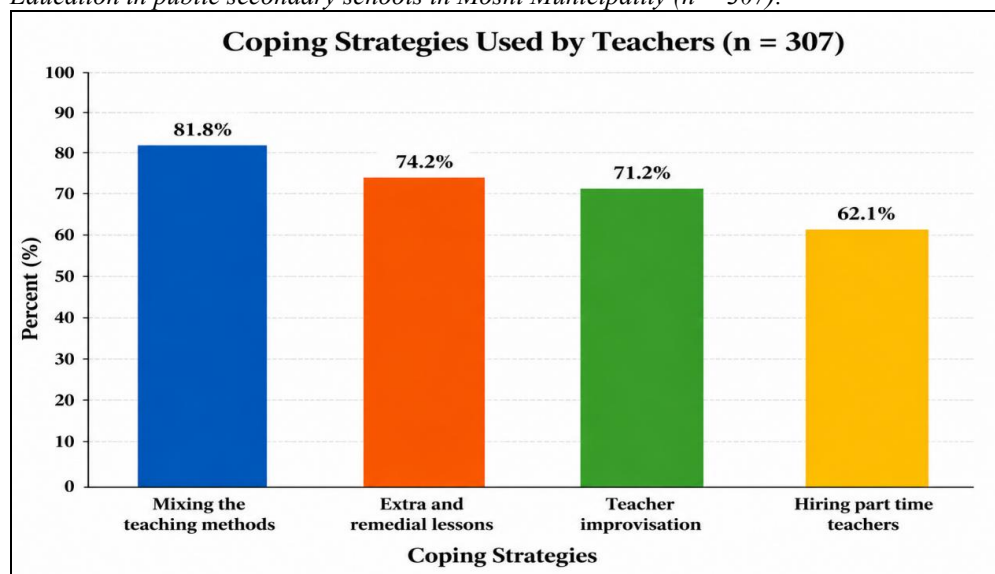
Findings and Discussion

Coping Strategies Adopted by Schools

A questionnaire completed by 307 teachers indicated that schools used several practical strategies to respond to shortages of teachers and instructional resources, as summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1.:

Coping strategies employed by teachers to address challenges associated with Fee-Free Education in public secondary schools in Moshi Municipality (n = 307).



Source: Field data, May 2026

Note: Percentages represent the proportion of teachers who selected Agree or Strongly agree for each coping strategy. Respondents could endorse more than one strategy; therefore, percentages do not sum to 100%.

As indicated in Figure 1, combining teaching methods within a single lesson was the most frequently reported strategy, reported by 81.8% of respondents. This was followed by extra and remedial lessons (74.2%) and teacher improvisation (71.2%), while 62.1% of respondents reported hiring part-time teachers. The following sections discuss these strategies and their perceived relevance in enhancing curriculum implementation.

Mixing Teaching Methods

Large class sizes in most of the schools visited put teaching and learning at risk. As shown in Figure 1, a large proportion of teachers (81.8%) reported that they usually combine a variety of teaching methods to address overcrowded classes. The descriptive results presented in Table 1 show a similar pattern.

Table 1:

Descriptive Results on the Use of the Mixing Method as a Coping Strategy

Statement	N	Mean	SD	SK
Mixing Teaching Methods				
I use a combination of teaching methods to enhance students' participation in large classes.	307	4.34	0.71	-1.18
I integrate discussion, question-and-answer, demonstrations, and think-pair-share methods during lessons.	307	4.21	0.77	-0.96
Mixing teaching methods helps learners acquire competencies despite overcrowded classrooms.	307	4.15	0.81	-0.88
Using different teaching methods enables me to address learners' diverse learning needs.	307	4.09	0.84	-0.79
Overall Mean	307	4.20	0.78	-0.95

Note: N=Number of respondents, SD=Standard Deviation, SK=Skewness

The overall mean for the mixing-teaching-methods items was 4.20 (SD = 0.78) on a five-point scale, indicating generally strong agreement that teachers used multiple teaching methods as a coping strategy in large, resource-constrained classes.

To supplement the questionnaire data: across 6 observed classes, class size ranged from minimum 50 students to maximum 80 students. All six observed classes exceeded the recommended maximum class size of 40 stipulated in the secondary education curriculum (MoEVT,2003). Teachers in these

classes were observed combining discussion, question-and-answer, demonstration, and think-pair-share approaches.

These strategies employed by teachers are consistent with the Competence-Based Curriculum's emphasis on learner-centred pedagogy and may help teachers maintain opportunities for participation and interaction in large classes. However, the present study did not directly measure student engagement, comprehension, or learning outcomes; these should therefore be treated as plausible benefits rather than demonstrated effects.

These findings support the argument that effective curriculum implementation depends not only on resource availability but also on teachers' pedagogical adaptability. By modifying instructional approaches to suit large class sizes, teachers demonstrate professional resilience and instructional creativity, which are essential for sustaining curriculum implementation in resource-constrained contexts.

The findings are consistent with studies suggesting that discussion and other interactive strategies can support teaching in large classes (Kihaga et al., (2025); Abu-Ghararah, 2021). Nevertheless, although this approach enhances curriculum implementation, excessive class sizes, limited instructional time, and inadequate teaching resources appear to limit its effectiveness. Teachers' pedagogical innovation alone therefore cannot fully compensate for systemic shortages, highlighting the need for system-level responses, such as more classrooms, increased teacher recruitment, and expanded teaching and learning resources.

Use of Extra and Remedial Classes

As shown in Figure 1.0, 74.2% of teachers reported using remedial and extra classes to address the challenges brought about by the FFE policy in Moshi Municipal Council.

Parents described supporting remedial sessions through voluntary contributions, such as food or payments for cooks. While such support may help schools extend instructional time, it also raises questions about equity and the boundary between voluntary participation and FFE charges. Schools should therefore ensure that participation in remedial learning is not contingent on a family's ability to contribute and that any community support remains genuinely voluntary. One of the interviewed heads of school said:

Students benefit greatly from remedial classes, and I thank God that my teachers are very committed to providing their extra time to teach the students. Without this strategy, it could be difficult for us to complete the

syllabus, given the shortage of teachers and other resources we face. I also thank the parents for their cooperation in supporting these initiatives (Head of School Interview, School C).

To corroborate these findings, parents were also interviewed about their participation in supporting remedial classes. Many of them acknowledged that although tuition fees had been abolished, they still considered it their responsibility to contribute to activities that directly enhanced their children's academic performance.

One parent explained:

I understand that education is free, but that does not mean the government must do everything. I usually contribute for remedial classes for my child to attend. I understand that my child, who is in Form Two, needed more time to learn and prepare himself for the examinations (Parent Interview, School A).

Another parent remarked:

Normal class hours are not enough for teachers to finish the planned lessons because the number of students has increased in recent years. As an educational stakeholder, I do not have money, but I support the remedial programme by contributing food so that my child can remain at school for extra learning. (Parent Interview, School B).

Similarly, another parent noted:

The school has educated us on the importance of remedial classes to our children and how they may help them to perform well. As you know, no one would like their child to fail, so many of us contribute some money to support remedial classes. (Parent Interview, School C).

These findings concur with those of Simbeye, Kigobe and Malingumu (2025), who reported that parents play a significant role in school feeding programmes that facilitate teaching and learning. Similarly, Mbaire, Njoka and Muturi (2026) reported that parents in Kenyan secondary schools play a vital role in financing education and other development projects, which ultimately shapes education policy implementation.

The findings suggest a need for clearer communication about forms of parental participation that remain permissible under FFE. Parental support can complement school efforts, but it should be voluntary, transparent, and structured so that learners from households unable to contribute are not disadvantaged.

Teacher Improvisation

Teacher improvisation refers to the process through which teachers create, adapt, or use locally available materials as alternative instructional resources, particularly when conventional teaching and learning materials are unavailable or insufficient (Kambuga, 2024). Results from the teacher questionnaire revealed that teachers used improvisation to address the lack of instructional resources in their schools. This result concurs with studies in resource-constrained science classrooms that have reported using improvised instructional materials when standard resources are unavailable or insufficient (Usman & Saminu, 2017; Ramothwala & Ramaila, 2020).

Interviews with heads of schools corroborated this finding. Heads of schools reported encouraging teachers to improvise to meet students' learning needs. One of the heads of school had this to say:

Teaching and learning materials for science subjects are very scarce and severely insufficient to accommodate the growing number of students in our school. In this context, we encourage teachers to be innovative by improvising resources to enhance the teaching and learning process, and this method has been very helpful in ensuring that students learn despite the challenges of limited resources (Head of School Interview, School A).

This finding suggests that, given the shortage of teaching and learning resources, teachers need the pedagogical knowledge and skills to use local, low-cost materials to enhance teaching and learning.

Hiring Part-time Teachers

Schools in Moshi Municipal Council, like other schools in Tanzania, face teacher shortages, especially in science, mathematics, and Business Studies (John, 2024). Participants reported that hiring part-time teachers helped schools maintain subject coverage and reduce pressure on existing staff, particularly in subjects with teacher shortages. This strategy was reported to reduce teacher workload, improve subject coverage, and consequently improve learners' academic performance. However, because student achievement was not directly measured, these findings should be interpreted as perceived operational benefits rather than demonstrated improvements in academic performance. One interviewed head of school explained:

We usually hire part-time teachers to teach subjects when our school has an inadequate number of teachers, and most of those hired were able to teach business subjects to close the existing learning gap (Head of School Interview, School D).

Some schools relied on voluntary parental contributions to pay part-time teachers. Although this arrangement may temporarily address staffing gaps, its sustainability and equity are uncertain under a fee-free education policy, particularly where families differ in their ability to contribute. The finding therefore points to the need for more sustainable public-sector responses to teacher shortages.

Interviews with heads of schools corroborated the questionnaire findings. Hiring part-time teachers increased the number of teachers in public secondary schools, thereby addressing shortages in certain subjects. A head of school from Secondary School A reported:

Our school had no teachers for teaching Business Studies. To address this challenge, the preferred part-time teachers were those who could teach Business Studies. Thus, the hired part-time teachers helped our school have teachers for Business Studies (Head of School Interview, School A).

Another HoS from Secondary School G said:

Our school had one biology teacher who used to teach the subject to form one, form two, form three and form four students, but now we have employed three other teachers of biology to support the teaching and learning process of that subject (Head of School Interview, School G).

Similar responses to teacher shortages have been reported in Tanzania and elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, where schools have used temporary, contract, or volunteer teachers to sustain curriculum delivery (HakiElimu, 2017; Manyengo, 2026).

Overall, this finding is consistent with Educational Production Function theory, which holds that adequate teacher inputs are essential for improving educational outcomes. From this perspective, engaging part-time teachers expands the teaching workforce, enhances instructional delivery, and supports effective curriculum implementation.

Other Coping Strategies

Qualitative interviews identified stakeholder support as an additional coping strategy that was not captured in the teacher questionnaire. In particular, five of the 13 heads of schools described receiving resources such as computers and construction materials from private-sector stakeholders.

Aids from Educational Stakeholders

To support teaching and learning, public secondary schools in Moshi Municipality sought and received books, classroom infrastructure support,

and other teaching aids from educational stakeholders. One interviewed head of school explained:

We really thank Vodacom Tanzania Plc for their support in our education initiatives. We have received educational resources like computers from them. Now our school has computers, which are very helpful for students to study and increase their knowledge of technology (Head of School Interview, School D).

Other aid received from educational stakeholders included roofing sheets from the National Microfinance Bank (NMB) to support school infrastructure.

These findings concur with those of Lukala and Mramba (2022), who found that key stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Finance, international organisations, business owners, and employers, play a significant role in enhancing the quality of education in Tanzanian schools by providing financial, material, technical, and infrastructural support.

From an Educational Production Function perspective, stakeholder contributions such as computers, construction materials, and other learning resources can be viewed as supplementary educational inputs that may help schools manage resource shortages. However, the present study did not test whether these inputs improved student learning or other educational outcomes.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in one municipality, which limits transferability to other Tanzanian settings with different enrolment pressures and resource conditions. Second, heads of schools and parents were purposively selected, and much of the evidence relies on self-report, creating potential selection and social-desirability bias. Third, the study was descriptive and cross-sectional and therefore cannot establish that the identified coping strategies caused improvements in curriculum implementation or student outcomes. Fourth, students were not included as respondents, and the study did not collect direct measures of achievement or implementation quality.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The study identified four prominent school-level coping strategies: combining teaching methods, providing extra or remedial lessons, improvising instructional resources, and hiring part-time teachers. Qualitative

evidence also highlighted support from parents and other education stakeholders. Participants saw these strategies as helping schools sustain teaching and learning amid overcrowding, teacher shortages, and limited resources. However, the study did not directly assess their effects on student learning; the strategies should therefore be viewed as short-term adaptive responses rather than substitutes for adequate system-level financing, staffing, infrastructure, and instructional resources.

Recommendations

Based on the findings on the coping strategies that schools use to enhance teaching and learning in the FFE context, the following recommendations are proposed for key stakeholders.

For the Government

The government should reduce schools' reliance on short-term coping arrangements by ensuring predictable financing, recruiting and equitably deploying qualified teachers, expanding classroom capacity, and providing adequate instructional materials. Where community support is mobilised, participation should remain voluntary and transparent, and no learner should be excluded or disadvantaged because a household cannot contribute.

Furthermore, the government should implement policies to increase the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers. For example, qualified part-time teachers should be considered for permanent employment to provide stability and continuity.

For Policy Makers

- i) **Integrate the findings into the FFE Policy Review:** The findings of this study could inform future revisions of the FFE policy, helping to make the policy sufficiently flexible to support these adaptive measures.
- ii) **Develop Support Frameworks:** Create national or regional frameworks to guide schools in implementing and refining these coping strategies, perhaps through best-practice guides or pilot programmes.

For School Administrators

- i) **Prioritise Professional Development:** Invest in continuous professional development for teachers, focusing on advanced pedagogical techniques, classroom management for diverse student needs, and innovative teaching methods.

- ii) **Optimise Resource Allocation:** Strategically allocate available resources to support successful coping strategies, such as providing materials for mixed teaching approaches and structuring schedules to facilitate remedial sessions.

For Teachers

- i) **Share Best Practices:** Participate actively in professional learning communities to share successful improvisation techniques and effective mixed teaching strategies with colleagues.
- ii) **Utilise Available Support:** Engage with professional development opportunities and advocate for resources that enhance their ability to use diverse teaching methods and conduct effective remedial classes.

Areas for Further Research

Future research should compare coping strategies across councils and regions, include students alongside teachers, school leaders, and parents, and use longitudinal or evaluative designs. Studies should also employ validated measures of implementation quality and direct indicators of student learning to determine whether particular coping strategies are effective, sustainable, and equitable.

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