

Preparedness of Secondary School Management to Support Mothering Students in Mtama District, Tanzania

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Abstract

This study examined school management preparedness to accommodate mothering students following the implementation of Tanzania's re-entry policy. Grounded in the Two-Generation Approach, the study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design involving Ward Education Officers, heads of schools, teachers, and mothering students in Mtama District. Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions and analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that school management demonstrated a moderate level of preparedness through flexible timetables, guidance and counselling services, and limited health support. However, significant gaps were identified, including inadequate infrastructure, a lack of institutionalised support systems, and insufficient professional training. Respondents' narratives highlighted both the efforts underway and the constraints in implementing the policy. The study concludes that while school management shows commitment, systemic limitations hinder effective implementation. The study recommends strengthening and formalising institutional capacity to enable mothering students to fully benefit from the re-entry policy.

Keywords: School management preparedness, mothering students, re-entry policy, inclusive education, Tanzania.

1.0 Introduction

The global commitment to inclusive education is fixed in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for equitable access to quality education and lifelong learning for all people (UNESCO, 2022). This commitment recognises the diverse needs of learners, including those whose education is disrupted by socio-economic and biological factors. Among the most vulnerable are adolescent girls, whose educational paths are frequently interrupted by pregnancy and motherhood. This challenge is severe in Sub-Saharan Africa, where pregnancy has historically led to school dropout due to restrictive policies, socio-cultural norms, and institutional exclusion (UNICEF, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

Adolescent pregnancy reinforces gender inequality by limiting girls' access to education and reducing their future employment prospects. Adolescent mothers face multiple challenges when attempting to return to school, including persistent social stigma, inadequate institutional support, and limited infrastructure designed to accommodate their dual

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roles as students and caregivers (Mtoi, 2024; Temba, 2022). These challenges not only threaten school retention but also contribute to long-term socio-economic disadvantages for affected girls and their children, as well as to national development, through reduced human capital formation (World Bank, 2020).

To address these challenges, many countries have introduced re-entry policies providing a second chance at education for adolescent mothers (Chae & Ngo, 2017). In Tanzania, the Government introduced Circular No. 2 of 2021, which permits adolescent mothers to return to school after childbirth, marking a significant shift from earlier practices that disqualified pregnant girls from the formal education system (URT, 2021; Mkumbo, 2020). The policy aligns with SDG 4 on inclusive education and SDG 5 on gender equality, and supports Tanzania's efforts to strengthen human capital by ensuring that all learners, including adolescent mothers, have access to quality education (UNESCO, 2022; UNICEF, 2021).

Despite the re-entry policy's progressive intent, evidence consistently shows that its effectiveness depends on school management's preparedness. Studies from Tanzania and comparable settings indicate that schools frequently lack formalised support systems, trained personnel, adequate infrastructure, and clear operational guidelines for accommodating mothering students (Mtoi, 2024; Temba, 2022; Kamangu & Mbago, 2024). Research from Kenya reveals that leadership commitment and school culture are critical factors in ensuring that re-entry policies produce meaningful results for returning mothering students (Kurgat, 2016; Marende, 2022). These studies highlight both the potential and the persistent gaps in translating policy into inclusive practice.

Existing studies have primarily focused on the challenges and experiences of mothering students, as well as barriers to re-entry policy implementation. For instance, Temba (2022), Mtoi (2024), and Kamangu and Mbago (2024) reported challenges related to inadequate counselling services, social stigma, weak institutional support, and infrastructural constraints. However, limited empirical attention has been paid to the preparedness of school management, the crucial actor responsible for implementing the re-entry policy. In particular, little is known about how prepared school management is to provide academic, psychosocial, infrastructural, and health-related support to mothering students, especially in rural districts such as Mtama. Therefore, this study examined the preparedness of secondary school management to support mothering students in Mtama District, Tanzania.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review: The Two-Generation Approach

This study is grounded in the Two-Generation (2Gen) Approach, which emphasises the interconnected well-being of parents and children and advocates for integrated support systems that address the needs of both generations concurrently within shared institutional frameworks (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2021). The central premise is that interventions targeting only one generation are inherently limited in impact. Applied

to the schooling of mothering students, the approach requires schools to create holistic support environments that simultaneously advance student-mothers' academic progress while acknowledging the developmental needs of their children (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2021).

In the context of this study, the 2Gen Approach provides a multidimensional lens for assessing school management preparedness across four dimensions: flexible institutional arrangements accommodating dual caregiving and academic roles; psychosocial support through guidance and counselling; physical infrastructure, including lactation spaces, childcare areas, and health facilities; and community and institutional partnerships extending support beyond the school (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023). The 2Gen approach shifts evaluation beyond academic provision to a broader assessment of institutional readiness to support the whole lives of mothering students, guiding both data collection and interpretation of findings.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 School Management's Role in Supporting Re-Entry Policies

Empirical studies consistently regard school management as the principal institutional actor in determining whether re-entry policies for mothering students are effectively implemented in schools. In fact, school management responsibilities extend beyond mere administrative compliance with policy directives to include fostering an inclusive school culture, allocating resources, coordinating support services, and managing relationships among mothering students, teachers, peers, and the wider school community (UNESCO, 2022; UNICEF, 2021). This broader role positions school leaders as key agents in bridging the gap between policy intentions and actual school-level implementation. Evidence from international contexts highlights the decisive influence of leadership commitment in shaping policy outcomes.

In Kenya, Kurgat (2016) found that schools where head teachers actively promoted the inclusion of mothering students and provided clear guidance to staff demonstrated higher retention rates than schools whose leaders adopted a passive attitude. Similarly, Marende (2022) reported that personal commitment and advocacy by school principals were critical determinants of whether re-entry policies were implemented with loyalty or reduced to mere symbolic administrative compliance. These findings suggest that effective implementation depends on both structural preparedness and leadership attitudes, values, and proactive engagement. In the Tanzanian context, empirical evidence reveals persistent gaps in institutional preparedness. Mtoi (2024) found that many schools lack formalised support systems, with implementation largely dependent on the goodwill and discretion of individual teachers and administrators rather than on established institutional strategies. This reliance on individual effort creates inconsistencies in support for mothering students, thereby undermining equity, equality, and the effectiveness of policies across schools. Supporting this conception, Temba (2022) identified inadequate infrastructure and a shortage of trained personnel as major limitations to schools' capacity to provide meaningful support to re-entering mothering students.

These studies demonstrate that, despite the existence of re-entry policies, their success depends on the level of preparedness of school management. This preparedness encompasses not only the availability of resources and systems but also the commitment, leadership practices, and institutional culture fostered by school management. However, existing studies have examined isolated aspects of implementation without sufficiently assessing school management preparedness through a multidimensional framework, such as the Two-Generation Approach. This gap justifies the need for the current study.

2.2.2 Flexible Timetabling and Institutional Accommodation

A substantial body of empirical literature identifies flexible timetabling as one of the most practical and immediately implementable strategies for supporting mothering students within school systems. Flexible timetabling allows student-mothers to attend classes at times that match their caregiving responsibilities, thereby reducing the tension between academic participation and parenting duties, a major factor in dropout among returning students (Asumini & Mwila, 2024; Okondo, 2022). Empirical evidence from Tanzania found that schools offering alternative schedules, such as afternoon or evening classes, enabled mothering students to manage childcare responsibilities and maintain school attendance (Asumini & Mwila, 2024). Schools with flexible timetables reported higher attendance and retention than those with stricter timetables. However, the study revealed that such arrangements were informal and inconsistent, and their application largely depended on the discretion of individual teachers or school administrators rather than on institutionalised school policies. This lack of formalisation undermines sustainability, consistency, and equity in the support provided.

From a theoretical perspective, the Two-Generation (2Gen) Approach reinforces the importance of flexible timetabling as a structural mechanism for recognising the dual roles of mothering students (He et al., 2019). The approach emphasises that educational institutions must adapt their organisational structures to accommodate the interconnected needs of both the student-mother and her child. Nevertheless, it also cautions that flexible timetabling, while necessary, is not sufficient without complementary support systems such as counselling services, childcare support, and appropriate infrastructure. Therefore, flexible timetabling can serve as a key strategy for facilitating re-entry and retention when integrated into a holistic support framework. This underscores the need to examine flexible timetabling not merely as an isolated practice but as part of a comprehensive system of school management preparedness.

2.2.3 Guidance and Counselling Services

Guidance and counselling services are essential components of a supportive school environment for mothering students. The psychosocial challenges associated with adolescent motherhood, including sorrows over lost educational opportunities, anxiety about the future, relationship difficulties, social stigma, and the emotional demands of caregiving, require professional psychological support beyond what regular classroom teachers are capable of offering based on their teacher training (Ngonyani, 2022). In Kenya, Tarus (2020) found that mothering students in schools with dedicated and trained

counsellors reported higher levels of psychological well-being, academic motivation, and retention than those in schools without such services. The availability of trusted adult professionals to whom mothering students could turn for confidential support was crucial to their decision to remain at school despite the challenges they faced.

Similarly, Ngonyani (2022) highlighted that both teachers and students recognised the potential of professional counselling in supporting the reintegration of mothering students, but lamented the absence of formally trained counsellors in most government secondary schools. The literature also reveals a concerning pattern in which guidance and counselling for mothering students was always conflated with moral lecturing or reproductive health education focused on preventing further pregnancies, rather than addressing the genuine psychosocial needs of student-mothers (Chiyota, 2020). This misalignment between what mothering students need and the actual provision further highlights the importance of professional training and clear institutional mandates for counselling services.

2.2.4 Infrastructure and Physical Support

The physical infrastructure of schools for accommodating mothering students is frequently overlooked. The absence of essential facilities such as lactation rooms, childcare spaces, private toilets, and first aid rooms creates practical barriers to school attendance and retention that flexible timetabling and counselling services alone cannot overcome (Temba, 2022; Kamangu & Mbago, 2024). Temba (2022) found that the absence of lactation rooms in Tanzanian government secondary schools was a significant barrier to school attendance for breastfeeding mothers, who often had to choose between feeding their infants and attending classes. Similarly, lack of childcare facilities meant that many mothering students had no safe place to leave their children during school hours, forcing them to either bring their children to school or leave them in the care of family members who were not always available or willing to assist. Kamangu and Mbago (2024) further observed that resource constraints and inadequate government investment in school infrastructure led to deficits in physical support, with most government secondary schools lacking even basic first-aid facilities. The absence of provisions for mothering students in Circular No. 2 of 2021 on infrastructure requirements is a significant policy gap that needs to be addressed to ensure the school environment supports the re-entry policy (Hall, 2022).

2.2.5 Health Services and Well-being Support

Mothering students have distinct health needs that require targeted institutional support beyond what is typically provided in standard school settings. These students, especially during the postnatal period, require access to clean, private breastfeeding spaces, adequate nutrition, and continuous monitoring of their physical and reproductive health (Madkour et al., 2016). These needs highlight limitations in conventional school first aid services and the need for more specialised and responsive health support systems within schools. International literature emphasises the importance of integrating education and health services, with recommendations that schools establish formal linkages with nearby health facilities to ensure access to maternal and reproductive health care (UNICEF, 2021).

This integration facilitates timely medical attention, supports the well-being of both mother and child, and enhances students' ability to remain engaged in schooling. However, in Tanzania and similar contexts, such integration remains limited. Most schools rely on basic first aid and external referrals, often resulting in delays and inconsistent access to care, which can negatively affect attendance, concentration, and academic performance (Temba, 2022; Mizero et al., 2024). Furthermore, evidence indicates that effective school management plays a critical role in ensuring the availability and coordination of health services. Failure to adequately address these needs not only constrains the success of re-entry initiatives but also raises concerns about students' rights to health and education. From the perspective of the Two-Generation (2Gen) Approach, health services are essential to supporting the interconnected well-being of the student-mother and her child, underscoring the need for an integrated institutional support framework.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological design to explore stakeholders' lived experiences and perspectives on the implementation of the re-entry policy for mothering students. The study was conducted in Mtama District, Lindi Region, Tanzania, which was selected for its high rates of adolescent pregnancy and for the ongoing implementation of Circular No. 2 of 2021. Purposive sampling was used to select 29 participants from three government secondary schools, including Ward Education Officers, school heads, teachers, and student mothers, to provide diverse perspectives on school management preparedness and policy implementation.

Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions conducted in Kiswahili. Interviews were conducted with education officers, heads of schools, and teachers, while focus group discussions were held with mothering students to capture their shared experiences. The data were transcribed, translated into English, and analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The study ensured trustworthiness through member checking, rich contextual descriptions, audit trails, and reflexive practices, guided by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

The findings are organised around four key themes: flexible timetabling, guidance and counselling services, infrastructure challenges, and health support services, with an additional cross-cutting theme on institutional and policy gaps. The results indicate moderate school management preparedness, characterised by emerging supportive practices and institutional commitment, but constrained by structural, resource, and capacity limitations that hinder the consistent and equitable implementation of the re-entry policy.

4.1 Flexible Timetable Arrangements

Flexible timetabling emerged as the most consistently implemented strategy for supporting mothering students across the schools. School management adjusted class schedules by introducing afternoon sessions to allow student mothers to care for their children before attending school. Although this arrangement was crucial for improving attendance and retention, its operation was informal and not institutionalised. One head of school noted that the flexibility depended on individual leadership discretion rather than formal policy, raising concerns about its sustainability and consistency upon leadership changes:

We try to adjust the timetable to allow students to attend classes after attending to their children, but this is not officially documented anywhere. We do it because we understand the girls' needs, but if a new head who doesn't understand them comes in, things might change. There is nothing binding us to this arrangement (HoS 2).

This quotation shows that the school management has responded well to the needs of mothering students, accommodating their dual roles. However, the key weakness is a lack of institutional commitment, as the flexibility rests in the leader's discretion rather than a formal policy. This creates the need to institutionalise flexible timetabling to ensure consistency and sustainability. A teacher corroborated the informal and individually dependent character of the arrangement, noting:

Sometimes we allow them to come late or leave early, depending on their situation, but it depends on the teacher's understanding. Not all teachers agree with this. Some feel it is not fair to other students (Teacher 3).

The findings reveal that flexible timetabling is not only a management issue but also a challenge to staff culture, as some teachers perceive the arrangement as unfair to other students. This shows that internal institutional pressures and the need to address negative attitudes through professional development and sensitisation are driving shared, inclusive practices. These results match UNESCO (2022) and Asumini and Mwila (2024), who emphasise the importance of flexible learning arrangements in improving attendance and retention among mothering students. However, the informal practices align with Mtoi (2024), who notes that support in Tanzanian schools is not institutionalised. From the perspective of the Two-Generation Approach, flexible arrangements are essential but must be formalised within schools to ensure sustainability, consistency, and equity.

4.2 Guidance and Counselling Services

Guidance and counselling emerged as an important need, but created an implementation gap in schools. The support rendered by the school management to mothering students through existing counsellors and informal teacher support seemed ineffective due to a lack of professional capacity and specialised training, indicating inadequacy in addressing complex psychosocial needs of mothering students, as acknowledged by one teacher:

We advise these students, but we are not trained counsellors. So, sometimes we don't know how to handle their psychological challenges, such as family rejection, financial constraints, and loneliness. We try our best to use the little skills we have, but we know that they aren't enough, as we are not therapists (Teacher 1).

This finding highlights a clear mismatch between the complex psychosocial needs of mothering students and the limited professional capacity available within schools. The challenges faced by mothering students, such as financial stress and loneliness, extend beyond academic concerns to include emotional, social, and economic dimensions, requiring specialised counselling expertise to address them - a skill lacking in most teachers, hence the need for formal training. From the perspective of mothering students, this gap translates into insufficient support, leaving many of their critical needs unmet and affecting their well-being and ability to remain engaged in schooling, as noted by one mothering student:

Sometimes I feel stressed because of my situation, but there is no one to help me. I have tried to talk to teachers, but they tell me to focus on my studies and not worry about other things. But how can I study well while I have so many problems? (Student 5).

The findings indicate that the counselling provided to mothering students is inadequate and focused on studies rather than addressing psychosocial challenges, hence contributing to feelings of isolation and misunderstanding. These results are consistent with Tarus (2020) in Kenya and Ngonyani (2022) in Tanzania, highlighting the role of trained counsellors in supporting retention and wellbeing, and that of Chiyota (2020), who notes that teachers are unprepared for counselling roles. From the perspective of the Two-Generation Approach, professional counselling is essential because the psychological well-being of student-mothers directly affects both their academic performance and their ability to care for their children. Therefore, inadequate counselling support affects both mothers and their children, underscoring the need to invest in specialised counselling services within schools.

4.3 Infrastructure Challenges

Infrastructure constrained the school management's preparedness since the absence of essential facilities such as childcare rooms, lactation spaces, private toilets, and appropriate health facilities created significant barriers to the effective participation of mothering students, as one Ward Education Officer noted:

Most schools were not designed to accommodate mothering students. The government has told us to accept these students back, but there are no resources for them. We are expected to do something from nothing (WEO 1).

This quotation highlights a critical gap between policy expectations and resource provision, indicating that school management efforts are constrained by structural limitations beyond their control. Inadequate infrastructure undermines the implementation of the re-entry policy, as policy expectations exceed available school resources, placing a disproportionate burden on already resource-constrained school management teams, as noted by Wekesa and Kitainge (2022). Moreover, lived experiences of mothering students illustrate the practical consequences of this gap, as one student explained:

"There is no place to take care of my baby when I come to school... sometimes I miss classes... Other times I bring the baby to school, and the teachers get annoyed" (Student 2).

The quotation shows that inadequate infrastructure creates attendance barriers and increases the risk of dropout among mothering students. For instance, a lack of childcare facilities and lactation spaces forces students to choose between attending school and caring for their children, a dilemma that undermines sustained participation even among motivated learners. These results align with Kamangu and Mbago (2024), who identify infrastructure deficits as key barriers to retention and inclusive education in Tanzania, and also align with Gardner et al. (2026), who state that the absence of clear infrastructure provisions in Circular No. 2 of 2021 limits effective implementation of the re-entry policy.

4.4 Health Support Services

Health support services such as postnatal, breastfeeding facilities, and reproductive health services were limited in schools, yet they were critical but unmet needs in the study schools, as one head of school noted:

We only have a first-aid kit, but we do not have a nurse or a special room. There is really nothing we can do beyond the basics" (HoS 1).

The findings reflect both resource constraints and institutional limitations, revealing a systemic gap, as schools lack clear policy guidance on how to address the health needs of mothering students, as one teacher explained:

The Ministry has not given us any specific guidance... we are not health workers... we can't do much" (Teacher 2)

This quotation shows that school management lacks the mandate or expertise to respond effectively to the health needs of mothering students. These results align with UNICEF (2021), which emphasises the importance of integrating education and health services, and with Temba (2022), who identifies inadequate health facilities as a major barrier to effective education. Generally, the absence of comprehensive health support undermines effective policy implementation and highlights the need for clear guidance, resources, and integration of health services within schools.

4.5 Institutional and Policy Gaps: Dependence on Individual Effort

A key cross-cutting finding is that support for mothering students largely depends on the individual effort and goodwill of teachers and school leaders, but not on formalised institutional systems. This situation creates inconsistency and inequality, as the quality of support varies depending on the commitment and attitudes of specific individuals, as one Ward Education Officer noted:

If you have a good head of school who cares, the students get support. If not, they are on their own... it is just luck" (WEO 2).

This quotation indicates that reliance on leaders' discretion, rather than on structured systems that provide clear guidelines, standardised procedures, and accountability mechanisms, leads to uneven policy implementation. These findings align with Mtoi (2024) and Wekesa and Kitainge (2022), who identify informality as a key barrier to effective implementation. While the school management demonstrates commitment, the absence of

systemic support, adequate resources, and a clear operationalisation of the policy limits the policy's effectiveness and equity. Hence, there is a need to institutionalise support systems alongside the Two-Generation Approach to ensure sustainable, consistent implementation.

5.0 Conclusion

This study examined the preparedness of school management to accommodate mothering students in government secondary schools in Mtama District following the implementation of Circular No. 2 of 2021. The findings reveal that school management demonstrated moderate preparedness through flexible timetabling, informal counselling support, limited health services, and supportive school learning environments, reflecting progress toward inclusive education compared to past exclusion. However, preparedness remains incomplete, as support systems depend on individual goodwill rather than formalised frameworks for flexible timetabling, the use of trained counsellors, adequate infrastructure, health services, and institutional coordination. Lack of formalised guidelines creates inconsistent and unstable support for mothering students. In conclusion, although the re-entry policy is committed to enhancing inclusion, its efficiency is constrained by insufficient resources, unclear operational guidelines, and institutional capacity. Hence, there is a need to bridge the gap between policy intentions and practical implementation to achieve equitable and effective support for mothering students.

6.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) revise and operationalise Circular No. 2 of 2021 by providing clear, specific, and enforceable guidelines on how schools should support mothering students across key aspects: timetabling, guidance and counselling, infrastructure, and health services. MOEST should also allocate more funds to the development of essential facilities, such as lactation rooms, childcare spaces, private toilets, and school-linked health services. The school management should formalise flexible timetabling arrangements, strengthen inclusive school cultures through continuous staff sensitisation, and address attitudinal barriers that hinder effective support. Schools should also equip teachers with basic training in psychosocial and stress management skills to support mothering students. Additionally, future research should adopt longitudinal designs to assess long-term academic and well-being outcomes of mothering students, conduct comparative studies across different regions to identify contextual variations, and incorporate community perspectives to enhance the reintegration and sustained participation of mothering students in education.

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