Original Article

Assessing the Implementation of School Re-Entry Policy in Primary Schools: Stakeholder Awareness and Barriers in Kuria East Sub-County, Kenya

Alice Omariba[1], Eusabia Ondieki[1] & Wycliff Mogoi[1]*

[1] Murang'a University of Technology, P. O. Box 75-10200, Murang'a, Kenya.
[*] Author for Correspondence Email: aomariba@mut.ac.ke

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the implementation of the school re-entry policy in public primary schools in Kuria East Sub-County, Kenya, with a focus on stakeholder awareness and the barriers that hinder effective reintegration of learners, particularly girls, after school dropouts. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research gathered data from learners, teachers, and community stakeholders through questionnaires and interviews. Findings revealed that while most learners felt welcomed by teachers and supported in classrooms, significant challenges persist. These include limited awareness of the policy among stakeholders, entrenched socio-cultural norms that stigmatise re-entry, especially for young mothers, insufficient teacher training on the policy, and weak community support structures. Additionally, economic hardships and the passive role of local authorities further hinder implementation. The study concludes that successful policy execution demands multi-stakeholder engagement, targeted sensitisation, and institutional strengthening to dismantle the systemic barriers facing re-entry learners.

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognised as a fundamental human right and a driver of sustainable development. However, school dropout due to teenage pregnancy continues to undermine girls' educational attainment, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In response, many countries, including Kenya, have adopted school re-entry policies to allow adolescent mothers to return to school after childbirth. Kenya's School Re-Entry Policy, reinforced by the Ministry of Education in 2020, seeks to promote gender equality in education and ensure inclusive learning opportunities (IDinsight, 2021).

Despite the presence of this progressive policy, implementation has remained uneven, particularly in rural and marginalised regions such as Kuria East Sub-County in Migori County. Stakeholder awareness and cooperation are crucial in policy implementation, but limited knowledge and cultural resistance continue to hinder progress. This study examines the level of implementation of the school re-entry policy, evaluates stakeholder awareness, and identifies key barriers to the successful reintegration of adolescent mothers into primary schools in Kuria East.

Background of the Study

Internationally, education policies are increasingly focusing on inclusion and equity. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) advocates for inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all by 2030. Several countries, including Zambia, Malawi, and Ghana, have adopted school re-entry policies to combat the effects of teenage pregnancy and early marriage (ActionAid Ghana, 2022). However, studies show these policies often falter at the implementation stage due to societal stigma, inadequate teacher training, and weak monitoring systems (UNESCO, 2022).

Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for the highest adolescent birth rate globally, with many young girls dropping out of school (UNICEF, 2023). While school re-entry policies have been embraced, limited stakeholder awareness and socio-cultural barriers continue to derail their effectiveness. For instance, in Tanzania and Uganda, cultural norms and a lack of political will hinder re-entry efforts despite supportive legal frameworks (Plan International, 2021).

In Kenya, the School Re-Entry Policy was introduced in 1994 and reinforced in the 2020 Guidelines on School Re-Entry, outlining steps for re-admitting learners after pregnancy-related dropout. The policy underscores the need for stakeholder collaboration—including school heads, teachers, parents, and community leaders—to facilitate successful reintegration. However, research indicates that implementation varies significantly across counties due to disparities in resource allocation, cultural practices, and lack of policy awareness (Zizi Afrique Foundation, 2025; IDinsight, 2021).

Kuria East Sub-County is characterised by deeply rooted patriarchal norms, high incidences of early pregnancies, and school dropouts among girls. Community resistance, stigmatisation of adolescent mothers, and limited awareness of the re-entry policy among teachers and parents hinder implementation. A study by Omariba et al. (2024) revealed that while the policy exists in theory, few schools have operationalised it, and most stakeholders lack proper guidance on how to support affected learners.

Statement of the Problem

Education is globally acknowledged as a fundamental right and a critical tool for promoting gender equality and sustainable development. The Government of Kenya, recognising the detrimental effects of adolescent pregnancy and early marriage on girls' education, developed and adopted the School Re-Entry Policy to provide affected learners—particularly adolescent mothers—with a second chance to complete their education. This policy was revised and operationalised through the National Guidelines for School Re-entry in Basic Education Institutions (2020), aligning with national and international commitments such as Vision 2030 and Sustainable Development Goal 4. However, despite the existence of this policy, its implementation has remained inconsistent and largely ineffective, especially in rural and marginalised regions like Kuria East Sub-County in Migori County. Numerous reports and studies have revealed a persistent disconnection between policy formulation and grassroots-level execution (IDinsight, 2021; Zizi Afrique Foundation, 2025). While the re-entry policy outlines clear procedures for reintegrating adolescent mothers into the school system, many schools and communities remain unaware or unprepared to implement these procedures effectively.

In Kuria East Sub-County, the situation is compounded by deep-rooted patriarchal norms, high rates of teenage pregnancy, child marriage, and socio-cultural stigma attached to adolescent motherhood. School administrators, teachers, parents, and even local education officers often lack adequate training or sensitisation on how to support adolescent mothers rejoining the school system. As a result, affected learners either fail to return to school or drop out again due to discrimination, lack of support, or poverty (Omariba et al., 2024).

Although national data exists on re-entry trends, there is limited empirical evidence at the sub-county level regarding the extent to which the policy is implemented, the level of stakeholder awareness, and the specific contextual barriers impeding its success. This gap in localised data creates a significant challenge in designing effective interventions tailored to the unique socio-cultural and institutional realities of Kuria East. Therefore, this study seeks to address the apparent disconnect between the existence of the School Re-Entry Policy and its practical implementation in primary schools in Kuria East Sub-County, particularly focusing on stakeholder awareness and the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that hinder its success. Addressing this gap is critical for informing policy implementation strategies that are contextually relevant and sustainable, and for advancing gender equality in education at the grassroots level.

Objective of the Study

To determine the level of implementation of the School Re-Entry Policy in primary schools in Kuria East Sub-County, with a focus on stakeholder awareness and barriers hindering effective reintegration of adolescent mothers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

School re-entry policies are globally recognised as a critical intervention to address educational inequalities resulting from adolescent pregnancy. According to UNESCO (2022), over 20 million girls globally drop out of school annually due to pregnancy and early marriage, with sub-Saharan Africa accounting for the highest numbers. To curb this challenge, countries such as Ghana, Malawi, and Zambia have adopted school re-entry policies that provide a legal and institutional framework for re-admitting adolescent mothers. However, while these policies exist on paper, implementation remains patchy due to systemic challenges, including weak enforcement mechanisms, societal stigma, and underfunding (UNICEF, 2023). These global trends underscore the importance of context-specific studies that evaluate how such policies are operationalised on the ground.

Regionally, the implementation of school re-entry policies in East Africa reflects a similar disconnect between policy intent and execution. For instance, in Tanzania and Uganda, even though re-entry frameworks exist, conservative cultural norms, punitive school environments, and inadequate teacher preparedness hinder effective policy rollout (Plan International, 2021). A study by Nyamweya and Otieno (2023) on school re-entry in Uganda revealed that although teachers supported the policy in principle, many were not trained on reintegration approaches, resulting in either passive resistance or inconsistent application. The region's experience suggests that increasing stakeholder awareness and building supportive school cultures are fundamental for successful policy implementation.

In Kenya, the Ministry of Education introduced revised *National Guidelines for School Re-Entry in Basic Education Institutions* in 2020, outlining steps for reintegrating learners after pregnancy-related dropout. The guidelines emphasise the role of school heads, teachers, parents, and communities in facilitating re-entry. However, studies show limited awareness of these guidelines among education stakeholders, especially in rural counties (IDinsight, 2021). A national baseline survey by Zizi Afrique Foundation (2025) found that only 42% of primary school teachers had received training or guidance on the re-entry policy, with implementation being the lowest in marginalised regions. This finding indicates a significant knowledge and training gap that undermines the policy's intended outcomes.

In Migori County—and particularly in Kuria East Sub-County—cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), early marriage, and patriarchy continue to fuel school dropout among adolescent girls (Omariba et al., 2024). Despite being a policy priority zone, Kuria East lacks adequate infrastructure, sensitisation programs, and school-level mechanisms to support young mothers' return to education. Community perceptions often brand adolescent mothers as morally deviant, further impeding reintegration efforts. Moreover,

school leaders and Boards of Management are often not conversant with re-entry guidelines, leading to inconsistencies in how cases are handled (Kenya News Agency, 2024). This localised evidence highlights the importance of stakeholder training and targeted community engagement to change attitudes and foster inclusive school environments.

Barriers to effective implementation of re-entry policies are multidimensional—ranging from personal and socio-cultural factors to institutional and systemic limitations. A recent study by Mwangi and Wambua (2022) emphasised that the successful reintegration of adolescent mothers is heavily dependent on the presence of psychosocial support services, flexible academic programs, and sustained community awareness campaigns. Unfortunately, many schools in rural Kenya lack the financial and human resources to offer such interventions. This reinforces the need for evidence-based, context-specific studies—like the one in Kuria East—to inform future policies, capacity-building programs, and school-level reforms that promote inclusive education for all.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods design involving both quantitative and qualitative data. The study will utilise a cross-sectional survey and phenomenological design. The geographical coverage were students, stakeholder presence and NGOS, if any, in the region. Since the study had three critical groups of concern, we will select representative samples for data analysis. The Yamane sampling technique was used to derive the

N = based on Yamane formulation …….

$$N_O = \frac{Z^2 pq}{e^2}$$

Where N Final sample size
Z is the confidence interval
P probability of success
q=1=p
e error margin

The girls/boys were distributed proportionately in the region as per the number of schools to be sampled and Table 1 shows the distribution.

The study used census (Sage, 2006) to select stakeholders in the sampled sub-county. The study also selected one manager of the institutions in the sample, teachers, BOM, parents and other stakeholders. This gave a total sample of 424 in the sub-county. The remaining samples were drawn purposively from KII and FGD

Table 1: Sampling Distribution

Group	Numbers	Proportion	Sample
Girls/Boys	10123	384	384
Managers (Head Teachers, Principals, BOM), Teachers, Parents/Caregivers, young mothers and other stakeholders	10123	40.492	40.492
Totals	10123	424.492	424.492
For the sub-county		424.492	

Since the study adopted utilize cross-sectional survey and phenomenological design, the target population included the School community non-teaching staff, education stakeholders (Parents, community leaders, education officers, development partners, Community and Family Based Organisation The study explored both probability and non-probability sampling techniques. Probability techniques: - Stratified (County, sub-counties and schools), non-probability techniques: - purposive sampling (head teachers, teachers, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology officials, community leaders), snow-balling (Learners affected-young mothers). Questionnaires were distributed to 318 respondents who were available during the data collection exercise (headteachers, teachers, and parents), while key informant interviews were conducted for 40 respondents, including the Ministry of Education officials and community leaders, as shown in Table 1. The respondents were assured of confidentiality and signed an Institutional Scientific and Ethics Review Committee (ISERC) consent form before they were engaged. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Level of Implementation of the Re-entry Policy in Primary Schools

The level of implementation of the re-entry policy varies across schools in Kuria East Sub-County, with some institutions fully supporting it and others lacking clear guidelines for execution. The effectiveness of implementation depends on factors such as school leadership, teacher training, parental attitudes, and community support. While some schools have successfully re-integrated adolescent mothers, many girls face stigma and lack essential support structures, leading to high absenteeism and eventual dropout. In cases where re-entry is permitted, girls struggled with balancing motherhood and school responsibilities. Further, the study established that the policy does not address the role of boys in teenage pregnancies, leading to gaps in its implementation. Some boys drop out due to financial pressure, while others are ignored in re-entry efforts. Moreover, the lack of tailored reintegration programs for dropouts means that many never return to school. Further, the study established that some Community Leaders support the policy, but others believe re-entry undermines cultural norms. Additionally, the religious leaders in faith-based schools vary in their approach; some embrace re-entry, while others reinforce moral judgment against returning girls. The Chiefs have limited direct involvement in policy implementation but can play a role in sensitisation and Child Protection Officers support re-entry by providing legal protection but struggle with community pushback.

In addition, the study established that resource constraints also pose significant challenges to the implementation of re-entry policies in Kuria East Sub-County. Schools in the region often lack adequate infrastructure, teaching materials, and trained personnel to support returning learners. Moreover, coordination challenges among stakeholders, including schools, government agencies, and community organisations, further impede the effective implementation of re-entry programs.

Further, an item in the questionnaire sought to investigate if learners felt welcome by teachers in the classroom. 89.9% of the respondents revealed that they felt welcome, whereas minimal percentages agreed a little, disagreed a little, and disagreed a lot that teachers welcomed them in the classroom. Moreover, the study sought to establish whether teachers treated both boys and girls differently in the classroom. 25.8% of the respondents agreed that teachers treated both boys and girls differently, whereas 51.6% of the respondents disagreed. Further, the study established that teachers were often absent from class. 17.9% agreed that teachers were often absent in class, and 11.6% agreed a little that teachers were often absent from class. The study also sought to find out whether teachers were friendly to young mothers. 58% of the respondents agreed a lot that teachers were friendly to young mothers, whereas 22.3% disagreed that teachers were friendly to young mothers, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Learners' Perceptions of Teacher Support and Gender Equality
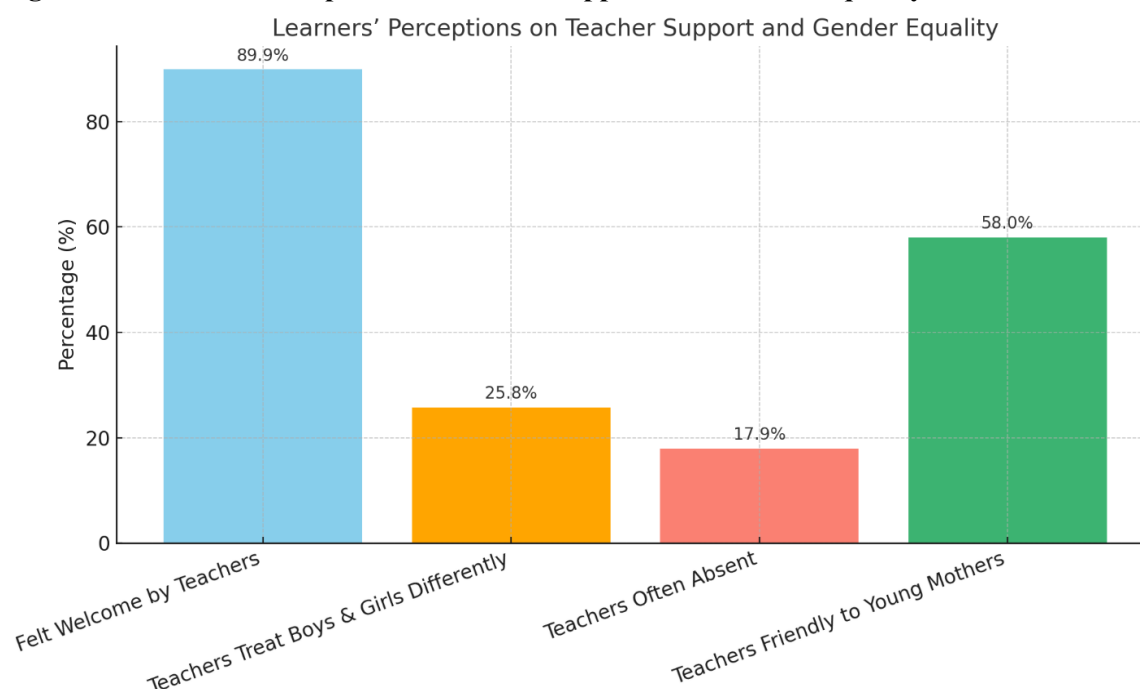
Findings from qualitative data were analysed thematically. In terms of Awareness and Support from 40 teachers, *R5 "We have heard of the re-entry policy but were not trained on how to implement it effectively'' R2 "Some colleagues still view returning girls, especially young mothers, as a distraction to others." R10 "I personally support* *re-entry because every child deserves a second chance, but sometimes parents don't cooperate." R 39 "We lack clear guidelines and resources to follow up on re-entered learners." Further, there were e*merging Issues whereby 15 teachers indicated limited formal training on the re-entry policy, 20 teachers expressed positive attitudes

toward re-entry but noted peer resistance and lack of institutional support, and 5 mentioned conflict between cultural beliefs and policy demands.

Moreover, from 30 parents, the study established Cultural Resistance and Economic Constraints. For instance, R1*"We fear our daughters might become 'spoiled' if allowed back into school after childbirth."* R4 *"School is important, but we also need help to feed the children. Education can't be the only priority."* R22 *"Some churches tell us that once a girl becomes a mother, she must take care of her family''* and R14 *"I support the idea of re-entry, but there is no one to look after the baby while the girl goes to school."* In addition, there were emerging Issues where 18 parents held strong cultural views prioritising boys' education, whereas 8 showed support for re-entry but lacked resources to help their daughters continue schooling and 4 were undecided or uninformed about the policy.

Furthermore, headteachers pointed out Policy Implementation Gaps. For instance, R1*"We try to implement the re-entry policy, but we don't have clear communication from the Ministry"* R6 *"Young mothers face stigma from fellow students and even some teachers"* R10*"We need counselors and social workers to support these learners"* And R18*"Our school board does not fully support re-admitting girls after pregnancy."* Additionally, there were emerging Issues from varied responses from the headteacher. 10 headteachers cited a lack of clear Ministry guidelines and no capacity building, whereas 6 indicated positive school-level initiatives, such as support groups for girls and 4 reported resistance from school boards or religious factions.

Moreover, from the Child Protection Officer, there were Institutional Constraints. For instance, *"We are overstretched and underfunded. We receive reports about school dropouts but cannot follow up effectively"*. *"Some chiefs or religious leaders still believe girls should not return to school after childbirth."*. The study further established a reported lack of coordination between child protection offices and schools and there was no dedicated budget for policy enforcement or community awareness campaigns.

The study also established that Community Leaders and Stakeholders had Mixed Attitudes and Passive Roles. For instance, R52*"Our traditions do not allow girls to go back to school after giving birth."* R72*"We need to engage elders and churches to change attitudes"*, and R91*"The policy is good but was never properly introduced to the community."* The findings are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Emerging Themes Across Respondents

Stakeholder	Key Issue Identified	Frequency
Teachers	Lack of training, stigma, policy awareness gaps	High
Parents	Cultural resistance, economic hardship	Very High
Headteachers	Weak institutional support, unclear guidelines	High
Child Protection	Resource/institutional challenges	Severe
Community	Traditional values vs. policy	High

The study further summarised emerging themes using Regression Analysis. The regression analysis explored how various qualitative themes influenced the overall support level for school re-entry among different stakeholders. The model had an R-squared value of 0.301, indicating that approximately 30.1% of the variability in support levels was explained by the selected predictors. Notably, cultural resistance among parents was significantly associated with lower support levels (β = -0.1036, p = 0.002), highlighting that entrenched socio-cultural beliefs continue to act as major barriers to effective policy

implementation. Institutional support from headteachers had a positive and statistically significant influence (β = 0.1238, p = 0.002), suggesting that leadership commitment at the school level is essential for successful reintegration of learners. Resource challenges faced by child protection officers showed a negative relationship (β = -0.2036) with support levels, although it was only marginally significant (p = 0.076), indicating institutional resource constraints may hinder effectiveness. Traditional values within the community also significantly predicted lower support (β = -0.1308, p = 0.010), aligning with qualitative findings that community norms impede re-entry efforts and interestingly, lack of training among teachers did not significantly impact support levels in the regression (p = 0.405), even though it emerged frequently in qualitative responses, suggesting that other factors might moderate its effect.

The study concluded that while some teachers actively support returning students, others discourage them due to personal biases or a lack of policy knowledge. This aligns with findings by IDinsight (2021), which highlighted that many educators lack adequate training on re-entry policies, leading to inconsistent support for adolescent mothers. Similarly, Omariba, Ondieki, and Mogoi (2024) found that insufficient awareness among teachers hampers the effective implementation of re-entry guidelines in Kuria East Sub-County.

The study also concluded that gender disparities in access to education exacerbate the challenges of school re-entry in Kuria East Sub-County. Girls face greater barriers due to socio-cultural norms that prioritise boys' education. This is corroborated by research from the Population Council (2023), which found that harmful cultural practices, such as child marriage and pregnancy-related taboos, hinder school re-entry for girls in Kenya. Additionally, Ochieng and Ondieki (2019) emphasised that

societal attitudes often stigmatise girls who drop out of school, creating barriers to their re-entry.

In addition, Limited community support further compounds the challenges of school re-entry, as returning learners lack the necessary support systems. Oketch and Oanda (2016) highlighted that community engagement is crucial for addressing underlying socio-cultural factors contributing to school dropout. Moreover, the 4Ts Initiative by the Population Council (2023) demonstrated that structured community involvement significantly improves re-entry rates among adolescent mothers.

The study found that many parents do not actively support re-entry due to economic constraints or societal pressures. This finding is supported by research from the Population Council (2023), which indicated that some parents view adolescent mothers as mature individuals who should prioritise family life over education. Additionally, Henzan (2022) noted that insufficient parental care and denial of child rights contribute to school absenteeism and hinder re-entry efforts.

Implementation of the re-entry policy is often hindered by community leaders who uphold traditional values that conflict with the policy's objectives. Some religious institutions support school re-entry, while others believe young mothers should prioritise family life. This dichotomy is reflected in findings by the Zizi Afrique Foundation (2025), which reported that stigma from peers, teachers, and community members, along with cultural practices, affects re-entry. Furthermore, the limited role of chiefs and resource constraints faced by Child Protection Officers impede effective policy implementation at the grassroots level.

These findings validate that stakeholder awareness and entrenched socio-cultural norms remain pivotal in shaping the effectiveness of school re-entry policy in Kuria East Sub-County. Addressing these barriers through targeted interventions could improve the inclusivity and implementation of re-entry frameworks.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study set out to assess the implementation of the school re-entry policy in public primary schools in Kuria East Sub-County, with a specific focus on stakeholder awareness and the barriers impeding its success. The findings reveal that while the policy is known to a degree among educators and some school heads, its practical implementation remains inconsistent due to a variety of socio-cultural, institutional, and economic challenges. Stakeholder awareness, particularly among teachers and headteachers, was found to be uneven, with many educators lacking formal training or clear guidelines to support learners who return to school after dropping out due to pregnancy or other socio-economic reasons. The study established that entrenched cultural beliefs, especially among parents and community leaders, significantly hinder the acceptance and support of returning learners, particularly adolescent mothers. These beliefs often prioritise boys' education over girls', stigmatise young mothers, and discourage school re-entry for fear of social embarrassment or diminished marriage prospects. In addition, economic constraints and the absence of childcare support systems further reduce the likelihood of successful re-entry for young mothers. At the institutional level, although some headteachers and teachers expressed commitment to supporting re-entry, their efforts are undermined by limited policy dissemination, lack of professional development, and minimal resource allocation. Furthermore, the involvement of child protection officers and community gatekeepers (such as chiefs and religious leaders) was found to be inadequate or misaligned with the policy's goals, further stalling implementation at the grassroots level. Therefore, for the school re-entry policy to achieve its intended goal of enhancing gender equality in education, a multi-stakeholder approach is essential. This should involve structured policy sensitisation for teachers, parents, and community leaders; enhanced training and support for school administrators; economic empowerment programs for affected families; and strong collaboration between schools and child protection agencies. Only through such comprehensive, culturally responsive, and well-coordinated efforts can the barriers to effective policy implementation be dismantled, thus ensuring inclusive and equitable access to education for all learners in Kuria East Sub-County.

Recommendations

- Stakeholder Training whereby the Ministry of Education should conduct workshops for teachers, school administrators, and community leaders.

- Community Sensitisation, whereby there is a need for grassroots campaigns to change perceptions about adolescent mothers.

- The Support Systems should be in place for the provision of school-based counselling, feeding programs, and flexible learning for adolescent mothers.

- There is a need for monitoring and evaluation through regular audits and reporting by education officers to ensure compliance with the policy.

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