

Exploring Stakeholders' Awareness on the Procedures Guiding Returning Student Mothers to Secondary Education in Morogoro Municipality

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study was to explore stakeholders' awareness on the procedures guiding returning student mothers to secondary education in Morogoro Municipality. The target population include District Education Officer, heads of schools, guidance and counseling teachers, parents of student mothers in the selected secondary schools. A sample size of 45 was used. Purposive sampling techniques were used in selection of respondents. Data were collected by using interviews, and focus group discussions. Qualitative data were analyzed by using thematic analysis. Findings of the study indicates that, effective management of the program for returning student mothers is vital to prevent unintended consequences such as increased teenage pregnancies. Relocating student mothers to different schools can enhance their confidence and academic progress, promoting inclusivity and gender equity. The introduction of a circular in Tanzania has significantly improved girl-child education and gender equality. The study recommends that, to ensure success, the government should also provide necessary school requirements and consider establishing special schools tailored to the unique needs of student mothers.*

Keyword: Stakeholders Awareness, Returning Student Mothers, and Secondary Education

1. Introduction

Early and unintended pregnancy is a global issue, particularly affecting young girls aged 15 to 19 years (Hubbard, 2009). This problem is especially pronounced in developing countries, notably Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where teenage pregnancy rates are alarmingly high (UNFPA, 2006). Unfortunately, this phenomenon obstructs the educational aspirations of many young girls, as it often occurs during the critical early stages of their educational journey.

To address the challenges posed by teenage pregnancies, some countries have adopted the "returning to school" approach, allowing mothering students to resume their studies after childbirth, following the positive outcomes observed in developed nations (Baxter, Pophan & Craig, 2021). In the United States, for instance, supportive infrastructure, such as breastfeeding and diaper facilities and nearby daycare centers, has facilitated this process (Heart, 2016).

In SSA, teenage pregnancies are a leading cause of girls dropping out of school, attributed to factors like inadequate sex education, poverty, unsafe sexual practices, and even negative influences within their environments (Britwum, et al., 2017). This situation perpetuates an education gap between genders, poverty, and increased dependency among women. Consequently, substantial support from governments, society, and peer groups is essential to help pregnant mothers return to education (Mmbaga, 2021).

Several SSA countries have initiated programs to support the return of student mothers to school, but implementation challenges persist, including insufficient community and school support. Tanzania, for instance, grapples with a high teenage pregnancy rate, with over 9000 secondary school

students becoming pregnant between 2021 and 2022 (United Republic of Tanzania, 2023).

While some countries, like Tanzania, have officially permitted pregnant girls to return to school, the gap between pregnancy rates and actual readmissions remains significant, indicating implementation challenges (United Republic of Tanzania, 2023). This underscores the importance of effective policy execution, as demonstrated by a study in Botswana (Molosiwa & Moswela, 2012).

Experiences from countries with re-entry policies suggest numerous benefits, such as empowering girls and women, countering harmful cultural practices like early marriages, and promoting girl child education (Mwanamwambwa, 2017). However, Tanzania faces reluctance among mothering students to take advantage of Circular No. 2 of 2021, potentially due to the low readmission rates.

Despite the broad consensus on the benefits of allowing mothering students to return to school, Tanzania still grapples with low readmission rates, influenced by various factors, including stakeholder perspectives (United Republic of Tanzania, 2023). There is a notable dearth of research on the viewpoints of key stakeholders, which this study in Morogoro Municipality aims to address. In doing so, this study seeks to explore the stakeholders' awareness on the procedures guiding returning student mothers to secondary education in Morogoro Municipality.

2. Research Methodology

This section outlines the research methodology that guided the study. The study employed a mixed research approach along with a case study research design. The target population include District Education Officer, heads of schools, guidance and counseling teachers, parents of

student mothers in the selected secondary schools. A sample size of 45 was used. Purposive sampling techniques were used in selection of respondents. Data were collected by using interviews, and focus group discussions. Qualitative data were analyzed by using thematic analysis.

3. Research Finding and Discussions

The second objective of the study was to review the stakeholders' awareness on circular of returning student mothers to school in Morogoro municipality. The responses were coded and thematically analyzed. Table 3.1 below presents the verbatim quotes, themes and codes of the responses.

Table 3.1: Stakeholders' Perspective of the Circular

Verbatim Quotes	Themes	Codes
<i>It is supposed to be noted that this circular might encourage more pregnancies from school girls if not well managed (R1).</i>	Need for proper management of the program	NPMP
<i>Government must make concerted effort to send student mothers to different schools rather than their previous schools in order to help them to maintain self confidence and self-esteem (R2).</i>	Changing the learning environment	CLE
<i>Due to the importance of education, the circular provides golden opportunity to student mothers to continue with their studies after giving birth so as to prepare for their brighter future (R3).</i>	Circular for students' brighter future	CSBF
<i>The introduction of the circular has facilitated an increase in rate of girl-child education, gender equality issues and equity among educated Tanzanians (R4).</i>	Increased number of literates	INL
<i>The Government ought to support the student mothers to acquire school requirements due to their poor backgrounds (R5).</i>	Provision of school requirements	PSR
<i>The Government must establish a special school for student mothers to ensure proper implementation of circular/ program (R6).</i>	Establishment of special schools	ESS

Source: Field Data (2023)

Need for proper management of the program

There is a need for proper management of the program on circular of returning student mothers to school. In this case a respondent in an interview pointed the following:

It is supposed to be noted that this circular might encourage more pregnancies from school girls if not well managed (R1)

The study's results highlight that existing policies, if not properly managed, may inadvertently encourage pregnancies among school girls. Stakeholders expressed concerns that these policies lacked recommendations or restrictions to limit social interactions between students and their partners or others, potentially contributing to teenage pregnancies.

These findings align with a UNICEF (2006), which revealed cases of teacher abuse leading to student pregnancies in Namibia, highlighting an abuse of power. The study also raised concerns about schools' slow response to such incidents and instances where school authorities might have sought to prevent legal action. Nevertheless, teachers were often the first individuals to whom abused children disclosed their experiences, emphasizing the need for better training and resources to help teachers respond effectively.

Changing the learning environment

Changing the learning environment involves altering the physical, digital, or social context in which education takes place to enhance the effectiveness of the learning process. In this case respondent pointed the following:

Government must make concerted effort to send student mothers to different schools rather than their previous schools in order to help them to maintain self confidence and self-esteem (R2)

The research suggests that implementing a government strategy to relocate student mothers to different schools from

their previous ones can be a powerful means of boosting their self-confidence and self-esteem. This approach offers these women a fresh start in a supportive and nonjudgmental environment, allowing them to break free from the burdens of past challenges and stereotypes. Moreover, these new schools should offer specialized support networks and empowerment programs to further enhance their personal and academic growth, equipping them with the necessary skills and resilience to effectively balance their education and parenting responsibilities. Ultimately, this approach aims to pave the way for positive life trajectories for both student mothers and their children.

These findings align with Shaningwa (2007), which underscores the importance of preparing suitable educators to address sensitive topics, promoting peer education as an effective approach, and celebrating successes to reinforce behavior changes among learners.

Circular for students' brighter future

This section focus on suggesting a circular aimed at ensuring a brighter future for students through comprehensive educational initiatives and opportunities. In this case, a respondent in an interview pointed the following:

Due to the importance of education, the circular provides golden opportunity to student mothers to continue with their studies after giving birth so as to prepare for their brighter future (R3)

The findings suggest that supporting student mothers in continuing their education not only fosters their personal growth but also promotes inclusivity and equity in the educational system. This initiative empowers them to balance motherhood and academics, opening doors to a brighter future. It underscores that education serves as a pathway to strengthen communities and societies by ensuring that individuals aren't hindered by life circumstances.

These findings align with Mwenje (2015), which emphasizes that our aspirations stem from our innate talents and gifts, indicating that one's dreams persist regardless of pregnancy, urging action to pursue them.

Increased number of literates

One of the stakeholders' perspectives on the implementation of returning student mothers policy was the increase of number of literacies. In this case, a respondent in interview pointed the following:

The introduction of the circular has facilitated an increase in rate of girl-child education, gender equality issues and equity among educated Tanzanians (R4)

These findings indicate that, the introduction of a circular in Tanzania has significantly improved girl-child education, gender equality, and overall educational equity. This has been achieved through the implementation of policies or guidelines, resulting in increased enrollment and retention rates for girls in schools. The circular also promotes gender equality awareness, inclusive educational environments, and reduces traditional barriers to girls' education, contributing to a more balanced and fair education system that benefits all Tanzanians by fostering a diverse and well-educated citizenry.

Another respondent has revealed the following:

The introduction of the circular has facilitated an increase in rate of girl-child education, gender equality issues and equity among educated Tanzanians (R4)

The introduction of the circular, a policy or directive, has played a pivotal role in catalyzing a significant increase in the rate of girl-child education in Tanzania. This policy shift has also brought heightened attention to gender equality issues, creating an environment where both girls and boys have equal access to educational opportunities, resources, and support. Consequently, a more equitable educational landscape has emerged, benefiting not only the immediate learners but also contributing to a more inclusive and empowered Tanzanian society.

These findings align with Sitali (2009), which advocated for reserving 50% of higher education slots for women or girls to ensure equal representation in the education sector. This approach aims to control entry numbers into public higher education institutions and can be adjusted by gender or other factors, like socio-economic status, to ensure equitable representation in Rwandese society. Encouraging institutions to set annual targets for gender-balanced enrollment over the next five years further promotes proactive efforts to address underrepresentation.

Provision of school requirements

The provision of school requirements involves supplying students with the necessary materials, resources, and items needed for their education, such as textbooks, stationery, and equipment. In this case, a respondent pointed the following in an interview:

The Government ought to support the student mothers to acquire school requirements due to their poor backgrounds (R5)

The study reveals that the absence of a well-defined policy implementation plan has placed the responsibility for the successful re-entry of young mothers into school primarily on head teachers. These head teachers wield significant authority in accommodating these students and creating either a supportive or unsupportive learning environment, impacting whether young mothers return to school or not. Many schools lack the necessary mechanisms to monitor and address pregnancy cases, hindering the implementation of intervention programs.

These findings are consistent with a study by Mwanamwambwa (2017), emphasizing the importance of teacher support for re-admitted girls who face academic challenges due to increased responsibilities as young mothers. To empower these girls, they should be encouraged to actively participate in academic activities and acquire valuable skills, necessitating the granting of sufficient freedom to do so.

Establishment of special schools

The establishment of special schools involves creating educational institutions tailored to cater specifically to the needs of students with unique learning requirements or disabilities. A respondent in an interview pointed the following:

The Government must establish a special school for student mothers to ensure proper implementation of circular/ program (R6)

The study suggests the government should establish a specialized school to support student mothers in balancing their education with parenting responsibilities. This school would create a conducive learning environment, addressing challenges like childcare and time constraints. The initiative demonstrates the government's commitment to inclusive education, recognizing the unique circumstances of student mothers.

The findings align with a previous study by Mwenje (2015), which also emphasized the advantages of such centers, including providing daycare programs and transitional support to enable adolescent mothers to continue their education effectively.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study conclude that, proper management of the program for returning student mothers is crucial to avoid unintended consequences such as increased teenage pregnancies. Changing the learning environment by relocating these students to different schools, providing specialized support, and empowerment programs can enhance their self-confidence and self-esteem. Supporting student mothers through a circular that enables them to continue their education promotes inclusivity and equity while also increasing girl-child education rates and gender equality. To ensure success, the government should also provide

necessary school requirements and consider establishing special schools tailored to the unique needs of student mothers.

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