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Beyond Re-Entry: How Parental Income Shapes Teen Mothers' Academic Engagement in Vihiga County Public Day Secondary Schools, Kenya

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Abstract: Secondary education is essential for developing the knowledge and skills required for lifelong learning and future employment. Despite Kenya's School Re-Entry Policy, many teen mothers continue to experience barriers to effective participation in academic programmes, particularly in resource-constrained households. This study examined the relationship between parental income levels and teen mothers' participation in academic programmes in public day secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya. A correlational research design was adopted, involving 220 teen mothers drawn from an estimated population of 550 using purposive snowball sampling. Data were collected using structured questionnaires. ANOVA results indicated a significant difference in participation across household income groups, $F(3, 216) = 7.82$, $p < .001$. Multiple regression analysis indicated that 41.2% of the variance in teen mothers' participation was explained after controlling for age, self-motivation, peer stigma, and school-based support services ($R^2 = .412$, $F = 29.64$, $p < .001$). The study concludes that higher parental income significantly enhances teen mothers' participation in academic programmes. The study recommends strengthening household economic support through targeted bursaries, social protection programmes, and school-based assistance to enhance participation and improve learning outcomes among teen mothers.

Keywords: *Parental income, Teen mothers, Academic participation, Public day secondary schools.*

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1. Introduction

Secondary education is a critical stage in the education system because it equips learners with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for higher education, employment, and active participation in society (UNESCO, 2023). Effective participation in academic programmes through regular school attendance, classroom engagement, completion of assignments, examinations, and co-curricular activities enhances learners' academic achievement and future opportunities (Campbell, 2018).

Globally, teenage pregnancy remains a major barrier to girls' educational attainment. Millions of adolescent girls leave school each year due to pregnancy and early motherhood, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (UNESCO, 2023). Although countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada have implemented school re-entry programmes for adolescent mothers, studies indicate that parental income and household socioeconomic conditions continue to influence their ability to participate effectively in education (Clarke & Benson, 2020; Carter & Mitchell, 2022; Thompson & Richards, 2023). Similarly, in Africa, despite school re-entry initiatives supported by UNESCO and the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), household poverty remains a significant barrier to educational participation among teenage mothers (FAWE, 2021; Banda & Chirwa, 2019; Mensah & Adjei, 2023).

In Kenya, the School Re-Entry Policy provides adolescent mothers with an opportunity to resume their education after childbirth. However, household characteristics, particularly parental income, continue to influence access to school fees, learning materials, transport, and other resources necessary for sustained participation in academic programmes (Kamau & Njeri, 2023; Ochieng & Wambua, 2023).

Vihiga County continues to report cases of teenage pregnancy among school-going girls. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2022), approximately 7.7% of girls aged 15–19 years in the county have ever been pregnant. Although these learners are eligible to return to school, limited household financial resources may constrain their effective participation in academic programmes. Despite growing evidence on school re-entry among teenage mothers, limited empirical studies have specifically examined the relationship between parental income levels and teen mothers' participation in academic programmes in public day secondary schools in Vihiga County. This study sought to address this gap.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the implementation of Kenya's School Re-Entry Policy, many teenage mothers continue to face challenges in participating effectively in academic programmes after returning to school. In Vihiga County, teenage pregnancy remains a concern, and many adolescent mothers experience financial constraints that may affect their school attendance, access to learning materials, participation in classroom activities, and completion of academic requirements. Although previous studies have examined teenage pregnancy, school re-entry, and school retention among adolescent mothers, limited empirical evidence exists on the relationship between parental income levels and participation in academic programmes among teen mothers in public day secondary schools in Vihiga County. Consequently, the extent to which parental income is associated with teen mothers' participation in academic programmes remains unclear, creating a knowledge gap that necessitated the present study.

1.3 Aim of the Study

To determine the relationship between parental income levels and teen mothers' participation in academic programmes in public day secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Underpinning

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explains that learners' educational outcomes are shaped by interactions within their immediate and broader environments, with the family (microsystem) playing a central role in providing financial, emotional, and social support (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within this context, parental income determines the availability of educational resources such as school fees, learning materials, transport, and childcare support, which are essential for sustained participation in academic programmes among teen mothers.

Parental income has consistently been identified as a key determinant of educational participation among adolescent mothers. Financial constraints often limit families' ability to meet both the direct costs of schooling, including tuition fees, uniforms, and learning materials, and indirect costs such as transport and childcare. These financial challenges reduce school attendance, classroom engagement, and completion of academic activities.

Evidence from developed countries demonstrates that financial support substantially improves educational participation among teenage mothers. In the United States, Campbell (2018) found that scholarships and financial aid programmes significantly increased school completion rates by reducing economic barriers to education. Similarly, UNESCO (2023) reported that countries with comprehensive financial support and flexible school re-entry policies record higher participation and completion rates among adolescent mothers than countries with limited institutional support.

2.2 Empirical Literature

Household income plays a significant role in determining whether teen mothers can return to school. Financial constraints often limit their ability to afford school-related costs, forcing many to drop out. The cost of education, including tuition fees, school uniforms, transportation, and childcare, creates a significant burden for low-income families. In many cases, parents prioritize the education of non-parenting siblings over that of teenage mothers, forcing them into informal employment or early marriages as alternatives to schooling. Additionally, the indirect costs of education, such as the opportunity cost of lost labor, further discourage young mothers from continuing their studies.

In developed countries, literature indicates that financial support structures for teenage mothers have been well-established. Campbell (2018) conducted a study on financial support structures for teenage mothers in the United States. With a sample of 400 participants, the study found that access to scholarships and financial aid programs significantly increased school completion rates among young mothers, increasing their likelihood of finishing high school by 40%. This finding underscores the crucial role of financial support in mitigating the economic challenges that often force teenage mothers to drop out of school. However, this study focused exclusively on financial aid and scholarships within a high-income country, where government and institutional support structures are robust. The study does not explore other socioeconomic factors such as parental support, household income stability, and societal attitudes, which could also influence teenage mothers' school participation. Additionally, the study does not account for how such financial interventions function in low-resource settings like Vihiga County, Kenya, where poverty levels and social norms might pose different challenges.

Studies examining barriers to teenage mothers' education across Sub-Saharan Africa have explored the phenomenon and its consequences on schooling (UNESCO, 2023). Data collected from 15 countries were analyzed, and it was found that in low-income households, teenage mothers were 70% less likely to return to school due to the high cost of education and childcare. The study provided a comparative analysis of different regions, highlighting systemic financial barriers that prevented teenage mothers from completing their education. It emphasized that financial constraints were not just limited to tuition fees but also extended to associated costs such as childcare, school materials, and transportation. Moreover, the study revealed that countries with strong policy frameworks for financial aid and flexible schooling systems had higher rates of school re-entry among teenage mothers compared to those with minimal government support. Despite offering a broad overview of financial challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa, the study lacked localized data and in-depth qualitative insights specific to individual countries. The current study bridged this gap by conducting an in-depth analysis of how household income levels influenced school participation among teen mothers in Vihiga County, Kenya. By focusing on this specific region, the study provided detailed insights into the unique socio-economic challenges faced by young mothers and proposed locally relevant solutions to improve school retention.

The relationship between Income levels and return to school in Tanzania was explored by Mutisia & Mwangi 2023), utilizing mixed methods. The study found that only 30% of teen mothers from low-income families returned to school, compared to 75% from middle-income households. The study highlighted that both direct (fees, uniforms, and childcare) and indirect costs (opportunity costs of schooling) were significant barriers. The study emphasized that even when school fees were waived, the hidden costs of education, such as school materials, transportation, and the need for childcare, still hindered many teenage mothers from returning and fully participating in the activities at school. Additionally, the study found that some parents viewed investing in the education of a teenage mother as a poor decision, fearing that the girl might drop out again or fail to achieve academic success.

While this study provided crucial insights into financial barriers, the research used a small sample, which may increase the risk of errors and thereby alter its generalizability. Additionally, its focus on Tanzania limited the applicability of its findings to Kenya's unique socio-economic context. The current study will address this limitation by conducting the study in the Kenyan context, in Vihiga County, and with a larger sample. Furthermore, by incorporating qualitative interviews, this study provided a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges teenage mothers face beyond financial constraints.

Sources of school fees funding were crucial in assuring the vulnerable learners, such as adolescent mothers, of their school attendance. A study in Uganda examined how government bursaries and financial support programs impacted school re-entry rates among young mothers (FAWE, 2021). The findings indicated that the provision of financial aid increased school re-entry rates from 25% to 60% over three years, demonstrating the significant role financial assistance played in promoting educational continuity. The study highlighted that direct financial aid not only covered tuition fees but also addressed other indirect educational costs, such as transportation and school supplies, which often posed substantial challenges for young mothers. However, while the study provided crucial insights into the importance of financial support, it did not explore how social and emotional support factors interacted with financial aid to influence school retention. Additionally, the study was limited to Uganda, meaning its findings may not be entirely generalizable to other socio-economic and cultural contexts, such as Kenya's Vihiga County. The current study addressed this gap by examining how financial assistance, combined with parental education and emotional support, impacted teenage mothers' participation in school within the Kenyan context.

Another qualitative study by Mudzielwana & Maphula (2022) in South Africa investigated 300 teenage mothers to understand how household financial stability influenced school participation. It was established that families with stable incomes were more likely to encourage their daughters to return to school, whereas economically disadvantaged families prioritized household responsibilities over education. The study highlighted that in many cases, low-income parents preferred their daughters to contribute to household income through informal employment rather than returning to school. Additionally, the research found that financial stress often led to teenage mothers experiencing heightened emotional distress, further discouraging them from pursuing education. The qualitative nature of the study provided valuable insights into parental decision-making and societal attitudes toward teenage motherhood. However, the study did not incorporate quantitative analysis to measure the extent to which financial stability affected school retention, nor did it explore the role of external financial aid in mitigating these challenges. The current study addressed these limitations by employing a correlation research design provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between household income and school participation among teenage mothers in Kenya. Additionally, the study assessed the effectiveness of existing financial support programs in Vihiga County to determine whether targeted interventions could enhance educational opportunities for young mothers.

Some existing literature discussed the aspect of economic empowerment for learners facing challenges as a coping mechanism to ensure their survival in schools. Hope and Homes (2024) investigated the impact of economic empowerment programs on the schooling of adolescent mothers in Rwanda. The study found that integrating vocational training with formal education increased school participation by 50%, as it enabled young mothers to achieve financial independence. This research highlights the effectiveness of economic empowerment in supporting teenage mothers' educational journeys. However, the study primarily focuses on vocational training and its financial benefits, without considering other socioeconomic challenges that could impede teenage mothers' school attendance. Factors such as household financial constraints, parental economic status, and community support networks were not extensively analyzed. Furthermore, the study does not assess whether such interventions were feasible or effective in rural Kenyan settings, where educational and economic infrastructures differ significantly. Addressing this gap, the proposed study examined how family socioeconomic factors beyond vocational training affected teenage mothers' ability to engage in academic programs in Vihiga County.

Household socioeconomics were a key determinant of retention rates for teen mothers. Ochieng and Wambua (2023) conducted a cross-sectional survey involving 250 teenage mothers in rural Kenya. Their findings indicated that 68% dropped out due to financial difficulties. Using structured interviews and structured questionnaires, they found that an increase in household income by one unit increased the likelihood of school re-entry by 12%. These findings suggest that economic support mechanisms, such as scholarships, financial aid, and income-generating programs, could play a crucial role in increasing school retention among teen mothers. However, this study focused primarily on financial constraints without addressing other factors, such as parental attitudes, which may also impact school re-entry rates and participation of young mothers. The current study filled this gap by examining how multiple socioeconomic factors, including parental education and emotional support, interact to influence teen mothers' participation in education in Vihiga County.

Existing studies have shown that low income hinders re-entry (Smith & Brown, 2021), but in Vihiga, this was amplified by rural poverty, unlike in urban areas (Ochieng & Wambua, 2023). This suggested a need for localized interventions. Parental income was consistently found to have a negative impact on school re-entry, retention, and participation of teenage mothers across literature. But most of the research was done outside of Kenya, primarily on re-entry back into school, or studied on financial issues alone, which did not account for other household factors. In addition, there is scarce empirical data on the effect of parental income on participation among teen mothers in rural areas, like Vihiga County. The present study filled this gap to investigate the relationship between parental income levels and academic programme enrolment of teen mothers in public day secondary schools in Vihiga County with the use of localized data and a quantitative correlational approach.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a correlational research design to examine the relationship between parental income levels and teen mothers' participation in academic programmes in public day secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya. The target population comprised 550 teen mothers enrolled in 118 public day secondary schools in the county. A sample size of 222 respondents was determined using the adequacy criteria recommended by Hair et al. (2019), who advise at least 5 observations per predictor variable, with a 20:1 ratio preferred for greater statistical power and model stability. With 11 predictors (3 independent and 8 control variables), a sample size of 222 respondents provided sufficient power to detect moderate effects while accounting for potential non-response or missing data. The sample was then proportionately allocated across the four sub-counties (Hamisi, Vihiga, Luanda, and Emuhaya) using Neyman allocation to ensure representativeness of the study population. Data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to the teen mothers. Validity of the questionnaire was ascertained by developing the instrument in line with the study objective and consulting research supervisors. A pilot study involving 10 teen mothers was conducted to assess the reliability of the instrument, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.799, which exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 and was therefore considered reliable for data collection. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process to ensure that the rights, privacy, and well-being of participants are protected. All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study, whereas those under 18 years of age provided parental or guardian consent. Moreover, participants were informed that they can withdraw from the study anytime they want without any negative consequences. All questionnaires were kept anonymous and confidential to ensure that the participants' identities remain protected. The study used culturally sensitive approaches because teenage pregnancy is a sensitive issue among adolescents and can cause them shame, stress, and anxiety. Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to examine differences in participation across household income categories, while multiple linear regression analysis was used to determine the relationship between parental income levels and teen mothers' participation in academic programmes. The study hypothesis was tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

4. Results and Discussion

The study examined the relationship between parental income levels and teen mothers' participation in academic programmes in public day secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya. Descriptive results showed that over 70% of respondents came from households earning less than Ksh. 10,000 per month. Overall participation in academic programmes was moderate (M = 5.8, SD = 1.2), with higher engagement in routine academic activities such as class attendance and assignment completion than in external academic events and school symposia. These findings suggest that low household income may limit broader academic participation among teen mothers.

To establish whether participation in academic programmes differed across household income categories, a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted. Table 1 shows differences in participation levels of teen mothers across household income levels.

Table 1: One-Way ANOVA Results for Household Income and Participation Index

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	df	Mean Square (MS)	F	Sig. (p-value)
Between Groups	28.64	3	9.55	7.82	0.000
Within Groups	263.75	216	1.22		
Total	292.39	219			

Note. SS = Sum of Squares; MS = Mean Square.

Table 1 indicates statistically significant differences in participation in academic programmes across household income categories, $F(3, 216) = 7.82$, $p < .001$. The F-statistics of 7.82 and a p-value less than 0.05 indicate that participation varied significantly according to household income level. These findings suggest that teen mothers across different household income categories differed in their participation in academic programmes, implying that parental income is significantly associated with academic participation. This finding is consistent with Campbell (2018), who also established that financial support significantly improved educational participation among teenage mothers.

The study sought to establish which specific income groups differed significantly from each other. Tukey's HSD test was further conducted.

Table 2: Tukey HSD Post Hoc Test for Multiple Comparisons

(I) Income Group	(J) Income Group	Mean Difference (I–J)	Std. Error	Sig.	Interpretation
Below 5,000	5,001–10,000	-0.44	0.19	0.041	Significant
Below 5,000	10,001–20,000	-0.93	0.21	0.000	Significant
Below 5,000	Above 20,000	-1.40	0.27	0.000	Significant
5,001–10,000	10,001–20,000	-0.49	0.18	0.018	Significant
5,001–10,000	Above 20,000	-0.96	0.25	0.001	Significant
10,001–20,000	Above 20,000	-0.47	0.26	0.089	Not Significant

Table 2 results indicate that teen mothers from lower-income households had significantly lower participation in academic programmes than those from higher-income households. However, the difference between Ksh. 10,001–20,000 and above Ksh. 20,000 income groups were not statistically significant (p = .089), suggesting that participation improves with household income but tends to plateau at higher income levels. Similar findings were reported by Ochieng and Wambua (2023), who found that economic support significantly improved school participation among adolescent mothers in rural Kenya.

The study further sought to establish whether an association between parental income and participation in academic programs existed but did not identify the independent effects of parental income when other factors were included. Table 3 shows the model summary of multiple linear regression analysis between household income and participation

Table 3: Multiple Linear Regression of Household Income on Participation Index

Variables	Model 1 β (SE)	Model 2 β (SE)
Ref: Below Ksh. 5,000		
Ksh. 5,001 – 10,000	0.44* (0.18)	0.31* (0.15)
Ksh. 10,001 – 20,000	0.93*** (0.21)	0.68*** (0.19)
Above Ksh. 20,000	1.40*** (0.27)	1.02*** (0.24)
Control Variables		
Teen Mother's Age		0.12* (0.05)
Self-Motivation		0.48*** (0.06)
Peer Stigma		-0.29*** (0.05)
School-Based Support Services (Ref; SD)		0.34*** (0.07)
Constant	5.48*** (0.13)	3.12*** (0.42)
Model Statistics		
N	220	220
R^2	0.198	0.412
RMSE	1.05	0.72
F-statistic	7.82***	29.64***

*Significance levels: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$*

Table 3 indicates that the regression model had statistically significant predictive power. This is evidenced by the significant F-statistic for both Model 1 ($F = 7.82$, $p < .001$) and Model 2 ($F = 29.64$, $p < .001$), indicating that the models provided a good fit to the data. The R^2 values further show that household income explained 19.8% of the variation in teen mothers' participation in academic programmes, which increased to 41.2% after the inclusion of the control variables. These findings suggest that household income is a significant predictor of participation in academic programmes. The explanatory power of the model improved substantially after the inclusion of control variables. Since the regression model was statistically significant ($F = 29.64$, $p < .001$), the null hypothesis was rejected. The study concluded that there is a statistically significant relationship between parental income levels and teen mothers' participation in academic programmes in public day secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya. This finding is consistent with Mudzielwana and Maphula (2022), who found that financially stable households are more likely to support continued schooling among teen mothers. The persistence of income effects in the multivariate model underscores its independent contribution, suggesting that financial capacity directly enables access to resources, reduces stress, and enhances the ability to balance schooling and motherhood.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

The study concluded that parental income levels are significantly associated with teen mothers' participation in academic programs in public day secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya. The findings showed that teen mothers from higher-income households were more likely to participate actively in academic activities than those from low-income households. Adequate parental income facilitates access to essential educational resources, such as school fees, learning materials, transportation, and childcare support, which enhance sustained engagement in academic programs. Conversely, financial constraints among low-income household's limit teen mothers' ability to meet educational demands and may negatively affect their participation in school activities.

The study further established that parental income was a significant predictor of participation in academic programmes, indicating that improvements in household economic status are associated with increased educational participation among teen mothers. Therefore, parental income remains an important household factor in promoting the educational participation of teen mothers in public day secondary schools in Vihiga County.

5.2 Recommendations

The study makes the following recommendations:

1. The government should strengthen resource mobilization by seeking additional support from donors, well-wishers, and NGOs to complement the limited funds available in the public education budget. Such partnerships would provide targeted assistance to learners from poor households, thereby reducing financial barriers and enhancing equitable participation in academic programs.
2. The County Government should create targeted education support funds covering fees, materials, uniforms, transport, and childcare to enhance retention.
3. School administrators, particularly head teachers, should regularly engage parents on the importance of supporting teen mothers' education and organize motivational talks to address misconceptions and promote continued participation in academic programmes.
4. Parents and Guardians should prioritize school-related needs and foster a supportive home environment that encourages regular attendance and participation.
5. NGOs and Development Partners Organizations should collaborate with schools and counties to provide scholarships, mentorship, childcare, and empowerment initiatives for vulnerable households.
6. A similar study should be conducted in other sub-counties to establish prevailing conditions in those parts with a view to comparing them with this study.

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