

# **RE-ENTRY POLICY**

## **A YOUTH-LED RESEARCH ON RE- ENTERED GIRLS EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES**

Prepared by the MEL unit

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

<b>CHAZ</b>	<b>Churches Health Association of Zambia</b>
<b>DEBs</b>	<b>District Education Boards</b>
<b>GCE</b>	<b>General Certificate Education</b>
<b>MEL</b>	<b>Monitoring Evaluation and Learning</b>
<b>PAT</b>	<b>Parent-Teachers Association</b>
<b>Y4H</b>	<b>Youth for Health</b>

# Executive summary

## Introduction

Each year one in every three school girls drops out of schools in Zambia due to pregnancy. Majority of these adolescent mothers are not able to go back to school after delivery. To address this issue, the Ministry of Education in 1996 released re-entry policy guidelines to ensure the smooth readmission of adolescent mothers after delivery. Years later, it was established that a significant majority of the adolescent mothers were still not attending school.

## Purpose of the study

Young girls that fall pregnant while still at school often face challenges especially with coping when they re-enrol for school. In some instances, these learners usually fail to complete their education owing to a number of factors such as taking care of their babies, coercion into marriage and dropping out due to bullying and stigmatisation that they are subjected to after giving birth by their fellow learners and sometimes even by the teachers. This contributes to the low number of girls re-enrolling for school and completing.

The study therefore sought to investigate the challenges that the learners face when they are readmitted into school. The study also sought to find out first hand from the learners about their experiences once they are readmitted as well as the mechanisms that the schools have put in place to ensure that these learners are fully supported when they return to school.

## Methodology

The study was purely qualitative and relied merely on qualitative insights gathered from the learners that were benefiting from the re-entry policy at the selected schools. The study also drew insights from the parents and guardians of the learners, the guidance and counselling teachers and the representatives of the DEBs office in the selected districts.

## Main findings

The research findings uncovered that many students faced challenges and were subjected to harsh treatment at home upon becoming pregnant. Some learners revealed that they had been forced to leave their homes and move in with their grandparents. ***“It was difficult for me at home because at some point I was even chased out of the house and I went to stay with my grandmother; my parents called me back home after giving birth and took me back to school.”*** Other learners were profoundly reprimanded by their parents and this led to some contemplating upon committing suicide, ***“The experience at home was very bad; they could shout at me, and I was tortured mentally to the point that I wanted to commit suicide.”***

Assessment of the learners' knowledge levels of the policy revealed that, prior to becoming pregnant, all the learners interviewed were unaware of the re-entry policy, ***“I did not know about the re-entry policy when I became pregnant.”*** Others shared, ***“I never heard about the re-entry policy.”***

While the learners showed a lack of understanding of the re-entry policy, many of the parents and guardians interviewed displayed a thorough understanding of the policy. ***“The re-entry policy involves a child going back to school after getting pregnant, it means that getting pregnant is not the end of education for a girl.”*** Others added, ***“It is simply taking a girl back to school after withdrawal due to various reasons such as pregnancy.”***

The teachers were cited as instrumental people in disseminating information about the re-entry policy to the learners, ***“Our madam at school told us about it.”***

All the learners commented unanimously that the re-entry policy is good, citing a myriad of reasons for their answer, ***“Re-entry policy is good because it allows young mothers to go back to school even after having a child.”*** ***“I heard about the re-entry policy through the school guidance teacher.”***

The parents and guardians also equally held the same views as the learners regarding the re-entry policy, ***“The re-entry policy is good because it prevents girls from getting kicked out of school like it used to be in the Kaunda era.”***

From the accounts of the District Education Board Secretary across the districts we conducted the study, the re-entry policy was praised for providing learners who fall pregnant with the opportunity to return to school, which is seen as a positive step towards ensuring their continued education., ***“My impression is that the policy is a good one because we have seen a lot of girls that had fallen pregnant coming back to school.”***

The study noted that returning to school can be a challenging experience for many teenage mothers due to the bullying and stigma they often face. This can negatively impact their overall learning environment and well-being, ***“Some girls say bad things about us girls who have kids at home.”*** Other young mothers are looked at as promiscuous individuals by their fellow learners and some of the teachers, ***“Some girls think that us girls with kids at home are prostitutes and teachers also say similar things.”***

The performance of the learners after going back improves for some of the learners, ***“I cannot lie before falling pregnant, my performance was not good because I was even a noise maker in class but as of now, it is a bit better. I do not know, maybe it is because of growth because I have a daughter to look after.”*** However, for others the performance is not good, ***“My performance has not been very good ever since I came back to school.”***

It was revealed during the interviews with some parents and guardians that teachers offer invaluable support to the learners, ***“The school has been supporting her through guidance and counselling, whenever she faces a challenge, the guidance counsellor is available to provide support. In order to help her continue performing well, I have also enrolled her for extra lessons to help enhance her performance.”*** The teachers themselves also shared, ***“We talk to the girls and counsel them when they fall pregnant and when they come back.”***

From the learner’s account, it was revealed that teachers render help and support to their learners, ***“Teachers are good, I have Mrs. Chembe who really supports me; she knows that I have a child and she has been encouraging me to study hard and pass.”***

The schools face a number of challenges with implementing the re-entry policy effectively. For instance, one challenge impeding the implementation of the policy was cited, ***“Another challenge is to trace the girls when they go on leave because some of the parents send their children to far places like the grandmother’s place.”*** Other challenges included: signing of the maternity leave forms especially by the person that impregnated a learner, ***“Signing the forms is very difficult especially if the girl was impregnated by a pupil from a different school or it is someone from the community who works.”*** It was also reported that there are girls that are forced into marriages once they get pregnant, ***“The biggest challenge that we are facing is the community, the community also needs to be sensitised because instead of encouraging these girls who fall pregnant to go back to school, they rush them into marriages.”***

# 1.0 Introduction

For many years Zambian girls were obliged to leave school permanently if they became pregnant. In 1997, the Government of the Republic of Zambia introduced the Re-entry Policy that requires all schools to grant girls maternity leave and readmit them to facilitate girls' education.

Zambia introduced Reentry policy as a strategy to enable teenage mothers to continue their education. It was assumed that teenage mothers would take advantage of the Re-entry policy to continue their education after childbirth. This has not been the case as teen mothers' re-entry across countries including Zambia established that significant number of teenage mothers are not re-entering

## 2.0 Purpose of the study

The importance of the study was that the findings might be useful to policy makers that are charged with the responsibility of overseeing the formulation and implementation of the re-entry policy program in Zambia. The findings might help identify some of the challenges that learners who are readmitted into school face and the help they may need to ensure that the learning environment is conducive. The findings of the study may also be useful to stakeholders when evaluating the effectiveness of the re-entry policy in schools.

## 3.0 Methodology

The study employed a purely qualitative approach. Hence no other quantitative data collection methods were used.

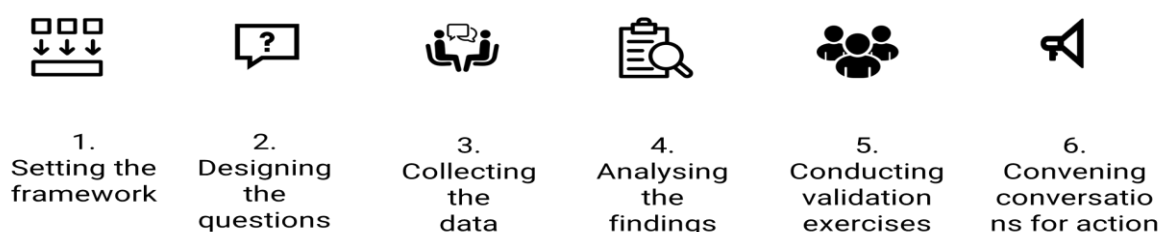
### 3.1 Our youth led research methodology

The research adopted Restless Development's Youth-Led Research Approach. This approach has six steps in which young people lead in all the six steps except for setting of the framework. The project staff only set the framework and provide technical oversight to the youth researchers of the other five steps. This approach is summarised below;

1. **Setting the framework:** Staff determine research focus, young people provide feedback and ensure the study reflects their priorities.
2. **Designing the questions:** Young researchers define key research questions and design questionnaires. Staff provide foundational training and technical oversight.
3. **Collecting the data:** Young researchers identify respondents then conduct all data collection (e.g., surveys, focus groups, interviews) and staff provide support, supervision, and assist in troubleshooting.
4. **Analysing the findings:** Staff determine the analytical methodology and provide analytical training. Next, young researchers lead the analysis process, identifying key themes, and compiling report input. Staff then polish the analysis.
5. **Conducting validation exercises:** Young researchers present to and clarify findings with respondents. They may also collect any additional data needed to fill in gaps. Staff guide on outstanding questions and provide support and supervision.

6. **Convening conversations for action:** Staff guide on packaging and presenting findings. Young researchers facilitate discussions and calls to action.

Figure 1: Restless Development Youth led Research methodology



## 3.2 Study population

The study population was drawn from selected schools in Lusaka, Ndola, Mkushi, Kasama, Kabwe and Chipata. The study was biased towards the female learners and focussed on interviewing those learners that were benefiting from the re-entry policy program. Parents and guardians of the learners were also interviewed. Further, guidance and counselling teachers with knowledge of the re-entry policy were also interviewed as well as the representatives from the DEBs office in the selected districts responded to the interviews.

## 3.3 Sample size

- The sample size for the study was 61 female learners that have benefited from the re-entry policy at the selected schools in the targeted districts. This sample only included female learners who were beneficiaries of the re-entry policy. The study also gathered data from the parents and guardians of the learners and 30 parents/guardians responded to the interviews. 15 guidance and counselling teachers and 7 representatives from the DEBs office responded to the study.

## 3.4 Inclusion criteria

- Learners who have benefited from the re-entry policy at the selected schools.
- Guidance and counselling teachers at the selected schools with knowledge of the re-entry policy.
- Representatives from the DEBs in the selected districts with knowledge of the re-entry policy.
- Parents and guardians of learners who were benefiting from the policy.

## 3.5 Exclusion criteria

- Learners who have not benefited from the re-entry policy at the selected schools.
- Guidance and counselling teachers at the selected schools without knowledge of the re-entry policy.
- Representatives from the DEBs who are selected without knowledge of the re-entry policy.
- Parents and guardians of the learners who were not benefiting from the re-entry policy.

## 3.6 Sampling techniques

- Purposive sampling: This technique was employed when selecting guidance and counselling teachers and the representatives from the DEBs offices. It is a non probability sampling method



that the study employed to select the sample because they possessed the knowledge and information that the researcher required.

- Snowball: This technique was used to select the female learners for the study. It is also a qualitative sampling technique that selects participants based on the knowledge they have on a subject or topic under study. In this method, a participant is identified and in turn the identified participant is requested to identify and mobilise other participants that meet the inclusion criteria.

## 3.6 Ethical considerations

In this study we adopted several ethical obligations as outlined in the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association [APA], 2002).

## 3.7 Limitations

Accuracy of pregnancy data and the number of learners re-entering school: Some of the DEBs did not provide accurate information on the number of learners that fell pregnant and were readmitted into school in the reference period (2019 to 2022). Despite efforts to verify the information, some of the DEBs could not give out precise figures. The findings revealed that out of the 7 DEBs that were interviewed, only 2 were able to provide accurate figures recorded by the districts from 2019 to 2022. This could lead to overestimation or underestimation of the numbers.

## 4.0 Study findings

### 4.1 Learners demographics

The sample was drawn from selected schools in Kabwe, Mkushi, Lusaka, Chipata, Ndola and Kasama. 61 female learners were interviewed during the study, 15 guidance and counselling teachers from these schools participated in the study, 30 parents were interviewed and 7 different representatives from the District Education Boards offices were also interviewed.

The study only targeted young female learners who have re-entered from the selected schools and a total of 61 learners were interviewed.

### 4.2.1 Experiences of the learners

#### 4.2.1.1 Experience of the learners at home

The interviews with the learners uncovered that many of them who became pregnant were subjected to criticism and rebuke from their parents and siblings, resulting in emotional turmoil and anxiety. For instance an interviewee recounted, ***"It was difficult for me at home because at some point I was even chased out of the house and I went to stay with my grandmother; my parents called me back home after giving birth and took me back to school."*** - learner, Kabwe District. Another learner from Ndola echoed these sentiments, ***"People at home got upset when they found out that I was pregnant."*** - learner, Ndola District. Similarly, another learner narrated, ***"When I told my mom about it, she was upset and she told me that I did not care that I was an orphan."*** - learner, Lusaka District.

Furthermore, some learners disclosed that their parents and guardians were deeply saddened and shocked upon learning that their child had become pregnant - ***"My parents told me that I have brought shame upon them, so they tell me to make sure that it does not happen again."*** said a learner from Kabwe District.

The interactions with the learners also revealed that the unpleasant experiences they faced at home was overly traumatic and detrimental to them and led to others thinking of committing suicide. This lived experience was shared by a learner from Lusaka, ***"The experience at home was very bad; they could shout at me, and I was tortured mentally to the point that I wanted to commit suicide."***

#### 4.2.1.2 Knowledge of the re-entry policy

The study also explored the learners' knowledge and awareness of the re-entry policy before they fell pregnant. According to the study's findings, none of the learners reported that they were aware of the policy prior to becoming pregnant. A learner from Kasama indicated, ***"I never knew about the re-entry policy,"*** and another learner mentioned, ***"I never heard about the re-entry policy."*** - learner, Lusaka District. ***"I did not know about the re-entry policy when I became pregnant."*** reported another learner from Kasama District.

### 4.2.1.3 Parents' knowledge and understanding of the Re-entry Policy

While the learners showed confusion about the re-entry policy, the parents interviewed were able to clearly explain that it is a policy designed to allow pregnant students to return to school and continue their education. A parent from Chipata District explained, ***"The re-entry policy involves a child going back to school after getting pregnant, it means that getting pregnant is not the end of education for a girl."*** Similarly, a parent from Kasama narrated, ***"The re-entry policy is a law that allows girls to go back to school after they give birth."*** These remarks were also shared by a respondent in Mkushi who noted; ***"It is simply taking a girl back to school after withdrawal due to various reasons such as pregnancy"***.

### 4.2.1.4 Sources of information about the re-entry policy

The findings revealed that while a significant number of learners did not know or hear about the re-entry prior to getting pregnant, those that were aware of the policy before they got pregnant mentioned that they learned of the policy from school. This indicates that the schools have played a crucial and instrumental role in dispensing comprehensive information about the policy. To exemplify, a learner explained, ***"Our madam at school told us about it."*** - learner, Kasama District. Similarly, another learner added, ***"I heard about the re-entry policy through the school guidance teacher."*** A learner from Kabwe District said, ***"I did not know about the re-entry policy before falling pregnant."***

In addition to teachers, family members, such as uncles, were identified as a valuable source of information regarding the re-entry policy - ***"I was not aware of the policy but my uncle told me about it that a girl has been given a chance to go back to school after pregnancy,"*** remarked a learner from Lusaka District. These findings indicate that family members also play a prominent role in sharing information about the re-entry policy.

The findings also revealed that while several learners had a lack of knowledge regarding the re-entry policy, there were learners who showed that they had an idea of what the policy does, ***"I did not know about the re-entry policy but I used to see girls going back after having a child."*** - learner.

### 4.2.1.5 Learners' perceptions of the re-entry policy

The data indicates that learners have a positive perception of the re-entry policy, as they believe it provides girls with the chance to return to school and pursue their goals, which they view as a beneficial opportunity. This came out during an interview with a learner from Kasama who shared that, ***"Re-entry policy is a good thing."*** These sentiments were also echoed by another learner from Kabwe, ***"The re-entry policy is a good thing."*** It was also shared by another learner that, ***"Re-entry policy is good because it allows young mothers to go back to school even after having a child."***

These findings were further validated by the teachers that were interviewed, ***"It's a good thing"*** said a guidance and counselling teacher from Kabwe District. Another teacher from the same district added, ***"It is good because girls get back to school and complete their education thus becoming independent after school."*** A guidance and counselling teacher from Kasama narrated, ***"I have some pupils who benefited from the re-entry: one is a medical doctor, another one is in her third year at Mukuba University doing mathematics and science and we have our girl here who has been getting 6 points from the time she came in grade 10 although she will write under GCE. So, the policy is good."***

Through interviews conducted with District Education Boards (DEBs), it was found that all DEBs support the re-entry policy, believing that it provides students with a valuable opportunity to return to school. ***“The re-entry policy is good because it makes learners get back to school.”*** - DEBs, Kasama District. ***“My impression is that the policy is a good one because we have seen a lot of girls that had fallen pregnant coming back to school.”*** DEBs, Kabwe District. DEBs from Lusaka District also explained - ***“The policy is helping girls realise their dream after such a disturbance. So the policy is good.”***

Many parents and guardians also expressed their approval of the policy - ***“It is good because it provides a second chance to girls who have made a mistake to do things right”*** - Parent, Kabwe District. Another parent from Lusaka added, ***“it is good.”***

The parents further highlighted that they perceived the policy positively as it provides a second chance for these girls to pursue their education and future careers. A parent from Ndola highlighted the historical context by stating, ***“The re-entry policy is good because it prevents girls from getting kicked out of school like it used to be in the Kaunda era.”***

However, while many parents support the re-entry policy for pregnant students, there were some who expressed concerns. These parents believe that allowing girls to return to school after giving birth may inadvertently encourage them to continue getting pregnant, as they know they have the option to continue their education, ***“The policy is not good because girls will see nothing with falling pregnant because they are given another chance to re-enrol.”*** - parent, Mkushi District.

#### 4.2.1.6 Learner’s experience with the teachers and pupils after re-entering school

The findings indicated that learners' experiences upon returning to school have been a mix of positive and negative aspects. The learners are subjected to harsh criticism and negative feedback from their peers, and at times even from their teachers. The learners shared that in some instances, they were subject to bullying, stigma and gossip among other things. During an interview, a learner recounted, ***“Both girls and boys used to say bad things but it was mostly girls but I never used to pay attention to them because I learned a lot after becoming pregnant.”*** Another learner remarked,

The findings also show that most of the re-entered girls have faced stigma and bullying from their female counterparts. - ***“Some girls say bad things about us girls who have kids at home.”***. It was also shared by another learner from Lusaka, ***“My friend from school used to bully me for being pregnant; she used to tell me that I will never go back to school because I have a child. This made me stay home all the time.”*** - Learner, Lusaka District.

The interactions with learners also revealed that young mothers are looked at as promiscuous learners by both the teachers and their fellow learners. ***“Some girls think that us girls with kids at home are prostitutes and teachers also say similar things,”*** explained a learner.

Another explained that their situation and experiences has resulted in teachers looking at them as bad girls. Hence, they do not pay attention to their educational needs, ***“Some teachers look at us as bad girls, so they do not pay attention to us.”*** Another learner narrated, ***“Some teachers use me as an example when they are telling other pupils not to fall pregnant; this makes me uncomfortable.”***

While the majority of learners interviewed had negative experiences, there were a few who shared positive and enjoyable experiences. This group of learners never experienced any form of bullying,

stigma or gossip. ***“No one stigmatises me,”*** said a learner. Another learner added that they have not encountered bullying, stigma or gossip and said, ***“None of my fellow pupils say bad things about me.”*** - Learner. ***“No one bullies me that I am a mother,”*** said a learner.

#### 4.2.1.7 Experience of Bullying: The DEBs and parents’ account

The interactions with the DEBs revealed that there are learners who experience bullying and this impels them to request for a transfer and go to a different school. A DEBs from Lusaka narrated, ***“We have cases where some girls decided to go to other schools to avoid bullying from other pupils.”*** Another respondent added, ***“We have girls that have been complaining that they receive stigma from some teachers and some of the teachers may not accept them especially those that have not been properly oriented.”*** - DEBs, Kasama.

While the learners reported experiencing bullying and stigmatisation upon re-entry into school, their parents did not mention these issues during the interviews. This discrepancy suggests that the learners may not be openly discussing their experiences with their parents. The interactions with the parents revealed that the school environment is conducive enough to allow the learners to properly and smoothly reintegrate. A parent from Chipata mentioned: ***“She hasn’t reported experiencing bullying in school.”*** Another parent from the same district shared these sentiments saying: ***“She was mocked before going back to school for getting pregnant and stopping school, but since she went back to school, her friends don’t mock or laugh at her anymore.”*** A parent in Mkushi confirmed these sentiments saying; ***“She has never complained about people laughing at her because she got pregnant or went back to school.”***

#### 4.2.2 Performance of the learners post - re-entry

##### 4.2.2.1 Learner’s performance after going back to school

The interviews revealed that learners endeavour to do better when they are accorded another opportunity to go back to school. There were learners who shared that their child impels them to work hard at school to achieve good grades. Hence, they reported an improvement in their performance compared to before they fell pregnant. A learner narrated, ***“These days I am focused on passing at school. Before I became pregnant at Twatanga basic, I used to play a lot but now I look at my child and I want to go and study nursing when I am done with school.”*** - Learner, Lusaka District.

Apart from an improved performance, there were learners who expressed that their attitude and behaviour in class had positively changed, for example, a learner from Ndola District narrated, ***“I cannot lie before falling pregnant, my performance was not good because I was even a noise maker in class but as of now, it is a bit better. I do not know, maybe it is because of growth because I have a daughter to look after.”***

Additionally, other students have also noted a significant improvement in their academic performance after returning to school. ***“I think my academic performance has even improved compared to before I became pregnant.”*** - Learner, Kabwe District.

The findings showed that some learners experienced improved overall performance upon returning to school, while others noticed a significant decline in their performance. Those who saw improvements credited the return to school, while those who saw a decline attributed it to the prolonged absence from school. A learner explained, ***“My performance became bad because I stayed a very long time in***

***the community without going to school.*** Another learner from Kasama District echoed, ***“My performance has not been very good ever since I came back to school.”*** .

#### 4.2.2.2 Learner’s Performance Post-Re-entry: The parents’ account

Most parents reported improvements in their children’s academic performance and behaviour after re-entering school. Parents from Chipata shared, ***“Ever since she went back to school, my child now pays more attention, you can even see her studying and her results are better.”*** Similarly, another parent in Mkushi remarked: ***“Her performance has gotten better, she has learnt to handle peer pressure and overcome laziness”***.

However some parents could not comment on performance due to the short time frame their children had been in school, despite this, the parents noted a positive change in attitude with a parent from Kasama indicating: ***“I don’t know if her performance has improved or gone down because she just started school last Monday, but her attitude seems better in terms of attendance.”*** A parent from Mkushi also reported significant improvements: ***“Her performance has gotten better, she has learnt to handle peer pressure and overcome laziness.”***

This improvement is attributed to the renewed focus and support from both the school and the parents. A parent from Mkushi indicated: ***“The school has been supporting her through guidance and counselling, whenever she faces a challenge, the guidance counsellor is available to provide support.”*** Another parent from Chipata echoed that in order to keep their child’s performance good, they provide support in the form of paying for extra lessons: ***“In order to ensure she keeps performing well, I have been paying for her extra lessons to make sure she perfectly understands the subjects she is taking.”***

#### 4.2.2.3 Performance of the learners: The teachers account

Teachers shared similar sentiments regarding the performance of the learners, stating that some learners’ performance is impressive after they return to school from their maternity leave, ***“The academic performance is very good, three of them that returned recently even proceeded to grade 10.”*** reported a teacher from Kabwe. Another teacher stated that the performance of the learners is somewhat okay because of the regular counselling that the learners receive when they return to school, consequently, they tend to perform okay, ***“The attention levels of the learners is okay after maternity leave, we usually talk to them and counsel them and they free in class.”***

Other interviewed teachers expressed a different viewpoint, noting that the performance of students often decreases upon their return to school following maternity leave. A teacher said, ***“The girls’ attention or concentration is reduced because they have divided attention between the child and school.”*** Another teacher added their view saying, ***“The academic performance of the girls is bad.”***

#### 4.2.2.4 Systems aimed at supporting the learners

##### 4.2.2.4.1 Support systems: The learners’ account

The learners cited the teachers as an important anchor after returning to school. Several learners shared how they have been supported and spurred on by their teachers. A learner from Ndola narrated,

***“The teacher always encourages me to ask my friends for the notes especially in the subjects where I am behind.”*** - Learner, Ndola. Another learner from Lusaka added, ***“Teachers are good, I have my teacher who really supports me; she knows that I have a child and she has been encouraging me to study hard and pass.”*** - Learner, Lusaka.

Parents also emerged as a key support system to the children during and after delivery. Learners expressed their heartfelt gratitude to their parents for the support they rendered to them such as the purchasing of baby layettes. A learner from Lusaka District shared, ***“My father and mother have been so supportive, they are the ones that helped to buy the things for the baby.”***

Learners also noted that their parents consistently attend school meetings when called upon by the school, which the learners see as a valuable form of support, ***“My parents usually support me because they always attend school meetings when they are called.”*** - Learner, Ndola.

The learners expressed that they receive support from their mothers and siblings in babysitting while attending school, ***“My mom looks after my child when I am at school.”*** - Learner, Chipata District. Another learner from Kabwe added, ***“My mother and my siblings take care of my child when I am at school but it is mostly my mom.”***

#### 4.2.2.4.2 Support Systems: Parents’ and teachers account

Parents highlighted the role of guidance and counselling provided by schools in supporting the girls’ academic and personal development post-re-entry. Additionally, some parents have taken extra measures to ensure their daughters perform well academically. A parent in Mkushi reported; ***“The school has been supporting her through guidance and counselling, whenever she faces a challenge, the guidance counsellor is available to provide support. In order to help her continue performing well, I have also enrolled her for extra lessons to help enhance her performance.”***

Through discussions with teachers, it was discovered that both guidance and counselling teachers and class teachers work together to provide support and guidance to female learners when they have become pregnant and at the time they return to school. A teacher narrated, ***“We talk to the girls and counsel them when they fall pregnant and when they come back.”***

It was also reported that teachers who are not from the guidance and counselling department are enlightened on the re-entry policy so that they in turn share the information with the learners, especially the female learners. A guidance and counselling teacher narrated, ***“For teachers that are not part of the guidance department, we talk about the re-entry policy during meetings, we also have special interactions with female teachers so that they are able to identify pupils that have fallen pregnant within their classes and provide some form of counselling to allow the pupils to speak up and seek help as well as provide information about the re-entry process.”*** - Guidance and counselling teacher.

It was found that there were schools that had implemented other deliberate measures that are aimed at offering support to learners once they re-enter school, ***“We have an action plan for learners who fall pregnant and those reentering school after pregnancy, we engage in talks and have other activities with them regularly,”*** shared a guidance and counselling teacher.

The findings also revealed that there were interventions at some of the schools that were aimed at supporting the learners with core life skills as well as knowledge of comprehensive sexuality education. A guidance and counselling teacher from Kasama shared, ***“We have two health referrals at the school; one from Restless and another one from CHAZ.”***

From the accounts of the DEBs, the findings revealed that learners are supported by means of counselling, ***“We regularly have sessions of counselling with the learners because they do not***

***immediately go on leave when they fall pregnant,”*** - DEBs, Mkushi District. From Lusaka, it was reported, ***“We tell teachers that they are like parents and they should consider all pupils like their children.”***

The learners are also supported through life skills, ***“We support learners with life skills through our implementing partners like CHAZ, and there is another program called Natwampane.”*** - DEBs, Kasama.

## 4.2.2.5 Participation of the learners in extra curricular activities.

### 4.2.2.5.1 Participation in extracurricular activities after returning to school.

The study uncovered that many students were actively involved in extracurricular activities prior to becoming pregnant. However, upon returning to school, a significant number of them no longer participated in these activities. They shared a myriad of reasons for their failure to engage or consistently participate in such activities. For instance, a learner shared, ***“I used to play girls soccer before having a child but I no longer do it.”*** - Learner, Mkushi district. Another learner from Chipata district commented, ***“I was good at sports but now I do not devote much time because I have to go home early and look after my child.”***

Others also reported that they stopped taking an active part in sports such as martial arts because they did not deliver through the normal mode of giving birth, ***“Before having a child, I used to do martial arts but I cannot do that anymore since I got a caesarean section and so I cannot do that anymore.”*** - Learner, Ndola District.

The learners further reported that it is believed that a girl should give up participating in extracurricular activities once they transition to motherhood. This was shared by a learner from Kasama during an interview, ***“I used to play football and dance before I became a mother but now it is different, I cannot do that.”*** another learner added ***“I used to dance before falling pregnant but now I do not.”***

Health challenges were also cited among the factors hindering learners from participating in extracurricular activities, ***“Before I had a child, I used to participate in sports but after giving birth, my legs started troubling me. I stayed 3 months without walking a long distance.”*** - Learner, Kasama.

From the teacher’s accounts, it was revealed that the participation of the learners in co-curricular activities is low when they return from their maternity leave compared to before they requested for the maternity leave. An interviewed teacher shared, ***they often don’t participate in co-curricular activities.”***



## 4.2.2.6 Challenges

### 4.2.2.6.1 Challenges faced by the learners

Financial challenges were the most mentioned challenges that the learners experienced during pregnancy and even after giving birth because the person that impregnated them could not take responsibility, ***“I faced financial challenges because my dad was unable to provide for us due to financial challenges that the family was going through, so it was all up to.”*** - Learner, Lusaka. Another learner indicated, ***“The man that got me pregnant denied the pregnancy at first, so it was difficult to provide for the baby at first but he later accepted.”*** - Learner, Lusaka.

The learners also reported that these problems still exist even after returning to school, ***“Finding money is hard, there are times when my child needs something which I cannot ask my parents to give me.”*** - Learner, Ndola District.

Upon readmission into the school setting, the learners shared they encounter other challenges such as bullying. This problem hinders their smooth reintegration process and in most instances opt to stay at home, ***“My friend from school used to bully me for being pregnant; she used to tell me that I will never go back to school because I have a child. This made me stay home all the time.”*** - Learner, Lusaka District.

Further, stigma also emerged as a major barrier to reintegration, with several learners facing negative labels and stereotypical remarks from both their fellow learners including their teachers. These sentiments manifest in learners being called prostitutes. A learner shared, ***“Some girls think that us girls with kids at home are prostitutes and teachers also say similar things,”*** and another reported feeling uncomfortable because of the remarks, ***“Some teachers use me as an example when they are telling other pupils not to fall pregnant; this makes me uncomfortable.”***

## 4.2.2.7 Number of learners re-entering school

### 4.2.2.7.1 Number of pregnancies recorded against the number of learners re-entering school

Table 1: Learners

District	Number of recorded pregnancies	Number of female learners returning to school
Kasama	1,643	634
Mkushi	509	238

The interactions with the DEBs showed that the number of the pregnancies recorded by the district from 2019 to 2022 continued to increase, however, the number of learners that return to the classroom block is less. For example, an interview with DEBs from Kasama revealed that out of the 1,643 female learners that fell pregnant from 2019 to 2022, only 634 were readmitted. ***“Out of that number I gave you, only 634 came back to school.”*** - DEBs, Kasama. From Mkushi, it was reported that out of the 509 pregnancy cases that were recorded among the female learners from the various schools, only 238

managed to re-enrol. ***“Here in Mkushi, 238 came back out of 509, this is still not a good number.”*** See table above.

It was also revealed that while the DEBs from other districts could not give out accurate figures because they did not have the information handy with them at the time of the interview, the interactions showed that cases of pregnancies are generally high. For example, from Lusaka, the DEBs said, ***“I may not have the accurate statistics of the number of girls that fell pregnant because we have not kept the records well but the numbers are high.”***

In terms of the number of the learners that return to school, from Lusaka, although figures were not given, it was shared that learners do return to school, ***“We have had a lot of cases of girls falling pregnant but the good part is that most of them do not completely abandon school.”***

## 4.2.2.8 Challenges faced by the District Education Boards

### 4.2.2.8.1 Challenges faced by the District Education Boards in implementing the re-entry policy

The DEBs reported that learners who fall pregnant do not return to school because in most instances they go out of the community to far places where they cannot be traced. For example, during the interview in Mkushi, the DEBs said, ***“Some girls go very far from Mkushi.”*** The DEBs from Lusaka also added, ***“The challenge is that not all pupils come back to school.”*** ***“Another challenge is to trace the girls when they go on leave because some of the parents send their children to far places like the grandmother’s place,”*** said the DEBs from Mkushi.

The other major challenge that the DEBs shared was that of rushing and/or coercing learners into early marriages. ***“The biggest challenge that we are facing is the community, the community also needs to be sensitised because instead of encouraging these girls who fall pregnant to go back to school, they rush them into marriages,”*** said the DEBs from Kabwe.

Similarly, the DEBs from Lusaka echoed, ***“most of them get married off.”*** It was remarked during an interview in Mkushi that while other learners relocate or move to a different community, others opt for marriage, ***“Some move out while others go into marriage.”***

Another prominent challenge that was shared was that of difficulties with signing of the maternity leave forms especially on the side of the man. Getting hold of the man is overly difficult and the findings revealed that this is even exacerbated the more when the person who got the girl pregnant is a pupil from a different school or just someone from the community. This came out during an interview in Mkushi, ***“Signing the forms is very difficult especially if the girl was impregnated by a pupil from a different school or it is someone from the community who works.”***

Furthermore, the findings also revealed that there are learners that fall pregnant for a second and even third time which impedes their progress and such instances, they end up dropping out of school, ***“The other challenge is that some learners fall into the same; they get pregnant again even after giving them an opportunity to get back to school, in the end, they just stop school.”*** - DEBs, Kasama.

In addition, it was also voiced that efforts to work harmoniously with parents and guardians have been challenging due to opposition to the re-entry policy. Many parents are concerned that the policy may inadvertently encourage their children to engage in sexual activities, as it assures students that they will have the opportunity to return to school even if they become pregnant. The DEBs in Mkushi noted, ***“It is difficult to sensitise parents through our radio shows, as some callers accuse us of encouraging students to become pregnant by providing them with the assurance of re-entry into school. They believe that our policy implies endorsement of such behaviour.”***

It was shared that there are learners that fail to return because there is no one to help them with looking after the baby, ***“Others fail to return to school because there is no one to take care of the child,”*** shared the DEBs from Mkushi.

# Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

## **To the schools and the district education boards in the targeted districts:**

- The findings revealed that all the interviewed learners were not aware of the re-entry policy. There is a dire need to raise awareness of the re-entry policy especially among the learners. This can be done through; school assemblies and also by going to the classrooms where learners can be allowed to ask questions.
- The findings revealed that there are parents and guardians who do not comply with the schools and in most instances, parents tend to hide the person that impregnated the girl child. Therefore, in the light of these findings, there is an urgent need for more sensitization to be conducted targeting the parents and guardians. This can be done through board meetings and also PTA meetings.
- Instances of bullying and stigmatisation were reported by the learners. Therefore, the teachers' and administrators should deliberately ensure that they create a conducive environment that fosters learning without discrimination and allow teenage mothers to fully participate in all the activities that go on at the school such as extracurricular activities.
- Learners that remain in school while their friends have requested for maternity leave should be encouraged to warmly welcome their friends and allow them to mix and interact amicably. This is important in that it will help to create a positive and inclusive environment, where everyone feels comfortable and is free from bullying and stigmatisation.
- The report also further recommends that teachers should be proactive and provide robust support to learners returning to school after an absence, ensuring they receive the necessary help to readapt and integrate smoothly. This support should focus on helping them acclimate to the school environment and catch up on their studies.

## **To Restless Development and the targeted schools:**

- Restless Development should also ensure that it works closely with the schools where the Youth For Health (Y4H) Project is being implemented by ensuring that the learners are part of the clubs that offer comprehensive sexuality education. Doing so will help the learners to be able to make informed decisions and this will in turn reduce the number of teenage pregnancies recorded by the schools.

## **To the parents and/or guardians of the learners**

- The findings revealed that several learners experienced bullying and stigmatisation when they were readmitted into the school setting, however, the account from the parents revealed otherwise, stating that learners do not experience any form of bullying or stigmatisation. Thus, in the light of these findings, the report makes a clarion call to the parents/guardians and strongly recommends that they take keen interest in learning about the lived experiences of the learners to best support them.

## References

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