

# Teachers' perspectives on the implementation of teenage mothers' school re-entry policy in Eswatini Kingdom: Implication for educational evaluators

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** In the global context, there have been high records of teenage girls drop out in schools than teenage boys. This ugly occurrence is attributed to teenage pregnancy and little or no concerns have been given to the school re-entry policy for such category of students especially in the Eswatini Kingdom, Swaziland. Thus, this study explored the perceptions of teachers regarding the implementation of the teenage mothers' school re-entry policy in the Manzini region of Eswatini.

**Method:** A qualitative research approach was adopted for the study using a sample of 15 participants. Data collection instrument a semistructured interview guide. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed.

**Results:** The findings indicated a lack of awareness and understanding of both the policy and its guidelines among participants. The results further showed that the implementation of the re-entry policy is crucial if a teenage pregnant girl child's education is to be realized in Eswatini.

**Conclusion:** Without proper implementation of such a policy, the affected girls could end up, uneducated and poor. Thus, educational evaluators should come up with appropriate policy documents for girl child.

**KEYWORDS**

Eswatini, policy implementation, pregnancy, school re-entry, schooling experiences, teenage mothers

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 | Statement of the problem

A case of gender inequality that causes a lot of girls getting pregnant and eventually dropping out of school has been caused by a complex and layered intersection of sociocultural and socioeconomic factors in sub-Saharan Africa (Nyariro, 2018). Nyariro (2018) opined that not minding the continued efforts to democratize decision and policy-making processes in the education sector, girls' voices continue to be marginalized. Mwanza and Policy (2018) noted that in SSA, poverty, and preference for boys' education anchored on cultural norms factors that negatively influenced the use of the pregnant girls' school re-entry policy. Despite the re-entry policy being in place, there seem to be no clear guidelines on its implementation. This ugly situation led to glaring reports of huge numbers of girls dropping out of school, due to pregnancy, but few or no evidence of the implementation of the same school re-entering policy exists. According to Onyango et al. (2015), studies have indicated that a greater percentage of girls who drop out of school as a result of teenage pregnancy do not return to class after childbirth not minding the re-entry policy provisions. In Kenya, 98% of the 15–19 years girls account for the population of out of schoolgirls as a result of teenage pregnancy, while 59% of such pregnancies are unintended (Walgwe et al., 2016).

Gladys and Alex (2019) found that 250,000 girls within the ages of 7–13 years dropped out of school as a result of pregnancy-related expulsions in schools in Zambia. It has been observed that the failure by school authorities to involve teenage mothers in re-entry policy formulation in Zambia has led to gender discrimination at primary and secondary levels of education (Phiri & Machila, 2020). According to Zuilkowski et al. (2019a), few young mothers complete their schooling not minding having the legal right to attend school. Global trends, especially in the developing nations, have indicated that one of the major social problems is teenage pregnancy which has taken an endemic proportion among teenagers (Mulenga & Mukaba, 2018). According to Birchall (2018), there is evidence of available policies that exclude pregnant students from the school, as well as those that allow new mothers' re-entry into schools in Africa. It is worthy to note that girls do not make themselves pregnant while the majority of those who write school policies in the Kingdom of Eswatini are men. Yet, teenage mothers appear to be the unfair target of both school re-entry policy and other environmental dynamics. Based on the forgoing, the researchers sought to explore the perceptions of teachers regarding the implementation of the teenage mothers' school re-entry policy in the Manzini region of Eswatini within the theoretical framework of Habermas' Critical social theory.

### 1.2 | Theoretical framework

The critical social theory of Habermas (1968) unlike the natural sciences or the humanities is based on the principles of critical knowledge as a result of its orientation to self-reflection and emancipation. Habermas' critical social theory believes that the era of modernity marks a move away from the liberation of enlightenment and toward a new form of enslavement. Critical theory has been applied to the field of education/pedagogy, considering his best-known work to be the pedagogy of the oppressed. Habermas argued that pedagogy should be able to take care of the demands of the oppressed to enable him/her to cocreate knowledge. Thus, the teacher in the critical-theory model is not the dispenser of all knowledge, but a participant who learns with and from the students through good conversation with them. Based on this theory, the goal of pedagogy is to liberate the learner from an

oppressive construct of teacher versus student, the oppressor, and the oppressed (Freire, 2014). Therefore, critical theory pedagogy must also empower the learner to both reflect and act on that reflection to challenge an oppressive status quo rather than allowing the student to only recognize imbalance and inequity (Gottesman, 2016). This theory is related to this study in that the pregnant mothers of school-age in this context are regarded as the oppressed, who need the assistance of the teachers to cope with their school challenges. Thus, using the critical theory to understand the teachers' perspectives on the implementation of the teenage mothers' school re-entry policy in the Manzini region of Eswatini becomes imperative.

### 1.3 | Review of related empirical studies

Onyango et al. (2015) revealed that a range of sociocultural factors such as attitudes towards womanhood, values, practices that consider women as minors among others affect the school re-entry of teenage mothers after pregnancy. In South Africa, school management teams were playing the role of supporting learners in schools whether pregnant or not to retain them by organizing learners' pregnancy awareness campaigns (Mausley & Molefe, 2016). Kurgat (2016) revealed that headteachers in Kenyan schools provided a conducive schooling atmosphere for the girls who are victims of teenage pregnancy and as well extended invitation to the girls who had dropped out of school due to pregnancy. A study showed that the readmitted girls after teenage pregnancy experience declined drastically in their academic performance and such was worse for the low achievers among them after pregnancy (Mwanamwambwa, 2017). Susan (2017) revealed that the majority of principals in the schools studied, have implemented re-entry policy for pregnant mothers after given birth and as well provided a conducive environment for them to cope with their school programs.

However, a study by Joase (2018) revealed that principals and teachers seemed to acknowledge that pregnant learners had a legal right to education but could not assist in managing pregnant learners to reduce the high rate of teenage pregnancies in public schools. Mulenga and Mukaba (2018) found that schools did not have specific programs meant to help the re-entered girls and most of the girls decided to stop schooling. Complex combinations of factors responsible for girl child school dropout include poverty, pregnancy, early marriage, lack of trained teacher counselors among others (Birchall, 2018). The study by Lebele (2018) showed that there is a need for a school-based rehabilitation center, which responsibility will be to provide encouragement and guidance to girls who experienced teenage pregnancy while in school. In a study in Zambia, Kalumba (2018) revealed that most educational leaders had shown positive concerns in the implementation of re-entry policy for teenage mothers by lowering girls cutoff point as well as enrolling more girls than boys. Besides, Musita et al. (2018) showed that the majority of the teachers used for the study were aware of the existing secondary school re-entry policy for teenage mothers.

Adequate utilization of school counselors with the primary objective of counseling girls at risk of dropping out of school as a result of teenage pregnancy will help in improving the enrolment of girls in schools in Nigeria (Alika & Aluede, 2019). Zuilkowski et al. (2019b) revealed that teenage pregnant girls who knew the teenage mothers' re-entry policy were less likely to drop out of school and suffered less stigma after delivery. Furthermore, re-entry policy for teenage mothers had the potential to enlist support for such girls' school continuation but there were shortfalls in its implementation potentials (Zuilkowski et al., 2019b). In Kenya, most principals were reported to have no adequate experience in the proper implementation of the readmission policy of girls after teenage pregnancy in public secondary schools (Musili, Mulwa, et al., 2020). Mpayipheli and Kheswa (2020) revealed that there are difficulties in the implementation of the teenage women's re-entry policy in South Africa, due to lack of in-service training, lack of resources to provide remedial and psychological services to pregnant learners, unclear school policies among others. The implementation re-entry policy of teenage mothers in Kenya was partially successful due to the presence of small numbers of teenage mothers in school compared to those who dropped out due to pregnancy (Barmao-Kiptanui, 2020). Implementation of the readmission policy

of girls after a teenage pregnancy is affected by the guidance and counseling sessions, principals' opinion, and community support (Musili, Mwanja, et al., 2020).

## 1.4 | Gaps in literature

Based on the reviewed empirical studies, it has been observed that related studies have been conducted mostly in Zambia, South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria with little or no studies in Swaziland. However, in the countries in which such similar studies have been carried, the literature showed that some of the teachers, headteachers, and principals are not aware of the re-entry policy for the teenage mothers in schools and thus, posed a lot of difficulties for such girls in schools. This makes it imperative for conducting this study in Swaziland to ascertain the level of awareness of the re-entry policy for teenage mothers by secondary school teachers. Thus, the researchers explored the perceptions of teachers regarding the implementation of the teenage mothers' school re-entry policy in the Manzini region of Eswatini.

## 1.5 | Objectives of the study

The following objectives were sought for the study.

1. Ascertain the perceptions of teachers on the implementation of school re-entry policy for pregnant girls.
2. Explore the perceptions of teachers on the challenges faced by teenage mothers in schools.

## 1.6 | Research questions

1. What are the perceptions of teachers on the implementation of school re-entry policy for pregnant girls?
2. What are the perceptions of teachers on the challenges faced by teenage mothers in schools?

## 2 | METHODS

### 2.1 | Research paradigm, approach, and design

The chosen research philosophy was pragmatism. This is a research paradigm that assumes that there are many ways of interpreting the world and undertaking research. This study was conducted within the qualitative research approach by adopting a phenomenological research design. According to Thwala et al. (2020, 2021), the phenomenological research design is powerful when the study's goal is to explore a concept loaded with social and cultural meanings. Similarly, Baloyi-Mothibeli et al (2021), Kgothule et al. (2021), and Ntseto et al. (2021) have adopted similar research approach. Thus, the researchers adopted it to explore the teachers' perceptions of the implementation of teenage mothers' school re-entry policy.

### 2.2 | Participants

The study sample was made up of 15 guidance and counseling teachers, drawn from a population of teachers in five high schools under the Manzini region. The schools in this region were purposively selected because

the region has a high dropout rate. This sampling procedure was apt in providing the researchers with the schools that have rich data regarding the research questions. In selecting the 15 guidance and counseling teachers, purposive sampling was used. This sampling procedure was ideal for this group of participants due to their specific duties in their respective schools.

### 2.3 | Instrumentation and data trustworthiness

A semistructured interview guide was used for data collection. The interview guide was developed by the researchers and it was properly validated to ensure that it measured the intention of the researchers. The face validation was done by quantitative researchers in the field of study. After that, the interview guide was subjected to pilot testing on an equivalent group of participants outside the study region to ensure the trustworthiness of the data collected.

### 2.4 | Data collection procedure

The researchers conducted individual interviews with the participants to collect the relevant data for the study. The interview was conducted in the respective school of each of the participants. The interviews with the guidance and counseling teachers helped in determining the views of teachers in respect of the awareness of policy implementation and challenges faced by teenage mothers in schools. The individual interviews were semistructured to elicit more important issues and at the same time to enhance flexibility. The interview for each of the participants lasted for a maximum of 25 min. Tape recorder was used to supplement the manual recording of the interviewee's responses to enhance the objectivity of the data collected.

### 2.5 | Data analyses

Data were analyzed using thematic analyses. Thematic analyses offer a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data. It also serves to organize and describe data that are rich in detail. This approach involved the following phases: familiarization with the data, generation of tentative codes, clarification of themes, description of themes, and producing a written report. Interviews were analyzed thematically and some of the things that were mentioned by the respondents were presented as direct quotes in the study. Themes and subthemes were generated from the analyzed data.

### 2.6 | Ethical measures

Ethical approval for carrying out the research was granted by the Eswatini's Ministry of Education and Training through the office of the Director of Education and Training. Permission to carry out the study in the various sampled schools were also granted by the headteachers of those schools. The research participants were asked to consent to participate in the study as an informed consent document was produced before conducting the study. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants' details while the interviews were conducted objectively and professionally.

### 3 | RESULTS

The results were presented based on the major themes and subthemes that emerged at the course of thematic analysis.

#### 3.1 | Theme 1: Perceptions of teachers on the implementation of re-entry policy for pregnant girls

This theme emerged at the course of the interview with the teachers at their various schools. The following extracts were arrived at from the individual responses of the teachers.

Participants A, B, C, D, and E had these to say:

We have been teaching for several years but we are not aware of the re-entry policy for the teenage women, not to talk of implementing. Most times we just pity the readmitted school teenage girls who had experienced teenage pregnancy.

Participants E, F, G, H, I, and J had these to say:

We are aware of the existence of the re-entry policy in general, but we have never seen it. Policy document has not been given to us to study and understand how to implement it. As a result, the implementation becomes practically impossible thereby making the teenage mothers to pass a lot of difficulties. The policy is not known to the girls; it was not brought in for them to understand. On this regard, the policy was deemed to be far-fetched, silent and a weak one.

Participants H, I, J, and K had these to say:

Sincerely speaking, we lack awareness and understanding of both the policy and implementation. We have contradictory perceptions on the interpretation of the policy from the time the teenage pregnancy is discovered at school, how long the pregnant girl should stay at school, up to the time when the girl should finally leave school for delivery. We are confused on how long the pregnant girl should be excused from school (maternity leave), and when she should re-enter after the cessation of pregnancy.

The above extracts showed that there is poor implementation of the re-entry policy for teenage women as a result of the poor awareness of the policy document by the teachers. This is a very ugly situation in schools in the Eswatini Kingdom of Swaziland which poses a lot of challenges to teenage mothers in schools.

#### 3.2 | Theme 2: Perceptions of teachers on the challenges faced by teenage pregnant girls

##### 3.2.1 | Subtheme 2.1: Low self-esteem

Data gathered from nonparenting learners under the same objective to cross-check the information given by parenting learners revealed that there was humiliation practiced by fellow nonparenting learners to returning after pregnancy learners. The kind of humiliation reflected itself as freaking out in class, feeling very disgusted, and

looking down upon the returning girls after pregnancy. They see the girls as a failure and do not want to associate with them. Some of the participants had these to say:

Some of the teachers and learners feel extremely upset and angry about the girls, *Sigiya ngaye nje, siyamlaya, futsi siyampanisha ngoba udlise iteam* loosely translated as (we laugh at them, we spite them, punish them because they have shamed us as a team of girls). We see them as failure because they have failed to close their legs despite the Life skills education lessons, which are always emphasised during the beginning of the year. Some learners in their classes are even more disgusted by merely seeing them walking around. Boys when referring to the returning girls after pregnancy would say “makwakhe” meaning “mother of so and so in a derogatory manner.”

From the above comments, it was deduced that returning girls after pregnancy were bullied by their teachers and fellow nonpregnant learners which leads to their low self-esteem.

### 3.2.2 | Subtheme 2.2: Stigmatization within the school

From the data gathered, stigmatization was reflected by being treated strangely by their friends, being gossiped about, teachers discouraging other learners from associating with returning after pregnancy learners. It transpired that returning after pregnancy learners suffer stigmatization from their peers and teachers within the school fraternity. Below are the extracts of the participants' responses

The truth of the matter is that some teachers and peers are quick to notice that the girls are pregnant such that when they return to the same schools, they will become their source of laughter, ridicule, and sarcasm. Teachers have great input to the extent that they even warn some of their close friends to disassociate themselves from the teenage mothers because they will learn bad habits since they are bad role models to them, to the extent that their friends then begin to treat them strangely and act funny towards them.

Continuing, some of the participants reported that teachers and fellow teenage women's classmates stigmatize and gossip about teenage mothers to the extent of laughing out loudly and sarcastically when they pass by. Some teachers even go to the extent of calling them to the staffroom, pretending to send them something, yet they want to show them to their colleagues and then laugh at them, making such comments as “wadzilika umgcabho, nalobudze buyasha” That makes them feel uncomfortable hence they end up dropping out of school.

The above quotation emphasizes that the stigmatization of returning girls after pregnancy is rife within the school environment, and to some extent, teachers have great input. Due to stigmatization, pregnant teenagers are severely stressed to an extent that they even lose concentration in their studies.

### 3.2.3 | Subtheme 2.3: Depression and anxiety

Data collected revealed that there is a high level of stress and worries coupled with the pressure that teenage mothers experience after pregnancy and delivery, hence they find themselves overwhelmed by the situation at that particular time. Below are the extracts of the teachers' responses.

Stress and worry are some of the challenges that teenage mothers encounter as they struggle to balance their roles as mothers as well as learners. The demanding roles of motherhood and the social ridicule they get from the society overwhelm them, hence making them depressed and traumatized. This ridicule may be from teachers, parents, classmates, and society. This negative treatment leaves them feeling demoralized and cast down with emotional scars.

Continuing, some other participants stated that they can only imagine what returning learners after pregnancy go through to strike a balance between motherhood and academic work, since they have a lot of assignments and tests given to them almost every day here at school. We feel for them because they need to take two shifts, one of being students during the day and being mothers during the night. All those have got their level of stress, especially when the baby is endlessly sick or hungry.

The above assertion reiterates the responsibility that comes with motherhood coupled with academic work which results in extreme levels of stress for the young girls. It was also discovered that returning girls after pregnancy experienced hardship in terms of coping with the demands that come with being a primary caretaker of a new baby coupled with schoolwork.

### 3.2.4 | Subtheme 2.4: Discriminatory practices

The plight of teenage mothers was also revealed through discriminatory practices by teachers and fellow learners. Information gathered showed that teenage mothers encountered difficulties when they attempted to interact with other fellow learners at school. The reaction from the other learners showed that they were regarded as social misfits, not fit to be interacting with “normal learners” it was reported that teachers and other learners went to the extent of developing a habit of blaming teenage mothers for anything wrong in class. This is echoed by the following assertion:

There were moments when the teacher would come to class and find learners in the whole class making noise; however, for some reason instead of addressing the whole class, the teacher would indirectly mention that she does not expect a class to be noisy where there are mothers for that matter. And the fellow learners would mention that “ngubona labomake lalababanga umsindvo” loosely translated as “it is these mothers who are making noise.”

Other participants had these to say: We call them derogatory names to spite them, more especially if we have conflicts, names such as “umtalakanye” or “umtedlane” are used to refer to them. “Our aim in doing this is to reduce their confidence and keep them in their place since they no longer fit in our age group by virtue of experience.”

From the above assertion, the use of such language from teachers is discriminatory, unfriendly, and unacceptable. Teenage mothers' freedom is limited at school, they are not free to behave and act normally like other learners, with them a small mistake is magnified, and they are blamed even for things that they did not do.

## 4 | DISCUSSIONS

Findings pertaining the views and opinions of teachers on the implementation of the re-entry policy for pregnant girls reveal that most teachers are aware of the existence of the re-entry policy in general, but some have confessed to never have seen it. Second, the study revealed a lack of awareness and understanding of both the



policy and implementation. From this finding, it is possible to argue that pregnancy must be seen as a process, as a sequence of events in which each step requires specific attention. For instance, the study revealed contradictory views pertaining to the interpretation of the policy from the time the teenage pregnancy is discovered at school, how long the pregnant girls should stay at school, up to the time when the girls should finally leave school for delivery. There were also conflicting views pertaining to how long should the pregnant girls be excused from school (maternity leave), and when they should re-enter after the cessation of pregnancy. As a result of this poor implementation of the teenage mothers' school re-entry policy, most of them pass through a lot of hardship in school while the majority drop out of school. These findings despite that they are the first in the study area, compare with the findings of similar studies in other African countries such as Mwanamwambwa (2017), Joase (2018), Mulenga and Mukaba (2018), Lebele (2018), Musili, Mulwa, et al. (2020), Mpayipheli and Kheswa (2020), and Barmao-Kiptanui (2020), Musili, Mwanja, et al. (2020).

A study showed that the readmitted girls after teenage pregnancy experience declined drastically in their academic performance and such was worse for the low achievers among them after pregnancy (Mwanamwambwa, 2017). A study by Joase (2018) revealed that principals and teachers seemed to acknowledge that pregnant learners had a legal right to education but could not assist in managing pregnant learners to reduce the high rate of teenage pregnancies in public schools. Mulenga and Mukaba (2018) found that schools did not have specific programs meant to help the re-entered girls and most of the girls decided to stop schooling. Complex combinations of factors responsible for girl child school dropout include poverty, pregnancy, early marriage, lack of trained teacher counselors among others (Birchall, 2018). Lebele (2018) showed that there is a need for a school-based rehabilitation center, which responsibility will be to provide encouragement and guidance to girls who experienced teenage pregnancy while in school.

In Kenya, most principals were reported to have no adequate experience in the proper implementation of the readmission policy of girls after teenage pregnancy in public secondary schools (Musili, Mulwa, et al., 2020). Mpayipheli and Kheswa (2020) revealed that there are difficulties in the implementation of the teenage women's re-entry policy in South Africa, due to lack of in-service training, lack of resources to provide remedial and psychological services to pregnant learners, unclear school policies among others. The implementation re-entry policy of teenage mothers in Kenya was partially successful due to the presence of small numbers of teenage mothers in school compared to those who dropped out due to pregnancy (Barmao-Kiptanui, 2020). Implementation of the readmission policy of girls after a teenage pregnancy is affected by the guidance and counseling sessions, principals' opinion, and community support (Musili, Mwanja, et al., 2020). Unlike what was found in those studies, Musita et al. (2018) showed that the majority of the teachers used for the study were aware of the existing secondary school re-entry policy for teenage mothers.

Based on the above findings, Alika and Aluede (2019) recommended that adequate utilization of school counselors with the primary objective of counseling girls at risk of dropping out of school as a result of teenage pregnancy will help in improving the enrolment of girls in school in Nigeria. Zuilkowski et al. (2019b) revealed that teenage pregnant girls who knew the teenage mothers' re-entry policy were less likely to drop out of school and suffered less stigma after delivery. Furthermore, re-entry policy for teenage mothers had the potential to enlist support for such girls' school continuation but there were shortfalls in its implementation potentials (Zuilkowski et al., 2019b). Those studies have strengthened the need for proper implementation of teenage mothers' school re-entry policy.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

The study assessed the implementation of the re-entry policy for pregnant girls in the Manzini region, Eswatini. Quality of education for teenage mothers with regard to policy drafting and policy implementation is one area that is neglected in terms of research in the Kingdom of Eswatini, hence the researcher's interest

in the study. With regard to the findings, it was concluded that there were tensions with respect to how the policy was perceived and how the policy would be implemented on teenage pregnancy. Some of the implementers seemed to be in confusion as to how they should implement the policy and what guidelines to follow. They attributed this confusion to the nonexistence and nonavailability of clear and specific guidelines on the policy.

## 5.1 | Recommendations

- Since the study indicates the lack of awareness of the implementation of the re-entry policy among the teachers, it is therefore very crucial to create awareness and sensitization of the policy among all the institutions of learning.
- There is a need for effective enforcement of the policy as well as constant and consistent follow-ups on the policy where necessary to increase levels of awareness.
- Ministry of Education and other relevant stakeholders should come up with clear guidelines on how to handle girls who become pregnant while they are still at school and those that return after pregnancy.

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## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

## PEER REVIEW

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