



Community Perceptions of the Alternative Secondary Education Pathway Programme for Girls Affected by Early Pregnancies: A Case of Momba District, Tanzania

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Abstract

This study aimed to assess the community's perceptions of the Alternative Secondary Education Pathway Programme (ASEP) among girl victims of early pregnancies in Tanzania. The study was carried out in Momba District, Songwe Region. Qualitative approaches with descriptive design were used. The target population involved the Regional ASEP Coordinator, ASEP girls' students, ASEP teachers and community members. Hence, the sample size of this study comprised 10 out-of-school girls, 1 Regional ASEP Coordinator, 5 ASEP teachers, 10 parents of the ASEP students, as well as 10 ASEP girls. Hence, making a total of 36 participants. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to obtain the sample. The interviews and focus group discussions were employed to obtain data from the participants. Findings revealed that the community has little knowledge about ASEP. It is therefore recommended that the Ministry of Education and Science and Technology provide education about ASEP to community members and establish mobilization strategies to help adolescents, especially girls victimised by early pregnancies, enrol in ASEP.

Keywords: *community, perception, alternative secondary education pathway, early pregnancies, Tanzania*

Introduction

Adolescent fertility remains high in many regions of the world, with particularly elevated rates across Africa, where about one-fifth of adolescent girls become pregnant under the age of 19 (Kassa et al., 2018; Mori *et al.*, 2017; United Nations,

2020). Early motherhood can negatively impact health, educational, and socioeconomic outcomes for adolescent mothers and their children. Supporting adolescent mothers' educational attainment and timely return to school may be key to interrupting intergenerational cycles of adversity. ASEP is facilitating access to secondary schools and bringing schools closer to communities. In 2022–2023, using force account construction methods, the Institute of Adult Education (IAE) completed eight newly constructed buildings across eight regions of the coast: Iringa, Songwe, Rukwa, Manyara, Mtwara, Kigoma, and Geita. 8 renovated buildings in eight other regions: Dar es Salaam, Morogoro, Dodoma, Ruvuma, Kilimanjaro, Mwanza, Mbeya, and Tabora. These facilities include hostels to support learners, especially female learners disadvantaged by living conditions, enhancing their retention in AEP programmes (Institute of Adult Education, 2025).

According to the latest Kenya Demographic Health Survey (KDHS), 40 percent of adolescent girls without any education are either pregnant or have already become mothers. This is in spite of the fact that there is a returned to work programme, a policy introduced by the government to allow girls who have already fallen pregnant to return to school. According to the latest survey in Masaba North District, the rate of dropout in public day secondary schools for girls is more alarming than in public boarding secondary schools (GoK, 2016).

UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2024), shows that over 98 million children and youth in Sub-Saharan Africa are out of school. This region has the highest rate of out-of-school youth in the world, where 30% of primary-school-age children, 34% of lower secondary school-age adolescents, and 49% of upper secondary school-age youth are out of school.

A US-based study with 301 adolescent mothers indicates that higher levels of completed education in the years after birth are associated with better community support health (Maslowsky *et al.*, 2021). Despite the importance of effectively promoting adolescent mothers' return to school, evaluated programmes from the US to date show that support programmes for adolescent mothers within the country are not implemented (Callahan *et al.*, 2017; Groves *et al.*, 2018; Toska *et al.*, 2020).

In Pakistan, a girl in the age group 5 to 9 is 14 percent less likely to attend school than boys (Aslam and Kingdom 2017). In both India and Pakistan, while wealthier boys and girls participate in school at similar rates, there is a gender gap of almost 5 years between them at the bottom of the quintile of income distribution. Similar patterns can be observed in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Benin, Gambia and

Togo. In spite of the benefits of education, the problem of gender disparity in education remains in many developing countries.

The study by Ndivo, Mwanja and Mumo (2021) on the socio-economic factors influencing dropout rates among girls in public day secondary schools in Mukaa sub-county, Kenya asserts that dropout from school among girls is a global phenomenon. They also found that there are reasons as to why Latina girls leave high school before graduation and they include pregnancy, marriage, gender roles, stereotyping, family demands and economic status.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent pregnancies occur against the backdrop of the highest global maternal mortality rates (World Health Organization (WHO), 2019), high levels of HIV (UNAIDS, 2020), violence (Poser and Ritchie, 2019), deprivation (Poser and Ortiz-Ospina, 2019), low service access (Magadi *et al.*, 2007; Mekonnen *et al.*, 2019), and limited support mechanisms (Toska *et al.*, 2020). These conditions pose significant obstacles for adolescent mothers and their children to achieve good health and social outcomes.

In South Africa, about 20% of female school-going adolescents report having ever been pregnant (Jonas *et al.*, 2016) and recent estimates show that approximately 125,000 adolescent girls give birth annually (Maquina, 2015). Supporting these girls to return to school after childbirth is critical, especially because prolonged absence can increase the risk of a permanent school dropout (Ardington *et al.*, 2015; Pandey *et al.*, 2009). Like many countries across the African Union, which increasingly aim to provide an enabling policy environment (Martinez & Odhiambo, 2018), the South African Department of Education established a national policy that supports young mothers' school return (South African Department of Education, 2007). However, evidence shows that only between 30% to 50% of young mothers manage to continue their education (Grant & Hallman, 2008; Groves *et al.*, 2021; Marteleto *et al.*, 2006).

A study by Grant and Hallman (2017) utilizing a cross-sectional sample of female adolescents from two districts in KwaZulu-Natal found that the community had positive perceptions and was aware of returning adolescent mothers to school. Returning to school was associated with good school performance prior to pregnancy, co-residency with a female household member, fewer years since birth, and adolescent mothers' higher age at the time of the interview. Another study by Groves *et al.* (2021) found that adolescent mothers need to navigate the dual challenge of parenting whilst attending school. Again, they found the importance of instrumental support, showing associations between the return to school and

family assistance with the re-enrolment process, provision of childcare from the family or support to organize external childcare, and financial support. These results align with a small pool of research from Zambia (Zuilkowski et al., 2019), Kenya (Birung *et al.*, 2015; Lwanga *et al.*, 2016; Kruger et al., 2009; Ngabaza and Shefer, 2013; Ntambo and Malvin, 2017), and Mozambique (Salvi, 2019), indicating that lacking financial means and the need for childcare are the main barriers to school return for young mothers.

According to the Republic of Kenya (2017), the national educational system has been characterized by gender disparities at the national level and between the various regions in favour of males. In spite of the government's efforts to provide free primary education, by subsidizing secondary education, the girls dropping out of school in Masaba North District have been an issue of concern in the recent past. The stakeholders' efforts to provide education to the girl child in the district have not been very successful because a large percentage drop before completing the full circle of four years in secondary education. In Masaba North District, Educational support (2016) claims that between 2008 and 2013, there were dropout rates of 10% for girls and 7% for boys. High wastage rates associated with dropping out, repetition in schools, and low transition render the education system inefficient.

In Tanzania, ASEP is vested in secondary schools by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) and the President's Office, Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG) in collaboration with the World Bank in an effort to take girls back to school after birth. ASEP was taken to be a five-year' programme plan (2020/2021 – 2024/2025) whereby the donors of this programme provide financial support to increase access to secondary education for adolescent mothers across the country. The Institutes of Adult Education (IAE) has enrolled 3,111 girls per year, as they start the implementation of the World Bank-funded ASEP. The programme specifically aims to: (i) create a safe, gender sensitive and learner-friendly school environment, (ii) provide good quality alternative education opportunities for secondary school drop-outs including young mothers (iii) improve the quality of secondary education by improving teacher skills, reducing huge class sizes and providing adequate teaching and learning materials (iv) provide financial support to increase access to secondary education across the country (v) increase access to secondary education, provide responsive learning environment for girl (vi) use innovative digital technology to improve mathematics and science teaching and (vii) increase access to secondary education by providing more schools closer to the homes of children particularly girls. Over the programme's lifetime, 6.5 million children (3.1 million girls) are expected to

benefit from the programme's interventions and an additional 900,000 children are expected to successfully complete their secondary education (Msese, 2020).

It was the Tanzanian government's intention to increase total enrolment in secondary school by 1.8 million students and increase the number of girls graduating from both secondary schools and alternative secondary education pathways (Ndalichako, 2021). Therefore, ASEP helps girls transition from lower to upper secondary education, including girls who had to leave lower secondary government schools due to pregnancy (URT, 2020). The *Mwananchi* newspaper of 19 May 2024 reports that in the Momba District, 194 adolescent girls aged 15 to 17 have been impregnated while schooling, and hence have been expelled from school. Among those girls victimized by pregnancy, only nine enrolled in ASEP, leaving their counterparts in the streets.

URT (2020), the programme focuses on enabling young girls, especially young mothers, to continue their secondary education despite the social and economic barriers they face. Such challenges include: economic challenges, child labour, as well as cultural beliefs and traditions. The government's target was to enrol at least 3,000 girls to access the secondary education provided. As of 2023, the government has enrolled over 6,949 girls across AEP learning centres nationwide. By 2024, World Bank project reports show that 9,661 female AEP learners had been reached, with the goal of enrolling 6,000 by March 2025 (World Bank Report, 2024)

Methodology

This study was conducted at Momba District in Songwe Region, Tanzania, since it is among the districts with the highest rate of early pregnancies that keep young girls out of schools and deny them their basic right to education (The *Mwananchi* newspaper of 19 May 2024).

The study employed the qualitative research approach so as to get an in-depth understanding of human behaviour and the reasons governing their behaviour (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Information was collected mainly by interviewing the respondents in their natural settings. Descriptive design with interviews and focus group discussions was employed together with non-probability sampling (purposive sampling). The RAC was selected purposively based on the pre-requisite information he had by virtue of his managerial position. In addition, purposive sampling was also used to select teachers who taught in the ASEP classes. Then, snowball sampling was used to get out of the school girls. These also helped to get access to their parents to provide further information for this study.

Basically, snowball sampling operates in such a way that currently enrolled research participants help to locate and recruit new units for a study. Therefore, the sample size of this study comprised 10 out-of-school girls, 1 Regional ASEP Coordinator, 5 ASEP teachers, 10 parents of the ASEP students as well as 10 ASEP girls -, hence making a total of 36 participants. Given the population of the out-of-school girls as a result of early pregnancies, the sample was considered appropriate to provide the relevant information, as suggested by Meriam (2009) that a sample size of not less than 10% of the population is good to provide reliable information for the study. Data was analysed thematically and manually by providing a summary and direct quotations from the respondents with regard to the objectives of the study.

Results and Discussion

Community Awareness on the ASEP

With regard to identifying the community's awareness of the ASEP, the findings revealed that the community had little awareness about the ASEP. The study also found that most of the community members remarked on the ASEP from different perspectives but mostly negatively. During the interview with the participants on how they knew the term '*alternative secondary education pathway*', some parents were not aware of the programme. For example, one of the parents said the following:

I really don't know about the programme. It is my first time hearing about this. Therefore, I also need to know about it. Is it among the ways to improve the quality of education in secondary schools?

Adding to their unawareness of the concept of ASEP, another parent also gave the following comment:

The concept of Alternative Secondary Education Pathway (ASEP) is not that much new to me, but I don't know it well. I think I need to get more information to know it well, especially on how it works.

There were also some parents who had an idea of the ASEP programme. For example, one of them tried to describe the ASEP programme as follows:

Alternative Secondary Education Pathway (ASEP) is a new programme introduced by the government; I think it aims to enhance education performance and administration activities in all secondary schools. What I know is that it is meant to provide a chance for girl students who got pregnant and gave birth to come back to school..." But, friendly speaking, I don't know more about it...

The Regional ASEP Coordinator gave the following explanation about ASEP.

The Alternative Secondary Education Pathway is an alternative pathway for girls who have been victims of early pregnancies and other societal problems, giving them another chance to access secondary education. This programme was introduced in Tanzania as a liberation strategy for these victim girls. After the establishment of the programme, nowadays motherhood enjoys access to education, which may help them to fulfil their dreams.

The information revealed that the community, especially parents, has little understanding of the Alternative Secondary Education Pathway (ASEP). In fact, it seems that the Alternative Secondary Education Pathway (ASEP) is only known to few people especially who at the centre of it in terms of its implementation such the teachers, education officers and coordinators as well as in terms of those who benefit from it such as the students who have been enrolled in it and their close relatives. This might be due to the fact that the programme is too new to be so widely known.

These findings corroborate to the findings by Ardington *et al.* (2015) and Panday *et al.* (2016) that returning these girls to school after childbirth is critical, especially because prolonged absence can increase the risk of a permanent school dropout.

Awareness of the Objectives of the ASEP

Again, the study was also aimed at knowing whether the respondents were aware of the aims and objectives of the ASEP. The results from the interviews and focus group discussion show that some respondents had a satisfactory understanding of the objective of the ASEP. However, the majority of them, especially the parents and the out-of-school girls, did not have a good understanding of the aims and objectives of the Alternative Secondary Education Pathway (ASEP).

This was evidenced when one of the out-of-school girls gave the following opinion:

Of course, I ever heard about the Alternative Secondary Education Pathway (ASEP) program. However, I personally really don't know why it was established and to whom it was targeted. (Interview with out-of-school adolescents.

Another girl who was expelled from school because of being pregnant and was now enrolled in the ASEP program demonstrated a good understanding of the aims and objectives of the programme by saying the following:

ASEP was introduced to save and help the girls who encountered the challenge of dropping out of school, particularly secondary school, to complete their studies. For example, I became pregnant when I was raped by a street boy when

I was in form three. It was not my will to drop out, but as per school rules and regulations, I had to be expelled from school. But now I hope I am going to fulfil my dreams of becoming a lawyer. FGD with out-of-school adolescents.

Similarly, one of the parents said the following concerning what she knew in relation to the aims and objectives of the ASEP.

What I know is that the Alternative Secondary Education Pathway (ASEP) in Tanzania was established for the purpose of helping only girls who were victimized by early pregnancies. Interview with parents.

When give a chance to explain to make the aims and the objectives of the ASEP clear to all the stakeholders, the RAC gave the following explanations:

The Alternative Secondary Education Pathway (ASEP) was introduced in Tanzania with the aim of providing a chance to the girls, especially those who got pregnant before the completion of their studies. The program also targets girls from families with poor economic bases as well as those affected by various negative family and traditional practices: The Alternative Secondary Education Pathway (ASEP) gives them another opportunity to access education and fulfil their dreams...

Based on the data in the verbatim quotes presented above, it is evident that most of the community members do not have a good understanding of the aims of ASEP towards girls who have early pregnancies. Not only that, based on the explanations from the RAC, the beneficiaries of the program are not only the victims of early pregnancies, but also the girls challenged with poor economic backgrounds, as well as other family problems such as early marriages and other negative traditional practices. This corresponds to the study by World Bank reports (2016) that there are reasons as to why Latina girls leave high school before graduation and they include pregnancy, marriage, gender roles, stereotyping, family demands and economic status.

Community Perceptions on the Implementation of the ASEP

Under the aspect of the community's perceptions on the implementation of ASEP, the study found that most of the community members perceived the program negatively, especially when matched with their social morals and values.

In relation to this, recalling his experience of the community's perception of the program, the Regional ASEP Coordinator gave the following complaints:

Most of the community members perceive ASEP negatively. Some say that it is against their social morals and values. This may result in an increase in pregnancy incidents in schools since there is another chance for education.

However, it is encouraging somehow that a few of them have come to understand the program and perceive it positively.

The RAC went on by adding the following comment:

As an educational practitioner as well as a parent, we perceive the Alternative Secondary Education Pathway (ASEP) in a positive way. This program has become a bridge between girls who were pregnant before completing their studies and their dreams that could be fulfilled through education. This means that the program brings hope and success to them...

On the other side, ASEP teachers were interviewed on their experiences and perceptions of ASEP. Various responses were given, in which one of the teachers had the following to say:

There is no doubt that the ASEP is like a backbone to the students who have become mothers. It helps them to fulfil their dream through education. On the other side, it is a source of employment for us since we acquire part-time employment to teach these students....

Another teacher was quoted as saying the following:

Thank you, Samia Suluhu Hassan, the president of the United Republic of Tanzania, you are the hope of victim girls, who were denied their right to education after giving birth. However, under your leadership, there is now this friendly program that gives mothers access to education again. We are very happy, and it is our expectation that the ASEP will continue to support us as well. We are ready to support it.

Data presented in the above quotes indicate that, still, some of the community members have negative perceptions towards the role of the ASEP program, especially on pregnant girls and those who have given birth. There are beliefs that enrolling such girls back to schools through ASEP may negatively affect the behaviours of other students, and that the community members and fellow students will laugh at them. Also, such student mothers will also lack ample time to take care of their children.

The findings, therefore, imply that the implementation of the ASEP on enrolment and retention is adversely affected by such perceptions. This calls for the need to develop appropriate policies on returning these girls to schools. This is similar to the findings by Martinez and Odhiambo (2018) that there is a need to establish a national policy that supports young mothers' school return. Towards the same direction, Groves et al. (2021) found that there is an importance of instrumental support, family assistance, provision of childcare to organize external childcare,

and financial support to girls victimized by early pregnancies so as to assure them comfort in the ASEP programme.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It was found that the community, especially parents, has little understanding of the ASEP. In fact, it seems that the ASEP is only known to a few people, especially those who share different things and ideas with education officers about education matters. It is maybe due to the recent implementation in the country, which most people are not aware of. Again, it was found that most of the community members do not understand the aims of the ASEP towards girls who are persecuted by early pregnancy. But it is shown that not only the victims of early pregnancy benefit well from the programme, but it also benefits those girls challenged with poor economic status, family problems, such as traditional beliefs and other problems, making them drop out. Meanwhile, it was found that the purpose of ASEP in Tanzania brings hope and arouses positive attitudes to the students, community and education stakeholders hence, it gives an access to education for girls victimised enrolling to ASEP will make the community members and students to laugh at them and also losing an ample of time to take care of their children. It therefore implies that a negative perception of the community members affects enrolment in ASEP and also retention in the programme, due to different incidents.

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are given:

There is a need for the government to provide education about ASEP. This will broaden people's knowledge and enable them to implement what is well known to them. The implementation of ASEP has different effects, such as fulfilling the education dream by giving access to education for girls who are victimised by early pregnancy, creating and developing valuable people in society, providing a source of income and employment for teachers, reducing poverty and ignorance, and helping in the improvement of formal education. This will help all victims to fulfill their educational needs, because not all girls get pregnant willingly. The government and community members should consider the implementation of ASEP among girls who have been victimised by solving different challenges, such as sensitising the community on ASEP. This may help to diminish traditional belief and lack of family support, building enough infrastructure to enact strict laws to discourage stigma in the community, and to moralise girls victimised by early pregnancy and getting better education.

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