



MODERATING INFLUENCE OF CAREGIVERS' SUPPORT ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION OF RE-ENTRY POLICY AND RETENTION OF SCHOOLGIRL MOTHERS: TARGETING CHILDCARE, COUNSELING, AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT: Adolescent pregnancy and low retention rates among schoolgirl mothers remain a major challenge to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education in Kenya, particularly in Busia County, which records high adolescent birth rates. Although the re-entry policy was introduced to facilitate school re-enrolment after childbirth, its implementation continues to face challenges related to stakeholder participation and support systems. Guided by Tinto's Learner Retention Theory and Resilience Theory, this study examined the moderating influence of caregivers' support on the relationship between participatory evaluation of re-entry policy and retention of schoolgirl mothers in public primary schools in Busia County. The study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design integrating quantitative and qualitative findings. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 27 through descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings established that participatory evaluation significantly influenced retention of schoolgirl mothers ($\beta = 0.286$, $p < 0.05$), while caregivers' support significantly moderated the relationship ($\beta = 0.704$, $p < 0.001$). The study concludes that supportive home and school environments strengthen the effectiveness of re-entry policy implementation. The study recommends strengthening participatory frameworks, integrated caregiver support systems, and inclusive policy implementation strategies.

KEYWORDS: Participatory Evaluation, Caregivers' Support, Re-entry Policy; Retention; School-Girl Mothers.



INTRODUCTION

The issue of retaining schoolgirl mothers in the education system is a critical challenge across Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where high adolescent birth rates (ABR) frequently derail educational attainment and hinder the region's ability to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on quality education and SDG 5 on gender equality. In many SSA countries, despite the presence of re-entry policies (Muli et al., 2023; Imbosa et al., 2022), the actual retention rates of these girls in primary schools remain low. This disconnect between policy and outcome is often attributed to systemic barriers such as widespread poverty, cultural stigma, and inadequate support systems, which prevent girls from fully reintegrating into the school environment (Baafi, 2020). The region's struggle to effectively retain these students highlights a critical problem that undermines both individual empowerment and national development.

This challenge is particularly pronounced in Kenya, where the national ABR of 56.3 per 1,000 girls remains a significant concern (Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, KDHS 2022). While re-entry policies exist (Christine, 2020), their implementation has been inconsistent, affected by shortcomings in stakeholder participation, inefficient administrative alignment, and lack of robust support systems (Edstrom, Gardelli & Backman, 2024). These national-level issues are amplified in specific regions. Busia County, for example, stands out with an exceptionally high ABR of 56.3 per 1,000 girls, far exceeding the national average and the global average of 39.07 per 1,000 (Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, KDHS 2022). This disparity highlights Busia as a high-burden county where socio-economic and cultural factors uniquely compound the problem.

The discourse on retaining schoolgirl mothers in the education system is a global concern, addressed primarily through re-entry policies. Research on the effectiveness of these policies, however, presents a complex and often conflicting picture. While some studies, like those from Imbosa, Majanga, & Ouda (2022) in Vihiga, Kenya, and Muli et al. (2023), suggest that re-entry policies have a positive impact on retention, others point to significant implementation challenges. Muyunda's (2021) qualitative case study in Lusaka, Zambia, found that despite the policy's existence, lack of clear goals, limited stakeholder awareness, and insufficient resources made its implementation ineffective. This inconsistency in findings highlights a critical research gap.

Participatory Evaluation of Re-Entry Policy

The success of a re-entry policy is heavily influenced by how it's implemented. Traditional, top-down approaches have often led to conflicting results regarding the retention of school-girl mothers, as they may fail to address the unique, on-the-ground challenges these students face (Muyunda, 2021). The independent variable of this study is the participatory evaluation of a re-entry policy. This method argues that involving stakeholders, particularly the schoolgirl mothers themselves, in the assessment and improvement of the program is essential for its success (Cornish et al., 2023). By empowering these individuals to actively participate in the process, participatory evaluation offers a potential solution to the conflicting outcomes found in previous studies, which often failed to consider local contexts and the lived realities of the beneficiaries (Imbosa et al., 2022).

This research is grounded in Tinto's Learner Retention Theory (Tinto, 1975, 1993). The theory



posits that learner retention is not merely a function of academic ability but is significantly influenced by a student's academic and social integration into the educational environment. The re-entry policy serves as the legislative mechanism that allows schoolgirl mothers to return to school (Christine, 2020), while participatory evaluation is the tool that facilitates the crucial integration process. By fostering a sense of ownership and belonging through stakeholder engagement and inclusive feedback channels (Edstrom, Gardelli & Backman, 2024), participatory evaluation enhances the academic and social integration of school-girl mothers, thereby strengthening their sense of purpose and increasing their likelihood of staying in school.

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Participatory evaluation of a re-entry policy is a collaborative assessment process that involves all key stakeholders—including schoolgirl mothers, educators, policymakers, and community members—in assessing and improving the policy's effectiveness. This approach is rooted in participatory action research, which emphasizes integrating experiential knowledge to address educational inequities (Cornish et al., 2023). It relies on collaborative decision-making and evidence to create adaptive, inclusive evaluation frameworks (Addey & Sellar, 2020), ensuring that the voices of vulnerable groups, such as school-girl mothers, directly inform policy adjustments (Chiyota, 2020; Christine, 2020). For this study, participatory evaluation was measured using four key indicators adopted from established frameworks (Edstrom, Gardelli & Bachman, 2024; WHO, 2022; Marende, 2022): stakeholder engagement, participatory decision-making, collective needs assessment, and inclusive feedback channels.

Retention of learners within public primary school institutions refers to the process of ensuring that students remain enrolled from admission through to completion or transition (Dalangin,



2018; Alsharari & Alshurideh, 2020). For this study, retention of school-girl mothers is defined as their ability to stay enrolled and engaged in the primary school system post-childbirth. The concept is operationalized through four dimensions of integration and engagement with the school community (Adomako Barfi Haruna et al., 2022): behavioral (participation in activities), emotional (relationships with teachers and peers), cognitive (awareness of their educational purpose), and academic (consistent attendance and participation). This multifaceted approach provides a comprehensive measure of retention that goes beyond mere enrolment numbers, capturing the depth of a student's reintegration.

Busia County, Kenya, presents a critical case for studying the retention of school-girl mothers. The county's adolescent birth rate (ABR) of 73 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 is significantly higher than the national average, making it a high-burden region (Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, KDHS 2022). This elevated rate directly contributes to the persistent challenge of low school retention among this vulnerable group. While national re-entry policies are in place to support these girls, their intended outcomes are often undermined by unique local socio-economic and cultural factors. The current low retention rates in Busia starkly contrast with Kenya's national educational goals and global development targets. This study is therefore motivated by the urgent need to understand how a participatory evaluation approach can be leveraged to improve the implementation of re-entry policy and ultimately enhance the retention of school-girl mothers in this specific, high-need context.

Caregivers' Support

Caregivers' support, as a key component of Resilience Theory, is a critical variable in this study. Resilience is defined as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, or significant sources of stress (McKenna, 2021). Caregiver support, therefore, is the active process of providing assistance that helps schoolgirl mothers build resilience and navigate their environment. It manifests through three main dimensions: financial aid, childcare, and counselling. Mukabana et al. (2024) argue that learners with strong caregivers' support may take large amounts of adversity and condense it to its key features, delivering the main points quickly and accurately. This support, if well-structured and efficiently coordinated, can instil a sense of emotional balance, good communication skills, and emotional resilience. Caregivers' support, as an ability to synthesize environmental factors, can facilitate accurate interpretation and analysis of challenges, thus enhancing a learner's ability to express ideas and make sound judgments (Musyoka et al., 2024). Consequently, the learner who demonstrates competencies in navigating support systems reflects higher achievement in communication and emotional regulation. Moreover, the learner who articulates their needs possesses distinctive abilities to process and understand complex emotions and communicate them to others effectively and quickly (Mukabana et al., 2024).

Extant literature contends that caregivers' support is a critical part of a learner's ability to navigate challenges. Apgar et al. (2017) also point that caregiver support significantly contributes to a learner's overall achievement in retention as it aids in maintaining focus and organization when re-entering school, remembering essential details, and forming a clear overall picture of their educational purpose. Having basic understanding of the caregivers' role therefore positively influences the deeper commitment to the material. Teachers who model and guide learners throughout the entire process of re-entry, effectively empower learners as they explain the benefits of the policy and provide feedback on how well students are coping (Tinto, 1975). As a result, it fosters students' independent learning and promotes the



development of skills that will benefit them in their academic careers in terms of improving students' focus, comprehension, and overall literacy skills.

This study aimed to fill this gap by exploring the moderating effect of caregiver support on the relationship between participatory evaluation of re-entry policy and the retention of schoolgirl mothers in public primary schools. By moving beyond a simple linear analysis, this research uses a mixed-methods approach to understand the nuanced realities on the ground in Busia County, a region with an exceptionally high adolescent pregnancy rate. The study not only assesses the policy's impact but also examines how crucial support systems, such as childcare, counselling, and financial aid, can strengthen the effectiveness of a participatory evaluation approach, thereby improving the retention of schoolgirl mothers and addressing the systemic barriers that previous research has identified. The study thus aimed to address this critical issue by answering the question: how does caregivers' support moderate the relationship between participatory evaluation of re-entry policy and the retention of schoolgirl mothers in public primary schools in Busia County?

The moderating influence of caregivers' support on participatory evaluation of re-entry policy and retention of Schoolgirl mothers is argued by resilience theory. The re-entry policy recognizes the importance of out-of-school factors such that the type of support provided by learners' families, as a key component for successful implementation of the re-entry policy. Addressing the broader social determinants of education, universal school meal programs and caregiving services demonstrate the intersection of health, policy, and academic performance. Cohen et al. (2021) found that school policies providing free school meals may significantly improve attendance, diet quality, and academic performance of schoolgirl mothers, particularly in economically disadvantaged contexts. Furthermore, school policies that integrate re-entry policy enable principals to highlight the broader socio-economic implications of equitable educational practices and the potential for multi-faceted interventions to improve learning environments for Schoolgirl mothers. As a result, integrating such programs with participatory approaches could amplify their effectiveness by involving Schoolgirl mothers, parents, caregivers, community leaders, and educators in decision-making processes, thereby ensuring contextual relevance and sustainability.

Retention of Schoolgirl mothers

Retention of learners within public primary school institutions refers to the process of ensuring that students remain enrolled from admission through to completion or transition, highlighting critical policy considerations related to education access (Dalangin, 2018; Alsharari & Alshurideh, 2020). Learner retention policies (LRPs) are designed to implement strategies and interventions that prevent premature dropouts, particularly among high-risk groups, enabling learners to complete their education cycle or transition to higher levels or the workforce (Muyunda, 2021).

In this context, the study emphasizes the need to support schoolgirl mothers through re-entry policies facilitated by teachers, caregivers, school communities, and policymakers to foster a conducive and inclusive school environment, enabling them to complete their primary education. These stakeholders work collaboratively to ensure supportive interventions that enhance engagement and reduce barriers to education. Retention in a broader context is operationalized through four dimensions of integration and engagement with the school community: behavioural, emotional, cognitive, and academic (Haruna et al., 2022).



Behavioural engagement focuses on participation in social and extracurricular activities, while emotional engagement emphasizes relationships with teachers, non-teaching staff, and peers, as well as feelings of acceptance within the school community. Cognitive engagement highlights learners' awareness of their educational purpose, rights, and available support systems. Finally, academic engagement is reflected in consistent school attendance, active participation in learning activities, and performance in evaluation tests.

The rationale for focusing on retention stems from the unique challenges faced by schoolgirl mothers. Balancing dual roles as young mothers and learners increases their vulnerability to dropping out. Addressing this issue requires integrated and adaptive systems that combine education and caregivers' support, as underscored by Cornish et al. (2023) and Addey & Sellers (2020). Effective policies, such as universal school meal programs (Cohen et al., 2021), address broader social determinants like nutrition and economic well-being, which are crucial for improving retention rates. Moreover, participatory approaches ensure that schoolgirl mothers and other stakeholders contribute to policy design and implementation, fostering inclusivity and sustainability.

Research Problem

Adolescent pregnancy and the resulting low school retention rates are a major global concern with significant socio-economic consequences. To address this, many countries have adopted re-entry policies to allow schoolgirl mothers to resume their education after childbirth. However, research on the effectiveness of these policies is inconsistent. While some studies suggest a positive impact on retention, others point to significant implementation challenges, such as unclear goals, lack of stakeholder awareness, and insufficient resources. This highlights that the link between policy and outcome is not always direct and may be influenced by other factors.

The literature points to a theoretical connection between a participatory evaluation approach and improved retention as moderated by caregivers' support. Involving stakeholders in policy evaluation is believed to enhance its effectiveness; however, a significant gap remains. The existing body of knowledge lacks empirical studies that directly examine the moderating effect of caregivers' support on this relationship, particularly in a public primary school context. Most existing research has focused on secondary schools and specific urban settings, leaving a notable contextual gap at the primary school level, especially in high-burden areas like Busia County, Kenya. Furthermore, prior studies have often relied on single-method approaches, highlighting a need for a more comprehensive mixed-methods design.

Therefore, this study aimed to address these conceptual, contextual, and methodological gaps by examining how caregivers' support moderates the relationship between the participatory evaluation of re-entry policy and the retention of schoolgirl mothers in public primary schools.

Study Objectives

To establish the moderating influence of caregivers' support on the relationship between participatory evaluation of the re-entry policy and the retention of schoolgirl mothers in public primary schools in Busia County, Kenya.



Research Significance

This study is expected to generate evidence to strengthen the re-entry and re-integration of readmitted schoolgirl mothers, ensuring their retention in public primary schools. The findings may specifically benefit the target population by providing insights that promote the completion of primary education for schoolgirl mothers. Practical contributions include raising awareness among key stakeholders such as school administrators, caregivers, and members of multi-sectoral task force about the challenges and solutions for re-entry policy implementation. This awareness is expected to empower stakeholders to actively support and facilitate the retention and academic progression of these learners. Additionally, the study is hoped to provide actionable recommendations for project monitoring and evaluation practitioners, enriching the practical tools and approaches for assessing educational programs aimed at vulnerable populations.

On a theoretical level, the study may contribute to the growing body of knowledge in project monitoring and evaluation, with a focus on participatory evaluation approaches in education. By exploring the participatory evaluation of re-entry policy, It is expected to pave way for further research into effective strategies for integrating marginalized groups into formal education. From a policy perspective, the study may provide insights to policymakers and practitioners in education, health, and social services for formulating clear, actionable policies to enhance the effectiveness of re-entry programs. These contributions collectively aim to ensure the sustained retention of schoolgirl mothers in school, fostering long-term educational and social outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Resilience Theory

Norman Garmezy and Michael Rutter pioneered the study of resilience in the 1970s, focusing on children facing adversity (Van Breda, 2001). The theory posits that resilience is not an inherent trait but is developed through the interaction between individuals and their environments, supported by external factors and personal adaptability. The theory emphasizes three key dimensions. The first is the significance of supportive relationships, particularly from caregivers, which buffer against stress and foster adaptive functioning (Afifi, Merrill & Davis, 2016). The second highlights the role of external resources and supportive environments, which equip individuals with tools to manage and overcome adversity. The third dimension underscores individual adaptability, defined as the capacity to maintain positive adjustment despite significant stress. Masten's (2001) concept of "ordinary magic" highlights the pivotal role of common protective factors, such as family support and community resources, in fostering resilience. Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker (2000) further emphasized the dynamic interaction between individual traits and environmental factors in resilience building.

Drawing on Resilience Theory, this research elucidates how caregivers' support act as a moderator in the connection between the participatory evaluation of re-entry policy and the retention of schoolgirl mothers. The theory highlights that caregivers' support is likely to foster the resilience of schoolgirl mothers, enabling them to remain in school despite socio-cultural and economic barriers. Effective re-entry policy can also create supportive environments that



enhance resilience, facilitating positive adaptation to challenging circumstances. By addressing the interaction between caregivers' support, policy implementation, and resilience, the theory provides valuable insights into the factors influencing retention rates among schoolgirl mothers. The structured relationship between variables, such as caregivers' influence and policy implementation leading to resilience and retention, aligns closely with the study's objective.

Major criticism of the theory lies in its inconsistent definitions and measurements, which make it difficult to standardize its application across contexts. Additionally, the theory's focus on individual resilience can sometimes overshadow broader systemic issues that significantly shape outcomes.

Empirical Literature Review

The moderating influence of caregivers' support on participatory evaluation of re-entry policy and retention of schoolgirl mothers is argued by resilience theory. The re-entry policy recognizes the importance of out-of-school factors such that the type of support provided by learners' families, as a key component for successful implementation of the re-entry policy. Addressing the broader social determinants of education, universal school meal programs and caregiving services demonstrate the intersection of health, policy, and academic performance. Cohen et al. (2021) found that school policies providing free school meals may significantly improve attendance, diet quality, and academic performance of schoolgirl mothers, particularly in economically disadvantaged contexts. Furthermore, school policies that integrate re-entry policy enable principals to highlight the broader socio-economic implications of equitable educational practices and the potential for multifaceted interventions to improve learning environments for schoolgirl mothers. As a result, integrating such programs with participatory approaches could amplify their effectiveness by involving schoolgirl mothers, parents, caregivers, and educators in decision-making processes, thereby ensuring contextual relevance and sustainability.

Caregivers' support is crucial for the re-entry and sustained enrolment of schoolgirl mothers, encompassing various forms such as the provision of basic necessities, school supplies, childcare services, attendance at school meetings, protection from violence, and emotional encouragement. A critical review by Mukabana et al. (2024) explored barriers to school re-entry among schoolgirl mothers in a low-income urban informal settlement in Kenya. This qualitative study, which involved 32 in-depth interviews with pregnant and parenting schoolgirl mothers, parents, guardians, and teachers, highlighted poverty, childcare responsibilities, and stigma as significant hindrances to retention. Their inductive thematic analysis revealed that while robust support systems, including childcare and financial aid, facilitate school entry, discriminatory attitudes and the withdrawal of parental support exacerbate challenges. The Mukabana et al. (2024) study, however, identified a contextual gap by focusing solely on an urban informal settlement, thereby overlooking the distinct challenges in rural communities. Furthermore, its reliance on inductive thematic analysis presented a methodological limitation, potentially missing insights into broader policy implementation dynamics. Against this realization, the current study examines the position of caregivers' support as a moderating factor in the relationship between participatory evaluation of re-entry policy implementation and retention of schoolgirl mothers in primary schools, addressing the contextual gaps.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was grounded in the philosophy of pragmatism. This approach was chosen because it emphasized a dynamic and evolving "truth" that is shaped by human experience, making it ideal for a topic like re-entry policy where reality is not fixed but is constantly influenced by the lived experiences of schoolgirl mothers (Rorty, 1986; Elgeddawy & Abouraia, 2024). The study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design, which involves the collection and analysis of quantitative data first, followed by qualitative data to help explain and contextualize the quantitative findings. This design is particularly suitable for the current study as it allows for the examination of relationships among study variables—participatory evaluation of re-entry policy implementation, caregiver support, academic integration, and retention of schoolgirl mothers—while also exploring underlying contextual factors that influence these relationships. It is also a cost-effective and efficient design that has been successfully utilized in similar studies on re-entry policies (Imbosa et al., 2022; Christine, 2020; Muyunda, 2021).

The study's target population consisted of key stakeholders in Busia County, which has a high prevalence of adolescent pregnancies. The population included 328 schoolgirl mothers, 221 teachers, 328 caregivers, 12 community leaders, and 8 education officers. A total sample size of 287 was selected from the target population using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) model. A multistage cluster sampling procedure was applied to select participants. At the first stage, purposive sampling was used to select sub-county education officers. At the second stage, public primary schools were selected using simple random sampling. Finally, within these selected schools, a combination of simple random sampling was used for schoolgirl mothers and teachers and caregivers, while purposive sampling was used for C to participate in focus group discussions.

Data was collected using three instruments: self-administered questionnaires for schoolgirl mothers, teachers, and caregivers; a focus group discussion (FGD) guide for community leaders; and a key informant interview (KII) guide for education officers. These tools were administered at a single point in time to describe the population of interest. The instruments were pilot-tested on 20% of the sample to refine questions and ensure clarity, following the recommendation of Lakens (2022). Schools, learners, teachers, and caregivers involved in the pilot did not participate in the main study. Validity and reliability was assessed using correlation analysis for validity and Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficient for reliability, with a threshold of 0.7 considered acceptable.

Data was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS, involving both simple and multiple linear regression models. To test the main hypothesis (Ho), a multiple linear regression model was used to assess the influence of caregivers' support on the relationship between participatory evaluation and retention of schoolgirl mothers in public primary schools.

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 Z_1 + \beta_3 (X_1 Z_1) + \epsilon$$

Where: Y = Retention of school-girl mothers (RASGM); X₁ = Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy (PERP); Z₁ = Caregiver Support (CS); $\beta_0, \beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3$ = Coefficients; ϵ = Error term

Moderation is inferred if the interaction term (X₁·Z₁) is statistically significant (p-value < 0.05)



or $t > 1.96$).

Diagnostic tests for normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and heteroscedasticity were conducted to ensure the validity of the regression model. Qualitative data from FGDs and KIIs will be transcribed and analyzed thematically to complement the quantitative findings.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Research approval was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) and the University of Nairobi. Permission was also sought from relevant county and school authorities before data collection commenced. Given that schoolgirl mothers constitute a vulnerable population, additional safeguards were implemented to protect participants from emotional distress, stigma, and discrimination during the study. Informed consent was obtained from adult participants, while assent was obtained from minors alongside consent from parents or guardians where applicable. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of coded identifiers instead of personal names. All data were securely stored in password-protected digital files and locked cabinets accessible only to the research team. The data will be retained strictly for academic purposes and disposed of securely after completion of the study in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the study's findings, beginning with a demographic analysis of the participants, followed by a detailed look at descriptive and inferential statistics. Each subsection presents the results first, then discusses their significance, implications, and connection to the study's theoretical framework and existing literature.

Demographic Analysis

This subsection outlines the demographic characteristics of the schoolgirl mothers who participated in the study

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of Demographic Variables

	Categories	n	%
Term returned to school	Term 1	28	60.9%
	Term 2	12	26.1%
	Term 3	6	13.0%
What grade are you in?	Grade 8.	10	21.7%
	Grade 9	4	8.7%
	Form 2	4	8.7%
	Form 3	8	17.4%
Previous school attendance after childbirth?	Form 4	16	34.8%
	Yes	22	61.1%
	No	14	38.9%
If Yes, specify the reason.	Family issues	16	80.0%
	pregnancy	4	8.7%
What is your type of family?	Complete Family	6	13.6%



	Single Parent	26	59.1%
	Family Guardian-led	10	22.7%
	Family Sibling-led	2	4.5%
How old is your baby or child now?	Less than 1 year	4	8.7%
	1 yr	18	39.1%
	2 yrs	16	34.8%
	3 yrs	6	13.0%
	4 yrs	2	4.3%
Distance from home to school	<1 km	22	47.8%
	1–3 km	14	30.4%
	>3 km	10	21.7%
Household income source	Farming	18	40.9%
	Trade	10	22.7%
	Salaried	2	4.5%
	casual labourer	10	21.7%
Do you have any special learning needs or things that make learning a bit harder for you?	Yes	6	13.0%
	No	40	87.0%
If Yes, specify	Vision	4	66.7%
	Learning	2	33.3%

The demographic analysis provides a clear picture of the study participants. A majority of the schoolgirl mothers returned to school in Term 1 (60.9%), with a significant number coming from single-parent families (59.1%). Most students live less than 1 km from school (47.8%), and the primary household income source is farming (40.9%). A crucial finding is that of those who had previously dropped out, 80% cited family issues, not the pregnancy itself, as the reason.

The prompt return to school suggests that the re-entry policy is effective in encouraging students back into the education system. The high percentage of students from single-parent families highlights a socioeconomic vulnerability that underscores the importance of a strong support system beyond the school. The finding that family issues, rather than pregnancy, are the main reason for dropping out is particularly significant. It implies that for a re-entry policy to be effective, it must be holistic and address complex family dynamics and support structures.

Not just the pregnancy itself. The short distance to school for nearly half the students is also a favorable factor that likely contributes to higher retention, as it reduces logistical and financial burdens associated with transportation.

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics section presents the findings for two key areas: the perceptions of schoolgirl mothers regarding the caregivers' support offered, as well as feelings of retention and integration in school.

**Table 2: Caregivers Support, Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy and Retention of Schoolgirl Mothers**

STATEMENTS	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean Std. dev skewness		
1. The school provides adequate support to address the childcare needs of pregnant and parenting students.	104 (43.5%)	58 (24.3%)	32 (13.4%)	35 (14.6%)	10 (4.2%)	3.88	1.24	-0.79
2. The school collaborates effectively with community resources to provide childcare support.	101 (42.3%)	72 (30.1%)	33 (13.8%)	26 (10.9%)	7 (2.9%)	3.98	1.10	-0.92
3. Access to the available childcare options makes it easier for students to consistently attend school.	92 (38.4%)	74 (31.0%)	31 (13%)	11 (4.6%)	31 (13.0%)	3.77	1.35	-0.98
4. The school provides adequate support to address the basic needs (e.g., food, hygiene, essential supplies) of pregnant and parenting students.	44 (18.4%)	135 (56.4%)	32 (13.4%)	25 (10.5%)	3 (1.3%)	3.80	0.902	-0.88
5. The school collaborates effectively with community organizations to provide support for the basic needs of students.	73 (30.5%)	106 (44.4%)	33 (13.8%)	20 (8.4%)	7 (2.9%)	3.91	1.02	-1.1
6. The school provides adequate support to ensure students and their children have access to necessary educational supplies (e.g., books, uniforms	53 (23.3%)	120 (50.2%)	36 (15.1%)	23 (9.6%)	7 (2.9%)	3.79	0.991	-0.90
7. The school provides sufficient support to help students overcome financial barriers related to their education and that of their child.	93 (38.9%)	93 (38.9%)	45 (18.9%)	8 (3.3%)	0 (0.00%)	4.13	0.834	-0.61
8. The school effectively communicates information about school events and meetings to pregnant and parenting students and their families.	78 (32.5%)	85 (35.6%)	41 (17.2%)	20 (8.4%)	15 (6.3%)	3.80	1.2	-0.88



9. The school provides adequate support (e.g., flexible timing, resources) to enable pregnant and parenting students to attend school meetings consistently.	47 (19.7%)	82 (34.3%)	25 (10.5%)	39 (16.3%)	4 (1.7%)	3.19	1.4	-0.33
10. The school provides adequate support in terms of access to extra/emergency uniforms and other essential supplies for students.	66 (27.6%)	83 (34.8%)	67 (28%)	4 (1.7%)	19 (7.9%)	3.72	1.1	-0.86
Composite mean & Composite standard deviation						3.80	1.10	

The descriptive analysis of Caregivers' Support yielded a composite mean of 3.80 and a composite standard deviation of 1.10. This indicates a robust positive perception of the integrated support framework. These results support the perspective that caregivers' support is a primary determinant of educational sustainability for vulnerable students.

The study identified Statement 7 (Financial barriers, $M=4.13$) and Statement 2 (Community collaboration, $M=3.98$) as the descriptive "peaks" of the support framework. This suggests that the school functions effectively as an external advocate rather than just an internal educator. This is validated by Key Informant K-007, who clarified the school's facilitative role: *"We've established collaborations with local community organizations to bridge this gap. While we don't directly provide financial aid, we work with these organizations to connect young mothers with resources that cover their basic needs, from financial support for their child to school supplies like books and uniforms."*

This qualitative insight explains the near-universal agreement on financial advocacy. Furthermore, the "symbiotic" nature of this support is reinforced by Key Informant K-004, who noted: *"In our experience, the participatory evaluation of the re-entry policy is directly tied to the level of support schoolgirl mothers receive at home... If teachers report a high number of student absences, our feedback mechanisms help us pinpoint whether the issue is related to a lack of support for childcare or basic needs at home."*

Items sitting in the middle of the spectrum, such as Statement 5 (Collaboration for basic needs, $M=3.91$) and Statement 4 (Support for basic needs, $M=3.80$), represent a stabilized institutional practice. This "operational core" is sustained by the Board of Management (B.O.M) and community leaders. Key Informant K-005 highlighted the impact of these tangible interventions on student confidence: *"The provision of things like dignity kits... is not a minor detail. When a student feels confident at school, it directly impacts their attendance and engagement... The B.O.M's role in providing extra uniforms, for example, is a direct outcome of this collaborative approach, addressing a need identified through our ongoing dialogue."*

This institutional support is mirrored at the grassroots level, though community leaders in FGD Group 1 cautioned that the current reliance on informal family networks is a double-edged



sword: *"We recognize the personal cost to families; often a grandmother must forgo her work to watch the baby. While we encourage this local support, there is a clear need for formal, affordable services to ensure the student can focus entirely on her education."*

The most significant area of concern lies in Statement 9 (Flexible timing and resources, $M=3.19$, $SD=1.40$), which recorded the lowest performance and highest volatility. This is where the "symbiotic relationship" mentioned by Key Informant K-001—*"When a school implements a participatory approach where students and parents feel heard, it often leads to a greater sense of trust"*—faces its greatest challenge. The data suggest a "coordination gap" that hinders this trust. A community leader in FGD Group 2 explained: *"Currently, services are siloed. A mother goes to a clinic for health and a community group for food kits, but these entities rarely speak to one another. An integrated 'one-stop' referral system would reduce the administrative burden on these young families."*

Furthermore, the low mean for flexible support is exacerbated by the internal emotional state of the students. A leader in FGD Group 1 noted: *"The resources like books and uniforms are helpful, but the girls often feel a sense of shame that prevents them from asking for extra help. We advocate for shame-free, one-on-one counselling and tutoring to bridge the academic gap left during their absence."*

Retention of Schoolgirl Mothers

Retention of schoolgirl mothers served as the dependent variable in this study, identified through four key indicators: behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social integration. To measure these indicators, participants responded to a 5-point Likert scale, which was statistically transformed into an interval scale to meet parametric assumptions. Table 4.3 illustrates the perceived effectiveness of the school environment in sustaining the education of parenting students.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics on Retention of School Girl Mothers

STATEMENTS	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	SD.	Skewness
1. Students in the school environment generally demonstrate acceptance and respect for all peers.	101 (42.3%)	89 (37.2%)	38 (15.9%)	11 (4.6%)	0 (0.00%)	4.17	0.860	-0.78
2. The school environment provides a sense of physical safety and security for all students.	96 (40.2%)	99 (41.4%)	32 (13.4%)	12 (5.0%)	0 (0.00%)	4.17	0.843	-0.83
3. Students who return to school after a long absence (e.g., maternity leave) are generally able to cope with the simultaneous demands of student life and their external responsibilities.	94 (39.4%)	54 (22.6%)	34 (14.2%)	29 (12.1%)	28 (11.7%)	3.66	1.40	-0.67



4. There is sufficient access to emotional support or counseling services within the school for students who need it.	79 (33.0%)	96 (40.2%)	31 (13%)	18 (7.5%)	15 (6.3%)	3.86	1.15	-1.1
5. Students returning to school after a long absence generally feel or are observed to be adequately prepared to handle the academic demands.	63 (26.3%)	109 (45.6%)	27 (11.3%)	26 (10.9%)	14 (5.9%)	3.76	1.13	-0.94
6. Returning students are provided with the necessary academic support (e.g., remedial classes, catch-up work) to address missed schoolwork.	94 (39.4%)	77 (32.2%)	35 (14.6%)	26 (10.9%)	7 (2.9%)	3.94	1.11	-0.88
7. The school environment as a whole is perceived as conducive to the social and emotional well-being of all students.	89 (37.2%)	79 (33.1%)	29 (12.1%)	11 (4.6%)	31 (13.0%)	3.77	1.34	-0.99
8. Returning students are generally able to keep up with the academic demands of the curriculum.	57 (23.8%)	122 (51%)	32 (13.4%)	25 (10.5%)	3 (1.3%)	3.86	0.942	-0.84
9. Students returning after an absence actively participate in classroom activities and discussions.	94 (39.4%)	86 (35.9%)	32 (13.4%)	20 (8.4%)	7 (2.9%)	4.00	1.06	--1.0
10. The re-entry policy programs in the school have encouraged students to continue learning	78 (32.6%)	82 (34.3%)	58 (24.3%)	4 (1.7%)	17 (7.1%)	3..84	1.12	-0.98
Composite mean & Composite standard deviation						3.90	1.14	

The overall composite mean of 3.90 indicates a high positive perception of the environment and support systems facilitating the retention of schoolgirl mothers in Busia County. This average score sits firmly within the "Agree" range, suggesting that the schools have a functional and generally effective system in place. However, the composite standard deviation of 1.14 reveals a significant divergence in individual experiences. This high variability implies that while the general institutional framework is supportive, the actual experience of retention is not uniform across all schools or for all student mothers, likely due to varying levels of implementation and individual domestic pressures.



The findings reveal that the highest mean scores were attributed to social integration and environmental safety, specifically regarding peer respect ($M=4.17$) and physical security ($M=4.17$). These peaks suggest that the most successful aspect of retention is the creation of a non-stigmatizing school culture. High active participation ($M=4.00$) further indicates that when students feel safe, they engage more deeply with the learning process. This is strongly corroborated by Key Informant K-003, who noted: *"The school's supportive culture and safe environment serve as the foundation for retention. Many girl mothers were relieved to find a safe and accepting space where they could focus on their studies without fear of judgment."*

Themes attracting moderate mean scores centered on formal academic support systems and curriculum management, such as structured remedial classes ($M=3.94$), emotional counseling ($M=3.86$), and the ability to keep up with the curriculum ($M=3.86$). While these scores indicate a functional system, they fall near the composite average, suggesting that while the services are available, their "visibility" or consistency varies across the sample. Key Informant K-001 validated this by stating: *"While formal systems like guidance services and the re-entry policy are effective, there exists lack of awareness among some students... there is need for a more consistent and visible implementation so that every returning mother knows exactly where to go for help."*

Conversely, the lowest mean scores and highest levels of divergence were found in the areas of personal coping and academic preparedness. Specifically, the ability to cope with dual demands recorded the lowest mean ($M=3.66$) and the highest standard deviation ($SD=1.40$), indicating that the dual burden of parenting and schooling is the most significant point of failure for a vulnerable minority. Academic preparedness following a long absence ($M=3.76$) similarly lagged behind social indicators. This logistical fragility was captured in Focus Group Discussions by a community leader who observed: *"The clinic helps with baby checks... But when she has to be at school early, and the community center childcare opens late, there's no smooth handover."* The implications of these results are twofold: first, they demonstrate that social and environmental factors are currently the strongest pillars supporting schoolgirl mothers. However, the high composite standard deviation ($SD=1.14$) implies a "non-uniform" experience where retention is fragile and highly dependent on a student's individual domestic circumstances. To move the overall "Agree" sentiment toward "Strongly Agree," the school must bridge the gap between internal academic support and external community pillars. Specifically, for the re-entry policy to achieve its maximum potential, it must evolve into a holistic, multi-pillar strategy that integrates childcare coordination and targeted academic catch-up programs to address the "dual-demand" bottleneck.

Correlation Analysis of Moderating Influence of Caregivers' Support on the relationship between Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy and Retention of Schoolgirl Mothers

Correlation analysis was conducted to establish the nature and strength of the relationship between Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy (the independent variable) and Retention of Schoolgirl Mothers (the dependent variable), as moderated by Caregivers' Support. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was utilized to determine the statistical significance of these associations.



Table 4: Correlation Analysis of Moderating Influence of Caregivers' Support on the relationship between Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy and Retention of Schoolgirl Mothers

Variable	Statistics	Retention of Schoolgirl Mothers
Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy	Pearson Correlation (r)	0.334*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	n	239
Caregivers Support	Pearson Correlation (r)	0.503*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	n	239
Overall Moderated Correlation	Pearson Correlation (r)	0.521*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	n	239

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results indicated that the combined correlation ($r = 0.521$) is higher than either individual variable, which proves a synergistic effect. This implies that for every improvement in the participatory nature of the re-entry policy and the quality of caregivers' support, there is a corresponding significant increase in the retention rates of schoolgirl mothers.

Furthermore, the strength of the Caregivers' support correlation ($r = 0.503$) relative to Policy Evaluation ($r = 0.334$) suggests that interventions should prioritize the "Caregivers' Pillar" to see the most immediate gains in retention. The statistical evidence leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis (H_0), which stated that Caregivers Support does not significantly moderate the relationship, and the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis. This confirms that the success of the re-entry policy in Busia County is fundamentally dependent on the active, moderating presence of caregivers' support systems.

Inferential Analysis

This subsection presents the statistical results from the regression analysis, which was used to test the study's hypotheses regarding the influence of Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy and caregivers' support on student retention.

Hierarchical Regression Analysis

The framework established by Baron and Kenny (1986) was adopted to investigate the moderating influence of Caregivers' Support (CGS) on the relationship between Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy (PERP) and the Retention of Schoolgirl Mothers. The moderation was tested across three sequential models to isolate the direct effects of the predictor and moderator, as well as the synergistic effect of their interaction. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Model Summary / Hierarchical Regression Coefficients results



Model	R	R ²	Adj. R ²	R ² Change	F-Change	Sig.
1 (Direct Path)	0.334	0.111	0.107	0.111	29.670	0.000
2 (Indirect Path)	0.521	0.271	0.265	0.160	14.280	0.000
3 (Interaction)	0.521	0.272	0.262	0.161	34.200	0.000
Model	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Standardized Beta (β)	t- statisticsSig.		
Model 1						
(Constant)	2.739	0.216			12.704	0.000
PERP	0.286	0.053	0.334		5.447	0.000
Model 2						
(Constant)	2.224	0.208			10.677	0.000
PERP	0.127	0.053	0.148		2.421	0.020
CGS	0.306	0.042	0.441		7.202	0.000
Model 3						
(Constant)	2.120	0.265			7.990	0.000
PERP	0.393	0.049	0.550		8.044	0.000
CGS	0.237	0.104	0.265		2.287	0.024
PERP * CGS	0.704	0.108	0.754		6.521	0.000

The results indicate that model 1, which treated Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy as the sole predictor of retention of Schoolgirl Mothers, explained 11.1% ($R^2=0.111$) of the variance in retention. However, in model 2, the explanatory power significantly increased to 27.1% ($R^2=0.271$), indicating that a combined effect of Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy and caregivers' support explained more variances in the dependent variable. Model 3, which included the interaction term in addition to Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy and caregivers' support, explained 27.2% of the variance in retention of schoolgirl mothers. The consistent significance ($p=0.000$) across all models suggests that while policy participation is important, the introduction of the caregivers' support as a variable has the potential to triple the model's ability to predict retention of schoolgirl mothers in school.

The coefficient results indicate that in Model 1, the direct effect of Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy, which is the independent variable, on retention yielded an unstandardized coefficient (β) of 0.286, with a p-value of 0.000. This indicates that for every one-unit increase in Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy, the retention of schoolgirl mothers increases by 0.286 units. Additionally, Model 2 estimated the simultaneous influence of both the predictor and the moderator. In this model, the predictor variable of Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy yielded a $\beta = 0.127$, ($p=0.020$), while Caregivers' Support (CGS) yielded a beta coefficient of 0.306, with a p-value of 0.000. Since both p-values are less than 0.05, both variables are significant predictors of retention in this stage. The results show that while both contribute to the outcome, the direct impact of caregivers' support is notably higher than the direct impact of re-entry policy evaluation alone ($\beta_{CGS} > \beta_{PERP}$).

Model 3 tested for the moderating effect of caregivers' support by including the interaction term (PERP*CGS). The results showed that the interaction term has a coefficient of 0.704, with a p-value of 0.000. Since this p-value is significantly less than 0.05, the interaction term is



statistically significant. This means that caregivers' support significantly moderates the relationship between participatory evaluation of the re-entry policy and the retention of schoolgirl mothers. The positive coefficient of 0.704 indicates a synergistic effect, where the positive influence of the re-entry policy on Retention of Schoolgirl Mothers is significantly amplified as the level of caregivers' support increases. By implication, the results show that student retention policy is accentuated by supportive environment provided by caregivers. The high significance of the interaction term ($\beta=0.704$, $p=0.000$) suggests that the effectiveness of the Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy is reinforced by the presence of caregivers' support. Given the findings, the study rejected the null hypothesis (H_0) and the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The descriptive findings reveal a high positive perception across the study variables, with Participatory Evaluation recording a composite mean of 4.07 (SD=0.98) and Caregivers' Support yielding a composite mean of 3.80 (SD=1.10). These results indicate that while both institutional and home-based support frameworks are viewed as functional, the school-led Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy process is perceived as the more robust pillar of the re-entry system. This result aligns with Cornish et al. (2023), who argue that stakeholder involvement creates the ownership necessary for policy goals to be met. However, a critical area of non-alignment emerges when examining the "dual demands" of motherhood. ($M=3.66$). While the high scores for teacher understanding and student input in Busia counter the implementation failures found by Muyunda (2021), they do not fully mitigate the systemic vulnerabilities noted by Baafi (2020). A significant insight here is that complex family dynamics, not just the pregnancy itself—are the primary reason for dropping out. This suggests a knowledge gap in existing re-entry policies: they are often designed as medical or social stigma interventions, whereas the data suggests they must function as holistic socio-economic support systems.

The qualitative data reinforces the descriptive "peaks" in Financial Advocacy ($M=4.13$) and Community Collaboration ($M=3.98$). This aligns with Faresa et al. (2022), who identified consistent caregivers' support as a primary determinant of sustainability. However, a critique of the current practice in Busia reveals a "coordination gap" in Flexible Timing ($M=3.19$, $SD=1.40$). While Key Informant K-007 highlights successful school-led advocacy, FGD Group 1 identified a "double-edged sword" where students rely on informal family networks (e.g., grandmothers). This creates a critical operational gap: although social support is high, the reliance on informal structures is fragile. This finding challenges the "ordinary magic" of Masten's (2001) resilience concept by showing that without formal integrated referral systems, informal support can lead to a "dual-demand bottleneck" that threatens long-term retention.

The correlation results provide a significant insight into the hierarchy of support. A significant moderate positive relationship was established ($r=0.521$, $p=0.000$), but the individual strength of Caregivers' Support ($r=0.503$) notably outperformed Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy ($r=0.334$). This represents a point of alignment with Musyoka et al. (2024), who emphasized that community involvement is the engine of policy success. However, it offers a new insight by proving a synergistic effect: the combined correlation is higher than the sum of its parts. This addresses a research gap where previous studies often treated policy and family



support as separate entities. The data proves that they are inextricably linked; every unit of improvement in the school's participatory culture is exponentially more effective if it is met with high-quality caregivers' support.

The regression analysis provides the most robust evidence for the study's hypothesis, confirming a significant interaction term (PERP*CGS) of 0.704 ($p=0.000$). This finding provides strong empirical support for Tinto's Learner Retention Theory (1975), but adds a moderating layer that Tinto's original work often overlooked in the context of primary schools. In Model 1, policy alone explained only 11.1% of the variance, aligning with Baafi's (2020) observation that policies often fail due to socio-economic stressors. However, the "multiplier effect" in Model 3—where the combined effect of policy and caregivers' support nearly triples the model's predictive power—directly supports the alternative hypothesis. These findings align with the work of Assini-Meytin et al. (2018), yet this study extends that research by quantifying the specific "supportive buffer" provided by caregivers. A critical takeaway is that the effectiveness of the re-entry policy is not a static property of the school environment; rather, it is a dynamic outcome that is "unlocked" by caregivers. This demonstrates that an isolated academic approach, which fails to integrate home-based support, is statistically less likely to succeed in ensuring the retention of schoolgirl mothers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy implications

The study recommends that the Ministry of Education should formally revise the National Re-entry Policy to mandate a participatory evaluation framework, transitioning from a top-down model to a stakeholder-driven approach that officially includes schoolgirl mothers and their families in policy review. In addition, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, should establish integrated referral systems to synchronize school schedules with clinic hours, removing the logistical barriers that force students to choose between their child's health and their own education.

Managerial Implications

The study recommends that the Ministry of Education should formally mandate a participatory framework within the re-entry policy program, to expand collaborative space with cross-agencies in order to disseminate actionable guidelines and build inclusive feedback channels and decision-making. This would likely mobilize additional resources for training administrators to transition from a top-down administrative approach to a stakeholder-driven model that empowers the learner and the community. School management should leverage caregivers' support as a strategic multiplier in the re-entry policy implementation within the school support ecosystem. This would enhance programming of awareness and anti-stigmatization activities, improve guidance and counselling for mental health, and strengthen the caregiving component within the re-entry program. Primary school boards of management should operationalize a caregiver support pillar within the school, treating parents and guardians as strategic partners rather than peripheral figures. Additionally, school administrators should implement flexible academic catch-up modules and peer-mentorship programs to bridge the learning gap caused by maternity-related absences.



School stakeholders such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) to strengthen partnership frameworks and mobilize additional financial and material assistance in addition to establishing childcare centers next to schools to help schoolgirl mothers overcome dual responsibilities of being a mother and learner. This inclusive and supportive participatory framework addresses the logistical bottlenecks that lead to dropouts.

Theoretical and Research Implications

The study recommends that universities and teacher-training institutions integrate Tinto's learner retention theory into their curricula, shifting the focus of future educators toward a multi-pillar ecological process where caregiver support is recognized as a primary moderator. Additionally, the study recommends that future inquiries perform a comparative analysis of school categories, specifically examining how different environments such as single-sex versus mixed-gender schools or boarding versus day schools influence the effectiveness of re-entry policies. Finally, future research could evaluate the impact of structured childcare infrastructure on determining factors such as proximity of on-site or community-based childcare centers in relation to reducing absenteeism and improvement of academic focus to address the high dual-demand pressure.

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