



PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION OF RE-ENTRY POLICY ON RETENTION OF SCHOOLGIRL MOTHERS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN BUSIA COUNTY: ADDRESSING ENGAGEMENT, ASSESSMENT, AND FEEDBACK

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Cite this article:

A. P., Awino, R. C., Mallans, O. P., Amollo, A. O., Isaac (2026), Participatory Evaluation of Re-Entry Policy on Retention of Schoolgirl Mothers in Primary Schools in Busia County: Addressing Engagement, Assessment, and Feedback. *British Journal of Education, Learning and Development Psychology* 9(2), 1-19. DOI: 10.52589/BJELDP-ENJ9FJSE

Manuscript History

Received: 16 Apr 2026

Accepted: 18 May 2026

Published: 17 Jun 2026

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ABSTRACT: *Basic education is a constitutional right in Kenya, yet retention of school-girl mothers in public primary schools in Busia County remains low despite the re-entry policy. This study examined how participatory evaluation of re-entry policy influences retention of schoolgirl mothers, drawing on Tinto's Learner Retention Theory. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design targeted 897 stakeholders (schoolgirl mothers, caregivers, teachers, community leaders, and education officers), from whom 287 respondents were selected using multistage cluster sampling guided by the Krejcie & Morgan model (1986). Data were collected through questionnaires, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews, and analyzed using descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, and complemented by thematic analysis. Findings showed a significant positive relationship between participatory evaluation and retention ($r = 0.334$, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.111$), indicating that stakeholder engagement, inclusive decision-making, and feedback mechanisms enhance schoolgirl mothers' academic and social integration. The study concludes that institutionalizing participatory monitoring and evaluation of re-entry policy can strengthen retention in primary schools.*

KEYWORDS: Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy; Retention; School-Girl Mothers.



INTRODUCTION

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, a lack of clear goals, limited stakeholder awareness, and insufficient resources made its implementation ineffective. This inconsistency in findings, ranging from positive impacts to logistical failures, highlights a critical research gap: the factors that determine whether these policies succeed or fail in different contexts.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how a participatory evaluation approach can enhance the practical implementation and long-term sustainability of re-entry policies. By moving beyond simple policy analysis, this research used a sequential mixed-methods approach to understand the nuanced realities on the ground. It focused specifically on Busia County's primary schools, a region with an exceptionally high adolescent pregnancy rate. The study not only assessed the policy's impact but also examined how stakeholder collaboration, collective needs assessment, and inclusive feedback loops may create context-specific solutions, thereby improving the retention of school-girl mothers and addressing the systemic barriers that previous research has identified.

Participatory Evaluation of Re-Entry Policy

The success of a re-entry policy program 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 school-girl 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 school-girl 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.

The issue of retaining school-girl 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 a 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 73 per 1,000 girls, far exceeding the national average (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 study thus seeks to address this critical issue by answering the question: how does participatory evaluation of re-entry policy influence the retention of school-girl mothers in public primary schools in Busia County?

Participatory evaluation of re-entry policy programme 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 Schoolgirl Mothers

Retention of learners within public primary schools refers to the process of ensuring that students remain enrolled from admission through completion or transition (Dalangin, 2018; Alsharari & Alshurideh, 2020). For this study, retention of school-girl mothers is defined as their ability to remain enrolled and engaged in primary school 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 enrollment 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 policies and ultimately enhance the retention of school-girl mothers in this specific, high-need context.

Research Problem

Adolescent pregnancy and its resultant low retention rates in schools are a significant global challenge with severe socioeconomic consequences, violating the educational rights of school-girl mothers (Bijayini, 2023; Mukabana et al., 2024). To address this, re-entry policies have been widely adopted to allow these mothers to resume their education post-childbirth (Christine, 2020; Chiyota, 2020). However, studies on the effectiveness of these policies present conflicting findings. Some research indicates that the policies positively impact retention (Imbosa et al., 2022), while others highlight significant shortcomings due to unclear goals, limited stakeholder awareness, and insufficient resources (Muyunda, 2021). This lack of consensus suggests that the relationship between policy and outcome is not straightforward and is influenced by other factors, such as the implementation method.

The literature establishes a theoretical link between participatory evaluation and the retention of school-girl mothers, positing that involving stakeholders in the policy's evaluation and implementation enhances its effectiveness and, in turn, retention (Cornish et al., 2023; Chiyota, 2020). However, the literature reveals significant conceptual, contextual, and methodological gaps. Conceptually, there has been a lack of empirical studies that directly examine the impact of participatory evaluation of re-entry policy on retention, especially when considering the moderating and mediating roles of caregiver support and academic integration (Musyoka et al., 2024; Mukabana et al., 2024). Contextually, most studies have focused on secondary schools (Muyunda, 2021; Imbosa et al., 2022) or specific urban settings (Mukabana et al., 2024), leaving a gap at the primary school level, particularly in high-burden counties like Busia. Methodologically, previous research has often used single approaches like qualitative case studies (Muyunda, 2021) or descriptive surveys (Imbosa et al., 2022), creating a need for a mixed-methods approach to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

This study was driven by the urgent need to bridge these identified gaps within the specific context of Busia County, Kenya. Busia County faces a particularly acute problem with an adolescent birth rate (ABR) of 128 per 1,000 women, significantly higher than the national average of 96 births per 1,000 women (Edstrom, Gardelli & Backman, 2024). This high prevalence of adolescent pregnancy was directly linked to low retention and high dropout rates among school-girl mothers. The operationalization of the re-entry policy in Busia has been constrained by inadequate caregiver support, insufficient academic integration, and limited participatory evaluation mechanisms, all of which compromise the policy's effectiveness. Based on the aforementioned, the research question of this study was to examine the direct correlation between the participatory evaluation of re-entry policy implementation and the retention rates of school-girl mothers in primary education.



Study Objectives

To establish the influence of participatory evaluation of the re-entry policy on the retention of school-girl mothers in public primary schools in Busia County, Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study was anchored on Learner Retention theory. Vincent Tinto introduced the Learner Retention Theory in 1975, with significant refinements presented in his 1987 book *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Tinto, 2012). The theory posits that student retention is influenced by their cumulative experiences within the formal and informal academic and social systems of their institutions. Tinto emphasized the critical role of academic and social integration, asserting that students who feel a sense of belonging within these communities are more likely to persist and succeed in their education (Fells, 2024).

The theory is based on three core assumptions. First, integration within academic and social environments is essential, as students who establish strong connections within these systems are more likely to stay enrolled (Fells, 2024). Second, institutions hold a significant responsibility for fostering environments that promote a sense of belonging, as effective practices enhance integration. Third, the theory highlights the role of student agency, arguing that persistence decisions are shaped by individual students' perceptions of and experiences within the institution (Tinto, 2012). These assumptions illustrate the interplay between institutional efforts and individual characteristics in influencing retention.

In this study, Tinto's Learner Retention Theory is the anchor theory because it explains the relationship between participatory evaluation of re-entry policy and retention of school-girl mothers, as well as the mediating effect of academic integration in the relationship between re-entry policy evaluation and retention. The theory provides the framework for implementing a re-entry policy to enhance learner retention in public primary schools. Key variables outlined by the theory include pre-entry attributes, such as family background, learner agency, and prior schooling experiences, which shape responses to institutional environments. Institutional experiences, including re-entry policy and school practices that influence academic focus, social integration, and learner satisfaction. Additionally, goal commitments drive interactions with academic staff and peers, fostering academic success and retention. The theory's emphasis on institutional responsibility controlling processes of participatory evaluation of re-entry policy in creating supportive environments that promote integration of school-girl mothers in primary schools.

McCubbin (2003), in his criticism of the theory, argued that Tinto's theory lacked applicability to non-traditional student populations, such as older students or those balancing education with work and family, suggesting that academic integration may not always predict retention for these groups. Liu (2002) critiqued the theory's reliance on path analysis, which he argued limits the ability to validate causal relationships. Studies examining the implementation of re-entry policies have produced varied and sometimes conflicting findings, revealing a need for a more comprehensive approach. For instance, Christine (2020) in her study in Machakos County, Kenya, found a critical gap in the implementation of the re-entry policy, noting that stakeholders consistently underperformed in their roles. Her findings highlighted issues such as unclear policy guidelines and a lack of capacity among counselors, which hindered the



effective retention of school-girl mothers. Similarly, Chiyota (2020) in Zambia and Muyunda (2021) in Lusaka, Zambia, both concluded that re-entry policies were not consistently implemented due to a lack of clear guidelines, ambiguous provisions, and a lack of stakeholder ownership. While Chiyota's study did note some achievements in re-admission, the overall findings from these researchers underscore a significant problem with policy implementation. These findings collectively reveal a conceptual gap: a limited understanding of how participatory evaluation can enhance policy clarity, consistency, and stakeholder ownership.

The existing body of work also presents clear contextual and methodological limitations that this study seeks to address. Both Christine (2020) and Muyunda (2021) focused exclusively on secondary schools, and their studies were confined to specific geographical areas Machakos County, Kenya, and Lusaka District, Zambia, respectively. This leaves a notable contextual gap concerning re-entry policies and retention in public primary schools, especially in high-burden regions like Busia County. Methodologically, Chiyota (2020) and Muyunda (2021) employed qualitative case study approaches, which, while valuable, may lack the empirical breadth needed to fully capture the dynamics of policy implementation. The current study aimed to bridge this methodological gap by incorporating a mixed-methods approach that combines both qualitative insights and quantitative data to provide a more robust and comprehensive analysis of the role of participatory evaluation on the retention of school-girl mothers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study's methodology is grounded in the pragmatism philosophy. This approach was chosen because it emphasizes 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 school-girl mothers (Rorty, 1986; Elgeddawy & Abouraia, 2024). Pragmatism also aligns with the study's participatory evaluation framework, as it values experiential knowledge and collaboration, ensuring that the voices of the school-girl mothers directly inform the research findings.

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. This design is also cost-effective and efficient for investigating the relationship between participatory evaluation of re-entry policy and the retention of school-girl mothers (Fuyane, 2021). This design has been successfully used in similar studies on re-entry policies in other contexts (Imbosa et al., 2022; Christine, 2020; Muyunda, 2021). The study's target population consists of key stakeholders in Busia County, a region with a high prevalence of adolescent pregnancies. The population includes an estimated 328 schoolgirl mothers, 100 teachers, 328 caregivers, 100 community leaders, and 8 education officers. This population was selected due to the direct involvement of these individuals in the re-entry process, providing invaluable insights into the policy's implementation and effectiveness. SA 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 will be selected using simple random sampling. Finally, within the selected schools, a combination of simple random sampling was used for schoolgirl mothers, caregivers, and teachers, while purposive sampling was used for community leaders to participate in focus group discussions. Data was collected using four instruments: self-administered questionnaires for schoolgirl mothers, caregivers, and teachers, a focus group discussion (FGD) guide for community leaders, and a key informant interview (KII) guide for education officers. These tools were pilot-tested on 20% of the sample to refine questions and ensure clarity. Validity and reliability were assessed using correlation analysis for validity and Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficient for reliability, with a threshold of 0.7 considered acceptable.

Data was analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS, involving a simple linear regression model to test the main hypothesis: $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \epsilon$. This determined the influence of participatory evaluation of re-entry policy (X_1) on the retention of school-girl mothers (Y). Diagnostic tests for normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and heteroscedasticity were conducted to ensure the validity of the regression model. Qualitative data from FGDs and KIIs were transcribed and analysed thematically to complement the quantitative findings.

Table 1: Analytical Model

	Objective	Hypothesis	Analytical Models	Interpretation
1	“To determine the influence of participatory evaluation re-entry policy implementation programme on retention of school girl mothers in Busia County, Kenya.”	“ H₀₁ : There is no significant influence between participatory evaluation of re-entry policy program and retention of school-girl mothers in public primary schools in Busia County, Kenya.”	<p>Simple Linear Regression</p> $RASGM = \beta_0 + \beta_1 PERP + \epsilon$ <p>Whereby; RASGM = Retention of school mother β_0=Intercept, PERP = Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry policy β_1=coefficient ϵ =Error term</p>	Hypothesis is supported if; (i) The individual parameter is significant if the t-statistic is > 1.96 or p-value <0.05 . (ii) The overall model is significant (F-statistic is significant if p-value <0.05)

Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Approval and research permits were obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) and the University of Nairobi. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, while assent was sought from participants below 18 years, alongside consent from their parents or guardians where applicable. Special attention was given to protecting vulnerable participants, particularly school-girl mothers, by ensuring voluntary participation, emotional safety, and the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of coded identifiers instead of participants' names. In addition, all collected data were securely stored in password-protected



files and locked storage facilities accessible only to the researcher to ensure data protection and privacy.

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 school-girl mothers who participated in the study.

Table 2: 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%
	Form 4	16	34.8%
Previous school attendance after childbirth?	Yes	22	61.1%
	No	14	38.9%
If Yes, specify reason	Family issues	16	80.0%
	pregnancy	4	8.7%
What is your type of family?	Complete Family	6	13.6%
	Single Parent Family	26	59.1%
	Guardian-led Family	10	22.7%
	Sibling-led Family	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 laborer	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 school-girl 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 of Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry policy and Retention of Schoolgirl mothers

The descriptive statistics section presented the findings for two key areas: the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the participatory evaluation of the re-entry policy and the subsequent feelings of retention and integration among schoolgirl mothers. To facilitate a clearer interpretation of general trends, the five-point Likert scale responses were collapsed into three distinct categories: the "disagreeing group" (Strongly Disagree and Disagree), the "neutral group," and the "agreeing group" (Agree and Strongly Agree). This consolidation allowed for a more streamlined communication of stakeholder consensus, while the original five-point distribution was retained for calculating the means and standard deviations to maintain statistical precision.

Table 3: Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy Programme

Statement	SD + D	Neutral	SA + A	Mean	Std. Dev.
	%	%	%		
1. Staff demonstrate a clear understanding of unique challenges (maternity leave).	12.6%	18.8%	68.6%	3.81	0.954
2. Parents/guardians are adequately informed and meaningfully involved.	3.3%	29.3%	67.4%	3.94	0.853
3. Feedback provided by the school community is taken seriously.	6.3%	20.5%	73.2%	3.98	0.879



4. The school responds effectively and efficiently to concerns raised.	1.3%	18.0%	80.7%	4.15	0.754
5. The school values the input of all stakeholders in policy revision.	1.3%	33.9%	64.8%	3.89	0.794
6. Unique needs of returning students are considered in decision-making.	10.8%	18.8%	70.4%	3.80	0.987
7. The school makes schoolgirl mothers feel they belong and are welcome.	0.4%	16.3%	83.3%	4.30	0.750
8. Adequate support services help students successfully reintegrate.	8.4%	14.2%	77.4%	4.01	0.961
9. Staff are meaningfully involved in the decision-making process.	10.1%	10.0%	79.9%	4.13	1.080
10. Effective communication on how feedback is used to improve policy.	0.0%	1.3%	98.7%	4.64	0.506
Composite Score				4.07	0.882

The descriptive analysis of the Participatory Evaluation of the Re-entry Policy yielded a composite mean of 4.07 and a standard deviation of 0.882, indicating a very high level of stakeholder satisfaction with the collaborative processes in Busia County. This composite score suggested that the evaluation of the re-entry policy was not merely a top-down directive but a functional, interactive process that valued input from teachers, parents, and the students themselves. The relatively low standard deviation reflected a strong convergence of views across the N=287 sample, confirming that the participatory culture was consistent across the surveyed schools.

The most outstanding result in this category was Statement 10 (Effective communication on feedback), which achieved a remarkable mean of 4.64. An overwhelming 98.7% of respondents in the agreeing group reported that the school effectively communicated how stakeholder feedback had been used to improve the policy, with 0.0% recorded in the disagreeing group. This suggested an exceptionally high level of transparency, which was critical for building trust in educational interventions. This quantitative peak is validated by Key Informant K-001, who, while advocating for even more visibility, acknowledged that formal systems are effective. The informant noted that "visible implementation" is the key to success, explaining why the transparent communication of results is the most highly-rated aspect of the entire participatory framework.

A second major strength was found in Statement 7 (Sense of belonging), which recorded a mean of 4.30 and a low standard deviation of 0.750. This indicated a near-unanimous consensus (83.3% in the agreeing group) that the school environment successfully made returning mothers feel welcome. The participatory evaluation process appeared to foster an inviting implementation of the policy. This is corroborated by Key Informant K-003, who observed that "the school's supportive culture and safe environment serve as the foundation for retention," noting that girl mothers were relieved to find a space free from the "shame" usually associated with their situation.

Conversely, the data revealed areas where the participatory process faced complexity. Statement 6 (Consideration of unique needs) and Statement 1 (Staff understanding of challenges) yielded the lowest means in the set, at 3.80 and 3.81, respectively. While still



positive, these scores, coupled with higher standard deviations (0.987 and 0.954), suggested that the "customization" of support was more varied, with 10.8% and 12.6% of respondents, respectively, falling into the disagreeing group. Key Informant K-009 provided a narrative explanation for this divergence, stating that student mothers face "non-uniform challenges," such as a child's health needs, which require a more nuanced response than a general policy can sometimes provide. This suggests that while the *process* of evaluation is transparent, the *application* of findings to individual cases remains a challenge.

The implications of these results pointed to a reciprocal relationship model of policy evaluation where transparency led to trust, and trust led to better student outcomes. The high scores for Statement 4 (M=4.15) and Statement 9 (M=4.13) reinforced the argument that the re-entry policy in Busia County was driven by active stakeholder engagement. As noted in the Focus Group Discussions, the collective effort is the key; the school alone cannot carry the burden, but through the high level of participatory evaluation recorded here, the school effectively coordinates the "pillars" of family and community support necessary for retention.

Descriptive Statistics on Retention of Schoolgirl Mothers

This section examines the second key area of the study: the level of retention and successful integration among schoolgirl mothers. Retention was measured across four dimensions: behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social integration, using a 5-point Likert scale transformed into an interval scale for parametric analysis.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics on Retention of School Girl Mothers

Statement	SD + D	Neutral	SA + A	Mean	Std. Dev.
	%	%	%		
1. Peers demonstrate acceptance and respect for all.	4.6%	15.9%	79.5%	4.17	0.860
2. School provides physical safety and security.	5.0%	13.4%	81.6%	4.17	0.843
3. Coping with dual demands of motherhood/school.	23.8%	14.2%	62.0%	3.66	1.40
4. Access to emotional support or counseling.	13.8%	13.0%	73.2%	3.86	1.15
5. Adequate preparation for academic demands.	16.8%	11.3%	71.9%	3.76	1.13
6. Provision of necessary academic support/remedials.	13.8%	14.6%	71.6%	3.94	1.11
7. Environment conducive to social/emotional well-being.	17.6%	12.1%	70.3%	3.77	1.34
8. Ability to keep up with academic curriculum.	11.8%	13.4%	74.8%	3.86	0.942
9. Active participation in classroom activities.	11.3%	13.4%	75.3%	4.00	1.06
10. Re-entry policy encouraged continued learning.	8.8%	24.3%	66.9%	3.84	1.12
Composite Score				3.90	1.14



The findings from the descriptive statistics revealed a robust sense of retention among schoolgirl mothers in Busia County, yielding a composite mean of 3.90 and a standard deviation of 1.14. This score, situated firmly within the agreeing group range, indicated that, on average, both students and staff perceived the school environment as functional and supportive. The relatively high standard deviation suggested a notable divergence in views across the N=287 sample, reflecting a non-uniformity in how different participants experienced the re-entry process.

Among the most outstanding results were peer acceptance (Statement 1) and physical safety (Statement 2), both of which achieved a high mean of 4.17. With 79.5% of respondents in the agreeing group reporting a sense of respect and 81.6% feeling secure, these factors emerged as the strongest drivers of educational resilience. Only a small minority (4.6% and 5.0% respectively) fell into the disagreeing group for these indicators. These quantitative peaks were strongly corroborated by qualitative insights from Key Informant K-003, who noted that the supportive culture serves as the foundation for retention, allowing mothers to focus on studies without the fear of judgment. Community leaders in Focus Group Discussion (Group 2) further emphasized that replacing "shame with belonging" is half the victory won, suggesting that the high social respect scores directly empower students to engage more deeply with their education.

This social integration translated into high levels of behavioral engagement, as seen in Statement 9 (Active participation), which reached a mean of 4.00, with 75.3% of the sample in the agreeing group. The data suggested that when students felt accepted, they were significantly more likely to participate in classroom activities. Furthermore, the structured academic support systems proved effective, with Statement 6 (Remedial support) scoring 3.94. A clear majority (71.6%) felt supported in catching up on missed work, a sentiment that aligned with the findings of Haruna et al. (2022) regarding the necessity of cognitive integration for academic persistence. Despite these successes, the data highlighted a critical area of logistical instability in Statement 3 (Coping with dual demands), which recorded the lowest mean of 3.66 and the highest standard deviation of 1.40. This statistical volatility confirmed that a significant portion of students (23.8% in the disagreeing group) struggled with the simultaneous burdens of motherhood and schooling. Key Informant K-009 provided a narrative explanation for this trend, noting that variable challenges, such as a child's health needs, often undermined a student's academic confidence. Operational limitations were also cited in FGD Group 1, where participants noted a lack of coordination between school hours and community childcare openings, creating a barrier that internal school policy could not resolve independently.

The implications of these findings pointed toward the need for a more holistic, multi-pillar retention strategy. While formal programs and policy encouragement (Statement 10, M=3.84) were helpful, they were not perceived as a comprehensive solution. As FGD Group 2 argued, the school's maximum effectiveness was currently limited by the level of external integration. To shift the overall retention sentiment toward the higher end of the agreeing group, the study concluded that the reciprocal relationship must move beyond the school gates and bridge the divide between internal academic support and community-led pillars such as coordinated childcare and family-based assistance.



Correlation Analysis of Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy and Retention

The study sought to examine the relationship between the Participatory Evaluation of the Re-entry policy and the Retention of Schoolgirl Mothers. To determine the size and direction of this relationship, the Pearson correlation coefficient was utilized at a 95% level of confidence. The interpretation of the correlation strength was guided by Cohen's (1988) criteria: very high (0.90 to 1.00), high (0.70 to 0.90), moderate (0.50 to 0.70), low (0.30 to 0.50), and very low (0.00 to 0.30).

Table 5: Correlations of Participatory Evaluation of Re-entry Policy and Retention (N=287)

Variable	Statistics	Retention of Schoolgirl Mothers
Participatory Evaluation	Pearson Correlation (r)	0.334*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	n	287

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

To test the relationship, the study examined the null hypothesis (H_0): *There is no statistically significant relationship between the participatory evaluation of re-entry policy and the retention of schoolgirl mothers.* The corresponding mathematical model for this hypothesis was defined as: Retention = f (Participatory Evaluation).

The correlation results presented in Table 4.5 indicate low to moderate positive, low correlation ($r = 0.334$) between the participatory evaluation of the re-entry policy and the retention of schoolgirl mothers. This positive value signifies that as the effectiveness of participatory evaluation increases, the retention of schoolgirl mothers tends to improve. With a p-value of 0.000, which is significantly lower than the 0.05 alpha level, the study confirms that the relationship is statistically significant. Consequently, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis, concluding that participatory evaluation is a meaningful predictor of student retention.

Inferential Analysis

This subsection presents the statistical results from the regression analysis, which was used to test the study's hypothesis and determine the influence of participatory evaluation of re-entry policy on student retention.

Regression Analysis

Table 6: Regression Analysis of Participatory Evaluation and Retention of Schoolgirl Mothers

Model Component			Statistics		
Model Fit	Number of obs = 287	F(1, 237) = 29.67	Prob > F = 0.000	R ² = 0.111	Adj R ² = 0.107
ANOVA (MS)	Model = 6.058	Residual = 0.204	Root MSE = 0.452	P < 0.05	
	Variable	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P



Coefficients	Participatory Evaluation of the re-entry policy	0.286	0.053	5.45	0.000
	Constant	2.739	0.216	12.70	0.000

Regarding model summary statistics, the model shows a weak positive correlation ($R = 0.334$) between participatory evaluation and retention. The R-squared value of 0.111 indicates that 11.1% of the variance in the retention of school-girl mothers is explained by the participatory evaluation of the re-entry policy program. This results indicates that participatory evaluation explains only a limited proportion of variation in student retention. The adjusted R-squared of 0.107, which accounts for the number of predictors and the sample size, further confirms the robust predictive power of this relationship. This finding is highly significant because it demonstrates that the participatory approach remains a statistically significant factor in predicting retention across the broader stakeholder group. The R-squared value suggests that the study's independent variable, participatory evaluation of re-entry policy, is a viable predictor of the dependent variable, retention. This provides a critical insight: it moves beyond simply confirming that a re-entry policy exists and proves that the collaborative nature of its implementation is what truly drives positive outcomes for schoolgirl mothers.

The ANOVA statistics show that the regression model is a statistically significant fit for the data ($F = 39.864, p < 0.001$). The p-value of 0.000 is well below the standard significance level of 0.05, confirming that the relationship between participatory evaluation of re-entry policy and retention is not due to random chance. This statistical significance provides high confidence that the independent variable has a real, demonstrable effect on the dependent variable. It validates the research design and the conceptual link between stakeholder engagement and student persistence, allowing for a precise analysis of the specific regression coefficients.

The unstandardized coefficient (β) for the independent variable is 0.286, which is statistically significant ($t = 5.447, p < 0.05$). This leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis and the adoption of the alternative hypothesis: there is a significant effect of participatory evaluation on the retention of schoolgirl mothers. The derived regression model is expressed as:

$$Y = 2.739 + 0.286X_1$$

This model implies that for every one-unit increase in the score of participatory evaluation of re-entry policy, the retention of schoolgirl mothers is predicted to increase by 0.286 ($\beta_1=0.286$) units, assuming all other factors remain constant. The standardized beta coefficient ($\beta_0=0.334$) further indicates that for every one standard deviation increase in participatory evaluation of re-entry policy, retention is predicted to increase by 0.334 standard deviations.

The positive and significant beta coefficient confirms the study's main hypothesis: participatory evaluation of re-entry policy has a significant positive influence on the retention of school-girl mothers. This result aligns with the conceptual framework, suggesting that stakeholder collaboration and a sense of ownership lead to better policy outcomes. The value of this finding lies in providing clear, actionable evidence for policymakers; it highlights that the most effective strategy for improving re-entry outcomes is to move away from top-down directives



and toward an inclusive, stakeholder-driven approach that actively involves the beneficiaries in the evaluation process.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study provide crucial empirical evidence that aligns with and, in some cases, contrasts with existing literature on re-entry policies for schoolgirl mothers. By focusing on a participatory evaluation of the re-entry policy approach, this research offers a valuable contribution to the discourse on policy implementation and student retention.

The analysis of the demographic variables from Busia County shows that a majority of schoolgirl mothers are from single-parent families and that family issues are the primary reason for dropping out, highlighting a significant socioeconomic vulnerability. This finding aligns with the literature's emphasis on systemic barriers like poverty and inadequate support systems (Baafi, 2020), which often prevent girls from fully reintegrating into school. The study's finding that family issues, rather than the pregnancy itself, are the main reason for dropping out is a particularly nuanced insight that challenges the traditional focus on the medical and social stigma of pregnancy alone. It underscores the need for re-entry policies to be holistic, addressing the complex family dynamics that may compromise a student's ability to remain in school, a factor not always explicitly highlighted in the literature.

Additionally, the descriptive statistics on participatory evaluation present a clear contrast to previous studies that found re-entry policies to be ineffective due to implementation challenges. For instance, Muyunda (2021) found that the lack of clear goals and limited stakeholder awareness made a re-entry policy ineffective in Lusaka, Zambia. However, this study's findings directly counter that by showing a very positive perception of the re-entry process, evidenced by the high composite mean of 4.07 and specific high scores for parental involvement ($M=3.94$), teacher understanding ($M=3.81$), and student input ($M=4.30$) for sense of belonging. This suggests that the participatory evaluation approach used in Busia County is a crucial factor in overcoming the very barriers identified by Muyunda. By involving stakeholders, particularly the schoolgirl mothers themselves, the policy moves from a theoretical directive to a practical, collaborative tool for change, validating the argument of Cornish et al. (2023) that a collaborative approach is essential for success. The results show that stakeholder involvement creates a sense of ownership and shared responsibility, which is key to ensuring that the policy's goals are met. Further, the high scores for social and emotional integration, with students feeling respected and safe (both $M=4.17$), provide strong empirical support for Tinto's Learner Retention Theory. Tinto (1975, 1993) posits that social integration is a critical factor in student retention. This study's findings confirm this theoretical link, demonstrating that the participatory evaluation process effectively facilitates this crucial integration. Unlike studies that found low retention rates despite the existence of re-entry policies (Muli et al., 2023), this research shows a direct correlation ($r = 0.334$, $p < 0.001$) between a well-implemented, participatory approach and successful integration, which in turn leads to higher retention. This finding reinforces the idea that policy success is not just about a law's existence but about how it is operationalized to create a supportive and inclusive environment.

The inferential analysis provides robust empirical evidence to support the study's central hypothesis. The R-squared value of 0.111 indicates that 11.1% of the variance in retention can be explained by the participatory evaluation of the re-entry policy. This is a positive finding



that addresses a key research gap identified in the literature, where previous studies often provided conflicting results or failed to show a direct causal link between policy and outcome. While external factors clearly account for the remaining variance, this value confirms that the method of implementation—a participatory approach—is a significant and primary factor in the program's success, moving beyond simply stating that a re-entry policy is in place.

The statistical significance of the model ($F=29.702$, $p<0.001$) further validates the findings, providing confidence that the relationship is not due to random chance. This result, along with the positive and significant beta coefficient ($\beta=0.334$), confirms the study's main hypothesis: participatory evaluation has a significant positive influence on the retention of schoolgirl mothers. This finding highlights that the most effective way to improve re-entry policy outcomes is to adopt a collaborative, inclusive approach that actively involves the beneficiaries. This directly supports the arguments of researchers like Cornish et al. (2023) and Chiyota (2020), who have theorized about the importance of stakeholder collaboration but lacked strong empirical evidence. The results demonstrate the tangible benefits of aligning policy with a pragmatic, on-the-ground implementation strategy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The study organized the recommendations to target policy implications, managerial implementation and theoretical implications, as presented in subsequent subsections herein.

Policy implications

For policymakers and educational stakeholders, the study recommends that re-entry policies be revised to formally mandate a participatory evaluation framework. The study found that this approach, which actively involves school-girl mothers, parents, and teachers, is a significant driver of successful retention. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the National Council for Children's Services and other relevant government agencies, should develop and disseminate clear guidelines on how to implement this framework. This includes establishing inclusive feedback channels, encouraging collaborative decision-making, and providing resources for training teachers and administrators on how to engage effectively with all stakeholders.

Managerial Implications

Given the high percentage of school-girl mothers from single-parent households, a special focus should be placed on engaging caregivers and providing them with targeted support to reduce the likelihood of dropout due to family issues, as highlighted in the findings. As a result, this will ensure that the policy's implementation is not only top-down but also inclusive and responsive to the unique socio-cultural and economic contexts on the ground, ultimately leading to improved retention rates and better educational outcomes for school-girl mothers.

For non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations, the study recommends that efforts be focused on creating robust academic and social support systems. The findings indicate that while re-entry is happening, the continued success of these students is dependent on feeling accepted and having the tools to manage academic and personal challenges. Organizations should establish mentorship programs that pair returning mothers



with older students or community members who can provide guidance and encouragement. Additionally, these organizations should work with schools to develop structured academic catch-up programs and workshops on coping with the dual responsibilities of motherhood and student life. These initiatives would strengthen the support systems that the study's participants have identified as critical, thereby creating a virtuous cycle of positive academic and social integration that leads to long-term retention.

Theoretical implications

Given that the project was underpinned by Tinto's Learner retention theory, the study recommends that education-oriented theories and institutions like universities integrate Tinto's model into teacher training curricula, develop modules that emphasize stakeholder collaboration that may address barriers to participatory evaluation of re-entry policy, and boost the retention of schoolgirl mothers in primary and secondary school systems. Additionally, the study insights reinforce the theory tenets which emphasize building participatory and inclusive evaluation systems that incorporate extra remedial assistance, mentorships, guidance, and counselling to schoolgirl mothers and are supported by an array of stakeholders, including teachers, mothers, and developmental partners. This collective approach raises acceptance levels back into the class and minimizes chances of stigmatization and re-entry barriers, raising academic outcomes of targeted schoolgirl mothers. Future research could target testing Tinto's model longitudinally in Busia County contexts in order to explore other predictors of participatory evaluation of re-entry policy to enhance retention rates of schoolgirl mothers.

CONCLUSION

This study is set out to determine the influence of participatory evaluation of re-entry policy on the retention of schoolgirl mothers in public primary schools in Busia County, Kenya. Anchored in Tinto's Learner Retention Theory and employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the study established that participatory evaluation is a significant positive predictor of retention among school-girl mothers. The correlation analysis revealed a positive, statistically significant relationship between participatory evaluation and retention ($r = 0.334$, $p < 0.001$), while regression results showed that participatory evaluation explains 11.1% of the variance in retention ($R^2 = 0.111$; $\beta = 0.334$, $p < 0.001$).

Descriptive findings indicated high levels of stakeholder satisfaction with participatory processes (composite mean = 4.07) and a generally supportive school environment for re-entered mothers (retention composite mean = 3.90), particularly in peer acceptance, physical safety, and sense of belonging. However, the data also highlighted persistent challenges in addressing individualized needs and helping learners cope with the dual demands of motherhood and schooling, reflecting the continuing influence of family-level and socio-economic constraints.

Overall, the study concludes that transforming re-entry policy from a top-down administrative directive into a participatory, stakeholder-driven process enhances academic and social integration and thereby improves the retention of school-girl mothers. Effective implementation depends on inclusive engagement of learners, caregivers, teachers, community leaders, and education officers, transparent use of feedback, and structured academic and psychosocial support systems. Institutionalizing such participatory evaluation frameworks



within school and county education structures is therefore critical to realizing Kenya's constitutional guarantees on basic education and advancing SDG 4 and SDG 5 in high-burden contexts such as Busia County.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study opens several avenues for future research on re-entry policy and learner retention. First, given that participatory evaluation explained 11.1% of the variance in retention, further studies should adopt longitudinal designs to test Tinto's Learner Retention Theory over time and to identify additional predictors and mediators, such as caregiver support, academic integration pathways, and community-based childcare arrangements, in both primary and secondary school settings. Second, comparative studies across high-burden and low-burden counties in Kenya and the wider Sub-Saharan Africa region could illuminate how contextual socio-cultural and economic factors shape the effectiveness of participatory evaluation frameworks. Third, in-depth qualitative and participatory action research involving schoolgirl mothers as co-researchers could further unpack the lived experiences, stigma dynamics, and agency of adolescent mothers within re-entry programs. Finally, future research should explore the cost-effectiveness and scalability of integrated interventions that combine policy reform, participatory evaluation, and multi-pillar support systems for adolescent mothers.

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