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Reintegrating adolescent mothers into secondary education: investigating the availability and effectiveness of support systems in Mbeya Region, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Despite recent policy reforms, such as Education Circular No. 2 of 2021 and the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Programme (SEQUIP) initiative, aimed at facilitating school re-entry, adolescent mothers continue to face considerable emotional, financial, and institutional challenges. This study examines availability and perceived effectiveness of support systems for adolescent mothers re-admitted to secondary schools in the Mbeya region of Tanzania. Guided by Lazarus's Cognitive-Motivational-Relational Theory (CMRT), this paper employed embedded single case study design involving 20 purposively selected student mothers across five secondary schools, through focus group discussions and open-ended questionnaires. Findings revealed that while informal support exists, formal and coordinated systems remain fragmented and insufficiently responsive to student mothers' lived realities. The paper emphasizes the need for integrated psychosocial, financial, and institutional interventions that are contextually grounded and emotionally supportive. These findings contribute new insights into how adolescent student mothers perceive and interpret support, offering understanding of re-entry contexts.

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Adolescents; support; student mothers; secondary schools; Tanzania; re-entry

Introduction and contextual background

Adolescent pregnancy poses a global issue affecting both the Global South and North; however, its effects are particularly severe in low- and middle-income nations. Annually, around 12 million girls aged 15 to 19 give birth worldwide, with sub-Saharan Africa reporting the highest rates (UNFPA, 2022). Early motherhood frequently hinders young women's education, as they struggle to attend and stay in school due to social stigma, financial limitations, and inadequate institutional support (Panday et al., 2021). These obstacles are especially pronounced in areas with weak support systems and persistent cultural norms that marginalize young mothers.

To assist adolescent mothers in returning to education, several countries have implemented school re-entry policies and support programmes. In the United States, for

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instance, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits discrimination against pregnant and parenting students, requiring schools to ensure they have equal access to education. This legal provision has led to supportive practices such as flexible academic schedules, on-site childcare, and counselling services (National Women's Law Centre, 2012). Although situated in a different sociocultural context, the U.S. model offers important insights into how legal frameworks can enable meaningful school re-engagement for young mothers.

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent mothers often face significant systemic barriers to returning to school despite the existence of formal re-entry policies. In Ghana, these guidelines are frequently poorly enforced due to deep-rooted socio-cultural stigma; educators and community members may view re-entry policies as endorsing premarital sexual activity, leading to reluctance in their full implementation (ActionAid Ghana, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2018). Similarly, research from South Africa shows that less than half of adolescent mothers return to school after childbirth, even with established policies. Major obstacles include limited access to childcare, economic hardship, and a lack of institutional support; however, resilience and family caregiving are key factors in promoting re-entry (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Furthermore, Human Rights Watch (2018) reports widespread gaps across at least 26 African Union countries, such as Nigeria, Malawi, and South Africa, where poor policy dissemination and vague procedural guidelines hinder effective implementation. These issues are worsened in areas without clear protocols for reinstatement or mandatory leave, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive support systems that address social, emotional, academic, and material needs to ensure long-term educational engagement for adolescent mothers, especially within Tanzania's secondary school system, where these issues remain insufficiently addressed.

Furthermore, Kenya promotes re-enrolment policies but allows schools and communities to decide on implementation, leading to inconsistent results (Nyariro, 2021). Conversely, Zambia mandates school re-entry and offers structured counselling and designated teacher mentors for adolescent mothers (Chulu, 2016). South Africa enables re-entry but lacks essential services like childcare and counselling, causing increased risks of isolation, anxiety, and dropout (Chinyani, 2017; Njie-Carr, 2019). Additionally, in their comprehensive review, Kinya and Nzengya (2025) found that the success of adolescent mothers returning to school is strongly influenced by socioeconomic factors, family involvement, and the supportiveness of school and community environments, highlighting multiple dimensions of support relevant to our study.

Research from Zambia illustrates significant gaps in implementing these policies. Muyunda (2021) found that unclear objectives, lack of stakeholder commitment, and insufficient resources weaken the effectiveness of the re-entry policy, reflecting similar issues in Tanzania. Additionally, Zaza, Masaiti, and Munkoyo (2025) reported that teenage mothers in Zambian secondary schools deal with stigma, reduced focus, and exclusion from extracurricular activities, underscoring the pressing necessity for comprehensive support, including housing options and policy advocacy.

Tanzania has experienced significant reforms in its educational policies. Traditionally, the government expelled pregnant girls under an exclusionary policy. Those affected were redirected to informal educational centres run by the Institute of Adult Education, often lacking resources or recognition akin to formal schooling

(UNICEF, 2022). However, this changed with the introduction of Education Circular No. 2 of 2021, allowing adolescent mothers to re-enter formal secondary education. This directive is supported by the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Program (SEQUIP), which provides tuition-free education and defines the roles of teachers, parents, and community leaders in aiding re-admitted mothers (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2021).

Despite these advancements, Tanzania still faces notable challenges. Unlike Zambia's integrated counselling or Kenya's community-based advocacy, the enforcement of Tanzania's re-entry policy remains inconsistent, largely influenced by local attitudes and capabilities. Reports continue to highlight high re-dropout rates, inadequate psychosocial support, limited family involvement, and pervasive societal stigma (Mwalongo, 2023; Restless Development, 2023; Timothy & Juhudi, 2023). Adolescent mothers often endure emotional isolation, anxiety, and low self-esteem due to discriminatory views in classrooms and within their families (Maunde, 2024; Mchome et al., 2022; Sewell, 2019). Similarly, research in Ghana indicates that teenage mothers face emotional challenges, poor time management, and low self-esteem, adversely impacting their educational experiences (Adangabe et al., 2021). These psychosocial obstacles reveal the critical need for support systems that go beyond financial aid to address emotional and psychological wellness.

Studies from Tanzania and across Sub-Saharan Africa suggest that re-entry policies may fall short without integrated support systems that address emotional, academic, material, and social needs of adolescent mothers (Ampofo et al., 2022; Atuyambe et al., 2005; Chinyani, 2017; Nyariro, 2021; Yakubu & Salisu, 2018). While fee-free education eliminates financial barriers, it ignores hidden costs for learning materials, childcare, meals, or transport (Mchome et al., 2022). Additionally, entrenched cultural norms often portray adolescent motherhood as a moral failing, leading to social isolation and emotional trauma (Mwalongo, 2023; UNICEF, 2022). These factors collectively hinder school re-engagement and raise the likelihood of student mothers dropping out entirely.

Insights from Australia suggest that educational programmes aimed at young parents must be flexible and accommodating, taking into account the unique challenges they face. Subban et al. (2022) introduce the R.A.F.T framework, which stands for Respect, Acceptance, Flexibility, and Trust, an approach that emphasizes acceptance, advocacy, and adaptable teaching strategies tailored to young parents' needs. This framework has been effective in reducing barriers and fostering resilience among young parents in secondary education. Although developed in a context quite different from Africa, the R.A.F.T framework offers valuable lessons on the importance of creating supportive and flexible learning environments. These international perspectives collectively highlight that while re-entry policies provide an essential foundation, the sustained educational engagement of adolescent mothers depends on multi-faceted support strategies involving family, community, and schools (Adangabe et al., 2021; Muyunda, 2021; Subban et al., 2022; Zaza et al., 2025). However, there remains a significant gap in research specifically focused on the lived experiences of adolescent mothers and the availability of such supports within Tanzania's secondary schools.

Background to Tanzania's re-entry policy

Historically, Tanzania enforced a punitive school ban against pregnant girls and adolescent mothers, grounded in the Education (expulsion and exclusion of pupils) Regulations of 2002, which allowed expulsion for 'offences against morality,' including pregnancy or wedlock. School officials routinely administered involuntary pregnancy tests and expelled girls, often without consent or due process, effectively ending their education (Human Rights Watch, 2017, 2018). In response to sustained national and international pressure to uphold girls' right to education, the Tanzanian government introduced Education Circular No. 2 of 2021, which officially overturned the expulsion policy and laid the foundation for more inclusive re-entry practices (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

In February 2022, the Ministry adopted the circular along with accompanying re-entry guidelines, marking a formal reversal of the discriminatory policy. These measures enable adolescent mothers to return to public schools within two years of childbirth or attend alternative education programmes under the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Programme (SEQUIP) (Human Rights Watch, 2022). However, implementation gaps persist due to limited awareness of these policy changes, ongoing practices of stigma and non-consensual testing, and restrictive conditions such as the two-year return window, which undermine the policy's intent (Human Rights Watch, 2022, 2025).

Research gap

While some empirical research has examined barriers faced by adolescent mothers (for example, Kimathi, 2020; Mwakililo et al., 2025), few studies have analysed how these mothers perceive existing support systems, whether formal or informal. Chinkondenji's (2022) phenomenological research in Malawi emphasizes the significance of family and school-based support, revealing that 'the absence of support (especially from their immediate family) predisposes teenage mothers to other vulnerabilities' (Chinkondenji, 2022, p. 747). Similarly, Ngabaza and Shefer (2013) highlight the disconnect between progressive policies and actual experiences in South African schools, where exclusionary practices and moralistic attitudes continue despite re-entry policies. Since adolescent mothers are a diverse group, their experiences with support depend on factors like family relations, school environment, economic challenges, and psychological resilience. Although Tanzania has introduced a circular aimed at reintegrating student mothers, little empirical data exists on how these policies are perceived and implemented locally. This study aims to address that gap by exploring how adolescent student mothers in Tanzanian secondary schools view institutional, familial, and community support systems after childbirth- evaluating not only their availability but also their practical usefulness, emotional support, and perceived adequacy from the mothers' viewpoints.

Significance of the study

This study makes a timely and significant contribution by exploring not only the availability but also the effectiveness of school and family-based support systems provided to adolescent mothers in Tanzania's secondary schools. While previous studies have primarily focused on access and re-entry frameworks, this research

shifts the lens towards how adolescent mothers perceive and experience support mechanisms after rejoining school. By applying the Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory (CMRT), the study provides theoretical insight into how student mothers appraise the adequacy of support during their dual roles of caregiving and learning. The findings offer practical implications for refining policy implementation, enhancing psychosocial and academic services, and promoting culturally sensitive interventions within Tanzanian schools and beyond. This depth of analysis helps bridge a gap in existing literature in Tanzania, where emotional and institutional effectiveness of re-entry support remains underexplored.

Research aim and objectives

The general purpose was to explore the availability, accessibility, and effectiveness of support systems for adolescent student mothers re-admitted into Tanzanian secondary schools following childbirth.

Specific objectives

- (i) To examine the forms of support available to adolescent student mothers in selected Tanzanian secondary schools.
- (ii) To explore how adolescent student mothers experience and perceive the support provided to them.
- (iii) To assess the perceived adequacy and effectiveness of these support mechanisms in managing motherhood and schooling.

Theoretical framework

This research draws on Richard Lazarus's Cognitive-Motivational-Relational Theory (CMRT) of Coping (1991), which provides a valuable framework for understanding how individuals evaluate their surroundings in relation to available support. Although developed within Western psychological contexts, CMRT's focus on cognitive appraisal, how people determine whether aspects of their environment are supportive, threatening, or irrelevant, has widespread cross-cultural applicability. In this study, the theory is adapted to the Tanzanian setting by acknowledging the unique socio-cultural and institutional factors shaping adolescent student mothers' experiences. Cultural norms around motherhood, education, gender, and national policies influence support in Tanzanian secondary schools.

The CMRT offers a relevant foundation to explore how these young women recognize, experience, and evaluate the support they receive while managing both motherhood and schooling. Specifically, it guides investigation into three key areas: the types of support available; how they experience and perceive this support; and how they judge its adequacy and effectiveness in helping them manage their dual roles. By applying CMRT, the study moves beyond simply identifying external support to examining the personal, culturally embedded processes through which adolescent mother students assess the relevance and sufficiency of support within their social and educational contexts. This approach aligns with the interpretivist

paradigm of the research, emphasizing participants' perspectives, lived experiences, and meaning-making in understanding social realities.

Methodology

Research approach and design

This study utilized a qualitative research approach grounded in interpretivist epistemology within a postmodern philosophical framework. Interpretivism acknowledges that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge emerges from the interaction between researchers and participants (Cohen et al., 2018). In this light, the study aimed to grasp the subjective experiences of adolescent student mothers as they navigate support systems while pursuing secondary education. The postmodern viewpoint challenges overarching narratives and aims to highlight marginalized voices, making it well-suited for research focusing on a vulnerable group whose stories are frequently overlooked in mainstream educational discussions.

The study employed a single case study design to investigate the availability and effectiveness of support for student mothers in public, day secondary schools in Mbeya Region, Tanzania. This method was chosen for its capacity to provide an in-depth, contextualized examination of complex social phenomena within real-life contexts (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Given that adolescent student mothers occupy a unique intersection of youth, parenthood, and education, this design facilitated a deep understanding of their lived experiences. While the findings are not meant to be generalized to a broader population (Denscombe, 2014), the aim was to offer a comprehensive, context-specific understanding of the phenomenon.

The selection of the Mbeya Region was intentional and informed by theory. According to the Institute of Adult Education (2022), Mbeya has one of the highest rates of adolescent student mothers re-entering secondary schools in Tanzania (see Table 1). The presence of this sizable population provided an opportunity to examine the structures and processes that shape their experiences. It was expected that a greater concentration of re-enrolled student mothers would indicate more supportive environments and increased community awareness. While challenges may be similar across different regions, the context of Mbeya offered a good ground for understanding variations in support and stigma.

Population, sample size, and sampling

Sampling

Sampling is the process of selecting a subset of individuals from a larger population to participate in a research study, with the aim of gaining insights that are relevant to the research objectives (Etikan et al., 2016). In qualitative research, sampling focuses on depth and relevance rather than representativeness. This study employed criterion purposive sampling, a technique where participants were selected based on specific characteristics or experiences that were central to the phenomenon under investigation, as explained by Patton (2015). The selected participants were adolescent student mothers who had returned to school after giving birth, had at least from one year of experience in

Table 1. Student mothers who have re-joined schools after dropping out due to pregnancy in different regions of Tanzania as of 2022.

| Region | Districts | Re-admitted Adolescent girls | Re-admitted Student Mothers | Region | Districts | Re-admitted Adolescent girls | Student Mothers |
|--------------|------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|--------------|------------------------------|-----------------|
| Mwanza | Sengerema | 13 | 01 | Mara | Musoma Mc | 37 | 00 |
| | Buchosa | 41 | 20 | | Rorya | 33 | 01 |
| | Ilemela | 73 | 00 | | Bunda DC | 10 | 07 |
| | Nyamagama | 32 | 07 | | Bunda TC | 25 | 01 |
| | Magu | 30 | 02 | | Tarime TC | 25 | 00 |
| | Misungwi | 31 | 01 | | Musoma | 19 | 00 |
| | Ukerewe | 12 | 02 | | Sengerema | 30 | 01 |
| | Kwimba | 09 | 02 | | | | |
| Total | | 241 | 35 | | | 179 | 10 |
| Manyara | Babati DC | 11 | 01 | Dar es Salaam | Kinondoni | 56 | 21 |
| | Babati TC | 43 | 03 | | Ilala | 47 | 07 |
| | Hanang | 45 | 02 | | Ubungo | 36 | 17 |
| | Mbulu DC | 67 | 03 | | Temeke | 22 | 04 |
| | Mbulu TC | 50 | 07 | | Kigamboni | 19 | 05 |
| Total | | 216 | 16 | | | 180 | 54 |
| Iringa | Iringa MC | 80 | 00 | Simiyu | Busega DC | 34 | 33 |
| | Kilolo | 36 | 03 | | Itilima DC | 32 | 01 |
| | Iringa DC | 16 | 00 | | Bariadi TC | 27 | 00 |
| | Mufindi | 30 | 03 | | Maswa DC | 10 | 00 |
| | Mafinga | 26 | 00 | | Bariadi | 21 | 00 |
| Total | | 188 | 06 | | | 124 | 34 |
| Pwani | Mkuranga | 20 | 03 | Mbeya | Busokelo | 15 | 01 |
| | Bagamoyo | 27 | 02 | | Kyela | 35 | 02 |
| | Rufiji | 05 | 00 | | Mbarali | 67 | 00 |
| | Chalinze | 44 | 02 | | Mbeya DC | 91 | 11 |
| | Kibaha- Tumbi | 22 | 01 | | Mbeya TC | 223 | 42 |
| Total | | 142 | 12 | | | 472 | 58 |
| Kigoma | Kigoma MC | 30 | 00 | Morogoro | Morogoro | 26 | 18 |
| | Uvinza | 62 | 04 | | Kilosa | 28 | 02 |
| | Kasulu | 23 | 00 | | Kilombero | 37 | 04 |
| | Kibondo | 18 | 00 | | Gairo | 31 | 03 |
| | Kakonko | 24 | 00 | | | | |
| Total | | 157 | 04 | | | 122 | 27 |
| Ruvuma | Tunduru | 17 | 05 | Dodoma | Dodoma CC | 50 | 06 |
| | Namtumbo | 28 | 03 | | Chamwilo | 44 | 04 |
| | Nyasa | 25 | 04 | | Mpwapwa | 04 | 04 |
| | Songea MC | 70 | 06 | | Chemba | 24 | 03 |
| Total | | 140 | 18 | | | 122 | 17 |

Source: Institute of Adult Education (2022).

Note: The researchers selected regions with more than 120 re-admitted adolescent girls.

motherhood and schooling, and who were ready to share their experiences with the researcher. Criterion purposive sampling was appropriate for this inquiry because it ensured that all participants possessed firsthand experience with the support systems being evaluated.

Selection of secondary schools

With assistance from the Regional Educational Officer, nine schools with a substantial number of registered student mothers were initially identified in Mbeya City, Mbeya

Table 2. Registered student mothers in different schools of Mbeya region.

| S/N | Name of school | Registered Student Mothers | District |
|-----|--------------------------|----------------------------|-----------|
| 1 | Nzondahaki open-school | 08 | Mbeya CC |
| 2 | Lufingo secondary school | 01 | Rungwe DC |
| 3 | Kyela secondary | 02 | Kyela |
| 4 | Iyunga secondary | 08 | Mbeya CC |
| 5 | Kiwira secondary | 03 | Rungwe |
| 6 | Legico secondary | 05 | Mbeya CC |
| 7 | Ihahi secondary | 01 | Mbarali |
| 8 | Mbarali secondary | 00 | Mbarali |
| 9 | Sinde secondary | 10 | Mbeya CC |
| 10 | Maziwa secondary | 00 | Mbeya CC |
| 11 | Uyole secondary | 09 | Mbeya CC |
| 12 | Usongwe secondary school | 11 | Mbeya DC |
| | Total | 58 | |

Source: Mbeya Regional Educational Office (2023).

District Council, and Rungwe District. From this initial list, five schools were purposefully selected based on the concentration of eligible student mothers: Iyunga, Uyole, Sinde, Nzondahaki, and Usongwe Secondary Schools. Criterion purposive sampling allowed the researcher to reach participants with rich, relevant experiences aligned with interpretivist logic (Bryman, 2014). Other schools, including Lufingo, Kiwira, and Ihahi Secondary Schools, were excluded due to the low number of student mothers or the ineligibility of potential participants; for example, Kiwira had three student mothers who did not meet the criteria, and Lufingo had only one (see Table 2).

Selection of adolescent student mothers

Twenty (20) student mothers aged 15 to 19 were purposively selected from the five schools. Selection criteria included that each participant had returned to school following childbirth and had at least one year of experience managing both motherhood and schooling, willingness to share personal experiences and the ability to provide consent. The Regional Educational Office assisted in accessing school records for participant identification. The sample comprised 7 student mothers from Sinde, 5 from Iyunga, 4 from Usongwe, and 4 from Uyole Secondary Schools, as indicated in Table 2.

Focusing on adolescent student mothers was intentional due to their distinct vulnerability. Unlike older student mothers or those in higher education, adolescent mothers in

Table 3. The profile of adolescent student mothers.

| Characteristic | Category/Range | Frequency |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------|
| Age | 15–16 years | 6 |
| | 17–19 years | 14 |
| Current School Level | Level II | 20 |
| Level at Dropout | Form one | 8 |
| | Form two | 12 |
| Time since re-engagement | One year | 20 |
| Socio-economic background | Low income | 15 |
| | Low-Middle income | 5 |
| Living arrangement | With extended Family-Guardian | 13 |
| | Independently or with a partner | 4 |
| | | 3 |

*Table 3 presents some demographic characteristics of the 20 student mothers who participated in this study.

secondary schools are often economically and socially dependent and face increased societal stigma (UNESCO, 2022). Their dual roles as learners and caregivers make them a vital population for understanding the functioning of institutional and community support mechanisms. Table 3 indicates the profile of participants with some demographic characteristics of adolescent student mothers.

Data collection

Data collection involved five focus group discussions (FGDs) and open-ended questionnaires. FGDs enabled participants to share experiences interactively, providing rich, collective insights into support systems and challenges. Each FGD, with 4–7 participants, was held privately within school premises to ensure confidentiality. The discussions lasted 60 to 120 minutes and followed a semi-structured protocol. To mitigate the impact of group dynamics, open-ended questionnaires served as a complementary method. To gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of student mothers, participants were asked open-ended questions, for instance, exploring how their families and schools assist them in managing the dual responsibilities of motherhood and schooling. They were also asked to reflect on how they perceive the support they have been receiving from these sources. These questions were designed to encourage rich, narrative responses that reveal both the nature and adequacy of the support systems surrounding adolescent mothers. Additionally, they allowed participants to share more personal, reflective responses and included perspectives from those less comfortable speaking in groups. Each questionnaire took about 60 minutes.

Richard Lazarus's (1991) Cognitive-Motivational-Relational Theory explains how people evaluate and emotionally respond to situations affecting their well-being, especially under stress. This theory significantly influenced the development of data collection tools, notably in understanding how adolescent student mothers perceive and react to available support systems for managing motherhood and education. For example, focus group prompts and open-ended questionnaire items were crafted to investigate participants' primary appraisals, which relate to how they view the support's availability and helpfulness, whether it is lacking or insufficient, and secondary appraisals reflecting their perceived ability to access and utilize that support effectively. The theory also guided the investigation of emotional reactions, such as feelings of support, abandonment, overwhelm, or empowerment.

In this study, open-ended questionnaires complemented focus group discussions (FGDs) to gather richer data from adolescent student mothers. While in-depth interviews offer detailed personal narratives, open-ended questionnaires were intentionally chosen to allow participants to share experiences privately and with less pressure, especially considering the sensitive nature of adolescent motherhood. Creswell and Poth (2018) highlight that written, thoughtful responses provided at participants' own pace are valuable, particularly when participants may hesitate to speak openly in interviews due to stigma or power issues. FGDs, on the other hand, were used to collect collective insights and group experiences. Combining both methods enabled data triangulation, helping researchers identify common and contrasting themes across personal and group data while respecting participants' comfort and autonomy (Patton, 2015). This approach

aligns with the study's interpretive perspective, which values multiple viewpoints and the meanings participants created.

To protect participants during the focus groups, sessions were held in private, neutral areas within school premises to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and student mothers were informed they could withdraw at any time without consequences. The researcher employed a trauma-informed, non-judgemental approach to foster a respectful and supportive environment. Before each session, it was emphasized that no personal identifiers would be included in reports. Additionally, recognizing the sensitivity of the topic, emotional distress was expected; consequently, referrals for counselling support through school-based teacher-counsellors were provided.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step thematic process. Transcripts were read repeatedly to gain familiarity; then, initial codes were generated inductively. These codes were organized into themes that highlighted patterns related to support systems, barriers, and lived experiences. The interpretive process was reflexive, considering the researcher's positionality in co-constructing meaning with participants. Themes were compared with existing literature for contextual understanding.

Lazarus's Cognitive-Motivational-Relational Theory (CMRT) guided both the development of the interview protocol and the interpretation of themes. Data analysis focused on how student mothers cognitively appraised support systems as facilitators or stressors in their educational pathways. Codes and themes reflected not only structural support but also participants' emotional responses, coping perceptions, and motivational outcomes. This approach ensured findings captured both functional and psychological aspects of support, aligned with CMRT. For instance, during analysis, the emotional and cognitive dimensions of student mothers' narratives were examined through the lens of CMRT. Statements reflecting gratitude, frustration, or resignation were interpreted as emotional outcomes of the student mothers' appraisals of institutional and familial support.

Researcher reflexivity

As a scholar with experience in educational counselling and psychosocial support, the researcher approached this study with empathy and awareness of the challenges faced by adolescent student mothers. While my background helped build rapport and sensitivity, it also risked interpretive bias, especially when assumptions about coping strategies or family dynamics arose.

To maintain reflexivity, the researcher kept regular memos during data collection and analysis to record evolving assumptions, reactions, and potential biases. During focus groups, the researcher allowed participants to lead conversations with minimal intervention to avoid imposing personal frameworks. The open-ended questionnaires further reduced researcher influence, encouraging participants to express themselves freely without immediate pressure. By engaging in ongoing reflection, the researcher aimed to co-construct meaning with participants and acknowledge how my positionality influenced knowledge generation and interpretation.

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical standards. Permissions were obtained from the University of Dar es Salaam, with approval number Ref. NO: AB3/12 (B), the Mbeya Regional Administrative Secretary, and the school authorities. All participants gave informed consent, and parental or guardian consent was required for those under 18. The purpose and scope were clearly explained, and participation was voluntary. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms for participants and schools. Attention was also paid to power dynamics, ensuring participants felt safe and empowered.

This research explored the availability, accessibility, and effectiveness of support systems for adolescent mothers re-admitted to secondary schools in the Mbeya Region, Tanzania. Using Lazarus's CMRT, it examined how these mothers perceive, emotionally respond to, and cope with challenges related to educational re-engagement. The discussion centres on five key themes aligned with the study's three objectives: (1) to assess the types of support available to adolescent student mothers, (2) to understand adolescent student mothers' experiences and perceptions of the support that they receive, and (3) to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of these support systems in helping them manage both schooling and motherhood.

Findings

This section presents the key findings derived from the voices of adolescent student mothers regarding the availability and effectiveness of support systems in selected secondary schools in Mbeya, Tanzania. The findings are organized into three interrelated themes that reflect the focus of the paper: (i) the types of support available to adolescent student mothers, (ii) their experiences and perceptions of the support they receive, and (iii) the perceived effectiveness of these support systems in helping them manage both schooling and motherhood. These themes emerged from a careful thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected through focus group discussions and open-ended questionnaires with adolescent student mothers. Where appropriate, direct quotations from participants are included to illustrate the depth of their experiences and support the interpretation of findings.

Types of support available to adolescent student mothers

The findings indicated that adolescent student mothers experienced varying levels of support, broadly classified into emotional, financial, and institutional categories. However, their perceptions revealed both the presence of support structures and critical gaps in accessibility, consistency, and adequacy across different schools and communities.

Emotional support

Some student mothers mentioned receiving emotional support mainly from individual teachers, school counsellors, and, on rare occasions, their families. This support included encouragement, understanding from teachers when they were late due to childcare

responsibilities, or simply having someone listen without judgement. For example, one student noted:

... there is a female teacher who consistently encourages me not to give up. She listens when I have issues at home or with my child. (FGD, School B)

In a similar vein, an open-ended questionnaire response provided another perspective:

When I feel stressed about missing classes due to parenting responsibilities, like taking my son to the clinic, my friend helps me relax. However, not everyone truly understands my situation. (OEQ, School C)

While some adolescent mothers acknowledged moments of emotional support from peers or compassionate teachers, many also reflected on the limitations of these support systems. Their experiences reveal not only the existence of informal emotional support but also gaps, such as the scarcity of structured psychosocial services like school-based counselling. For instance, student mothers from various schools expressed:

Our school lacks a professional counsellor. When we feel stressed, we often keep it to ourselves or confide in a friend, sometimes reaching out to a class teacher. There's no trained counsellor available for us. On occasion, we hesitate to approach our male class teacher regarding our struggles. (FGD, School E)

I have never encountered anything like counselling sessions at this school. Even when I feel overwhelmed, I am unsure who to approach. Teachers are often too busy or fail to comprehend our situations. Sometimes, I fear discussing sensitive issues with our class teacher. (OEQ, School C)

These testimonies underscore the deficiency of structured emotional support services, such as school-based counselling, which many student mothers could utilize to manage stress and remain engaged in their education.

Financial support

Financial support represents an essential resource for adolescent student mothers managing both schooling and parenting responsibilities. However, the findings revealed that while formal initiatives such as SEQUIP reduced direct school costs, many student mothers experienced minimal financial assistance from family members or the men who impregnated them. This lack of consistent, informal financial support significantly shaped how they navigated school demands and caregiving responsibilities. As one student mother explained:

... school fees are manageable now, but I receive no assistance with transport, food, or other necessities for my baby. (OEQ, School D)

Some mentioned receiving occasional support from relatives, while others relied entirely on themselves, engaging in small income-generating ventures. However, none of the student mothers reported any financial assistance programmes specifically designed for them from schools or the government. The findings suggest that although Tanzania's fee-free education policy under SEQUIP has alleviated direct tuition costs, adolescent student mothers still face considerable financial hurdles beyond just school fees. These challenges include transportation costs, as most student mothers live far from the designated secondary schools for re-entry,

as well as expenses for school supplies, childcare, uniforms, and food, costs that are not included in government provisions at their schools and are crucial for consistent school attendance and engagement.

Some of my relatives help me once in a while, but it's not something I can rely on. Sometimes they say they also have their own children to take care of, so they just tell me to find my own way. I feel like I'm mostly on my own. (FGD, School A)

Another student mother explained her need for small businesses and part-time jobs due to a lack of financial aid:

I sell groundnuts during breaks to buy some necessities for my child and take care of myself. Sometimes, I sell snacks early in the morning to our neighbours before heading to school. On some days, I even miss classes when I feel too exhausted. (FGD, School C)

These findings highlight that while eliminating school fees has reduced one educational barrier, it does not tackle the broader financial pressures that disproportionately impact student mothers. The findings demonstrate that while some formal financial mechanisms exist, adolescent student mothers often perceive informal support from parents, partners, and extended family as inconsistent or inadequate. Understanding these realities highlights the need to strengthen both formal and community-based support structures, ensuring that adolescent mothers have reliable, accessible resources to meet their basic needs while pursuing education

Institutional support

The findings highlighted varied experiences concerning institutional support for adolescent student mothers. While some schools offered slight accommodations, such as flexible attendance policies and informal assistance from teachers, essential structured mechanisms, like formal orientation programmes for returning adolescent mothers and accessible childcare options, were mostly lacking in the selected schools. For instance, one student mother articulated the absence of structured support:

The government has allowed us to rejoin the school, but after that, it's like we are on our own. No teacher asks me how I'm coping or helps me manage school and the baby. Although we don't start classes early in the morning like other regular students, the struggle is still real because the majority of us have been rejected by our families since pregnancy. (FGD, School C)

Another student mother similarly addressed this issue through an open-ended questionnaire, stating,

I wish the school had a place for us to leave our babies as we enter classes or someone to talk to regularly. For me, I don't have anyone to take care of my baby at home as I come to school, so I have to take her with me to school. Unfortunately, my family doesn't have the financial ability to hire a babysitter for me. (OEG, School A)

Institutional support plays a crucial role in ensuring that adolescent student mothers have the necessary resources and services to continue their education successfully. In the context of secondary schools in Tanzania, institutional support mainly encompasses academic assistance and physical facilities. The findings revealed that while some schools offered varying degrees of institutional support, it was often inconsistent and insufficient

to address the comprehensive needs of adolescent mothers. Many student mothers expressed their frustration regarding the absence of childcare services in schools and counselling services from professional counsellors. For example, one participant noted,

I wish the school had a nearby nursery for us to keep our children while we attend classes. It would help us focus on lessons without worrying about where to leave the babies. (FGD, School A)

Another student mother remarked, . . . there are no facilities here for student mothers. I leave my child at home with my grandmother when I come to school. (OEQ, School C)

These accounts illustrate that although student mothers are permitted to re-enter school, meaningful follow-up and customized institutional support are largely inadequate or absent.

Perceptions of student mothers on the support provided to them

Student mothers noted that while emotional, financial, and institutional support was available to some degree, their views on its sufficiency, and reliability were varied. Their experiences reflected appreciation for the support offered, but also frustration regarding the areas that were insufficiently structured or lacking. One student mother expressed her gratitude for occasional encouragement from educators, particularly class teachers, but still felt a general lack of support:

They say they support us, but it's just words in most cases. When I miss a class because of my childcare matters, no one looks after me to find out what is up or helps me catch up. (FGD, School D)

Another participant highlighted the emotional strain stemming from feeling like an outsider in the school environment:

Even though I was allowed back to school, I feel different. Teachers and students look at me like I don't belong here anymore. It was better to relocate us to a different place. (OEQ, School C)

These expressions indicate that perceived support depends not only on its availability but also on its quality, stability, and the school's overall culture of acceptance. Feelings of isolation or moral judgement diminish the perceived value of assistance and discourage help-seeking behaviours.

Effectiveness of support systems in managing motherhood and schooling

Although some adolescent student mothers acknowledged receiving different forms of support, their stories indicated that such support was frequently inconsistent or fragmented to significantly alleviate the challenges of balancing education and motherhood. In several instances, the support provided only partially addressed their complex needs. One participant noted:

The school allows me to attend classes, but when my child is sick, no one helps. I have to choose between missing school and leaving the baby unattended. (FGD, School A)

Another student mother shared her thoughts on the lack of tangible help despite emotional support:

Teachers sometimes encourage us with words, but we need more than encouragement. We need help with taking care of our children, catching up with lessons and financial assistance for child and self-care. (OEQ, School C)

A third participant pointed out the challenge of lacking specific support for young mothers like herself:

Everything is general. They treat us like normal students, but our problems are not the same. Sometimes, normal students are treated better than us, for example, we are not provided school lunch like them, which was crucial, especially to us who are lactating. (FGD, School D)

These insights highlight that support that lacks contextual understanding or practical assistance tends to fall short of fostering academic persistence and emotional stability among adolescent mothers.

Figure 1 indicates a summary of the themes and subthemes related to the availability and effectiveness of support systems provided to adolescent student mothers.

Discussion

Findings indicated that some adolescent student mothers received emotional backing from teachers or peers, but most schools lacked formal psychosocial services like structured counselling. The emotional strain of balancing motherhood and studies without systemic emotional support was clear. This aligns with Groves et al. (2022), who state that adolescent mothers' continued engagement with education often depends on consistent emotional backing. Similarly, Adangabe et al. (2021) pointed out emotional instability and low self-esteem among teenage mothers in Ghana, highlighting the urgent need for structured psychosocial programmes to strengthen resilience.

From a Cognitive-Motivational-Relational Theory (CMRT) perspective, the absence of emotional support impacts the secondary appraisal stage, where individuals assess their internal and external coping resources. Without emotional affirmation or empathetic engagement, many student mothers report feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, and isolation, weakening emotion-centred coping strategies. However, when certain teachers or peers offer compassion or practical guidance, these serve as emotional buffers, boosting motivation, belonging, and psychological resilience. These dynamics echo Twalo (2024), who observed that in emotionally unresponsive school environments, adolescent mothers often internalize stress, leading to disengagement, absenteeism, and poorer academic performance.

Similarly, Subban et al. (2022) argue that emotionally inclusive educational structures, described as 'RAFTS' (Responsive, Accepting, Flexible, and Transformative Supports), promote resilience by providing acceptance, advocacy, and adaptability, which are still critically underdeveloped in Tanzanian secondary schools. This aligns with findings by Mwakililo et al. (2025), who noted that Tanzanian student mothers often cope alone or bring their babies to school, highlighting the fragility of institutional support. Furthermore, evidence from Ipas et al. (2017) demonstrates that Tanzanian adolescent mothers frequently mobilize social and cultural capital to survive educational and social exclusion. Lastly, as Human Rights Watch (2018) warns, although formal re-entry policies may exist, poor implementation, stigma, and the lack of counselling and emotional scaffolding continue to marginalize adolescent mothers across Sub-Saharan Africa.

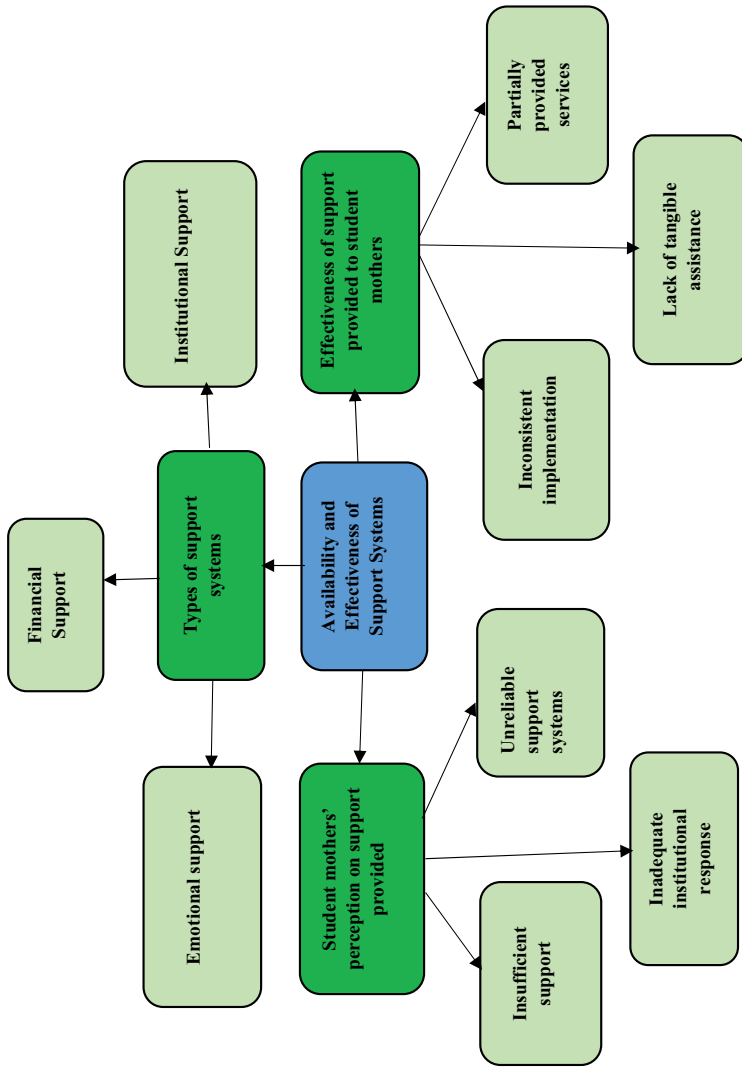


Figure 1. Summary of themes and subthemes on the availability and effectiveness of support systems to adolescent student mothers.

Collectively, these findings emphasize the urgent need for emotionally responsive, policy-driven support systems that prioritize the psychological and social realities of student mothers within the education sector.

Although the SEQUIP initiative in Tanzania offers tuition-free education, participants consistently described financial hardship as a persistent barrier to regular school attendance. While tuition is waived, indirect costs, such as school uniforms, textbooks, transport, childcare, and meals, remain unaffordable for many adolescent student mothers, most of whom come from socioeconomically disadvantaged households. Comparable findings from Kenya (IDinsight, 2022) indicate that fee abolition alone is insufficient to alleviate the compounded financial burdens faced by young mothers, particularly when they must balance caregiving responsibilities with educational demands. In Zambia, Zaza et al. (2025) similarly highlighted how poverty and social stigma intersect to discourage consistent attendance among school-going mothers, advocating for more holistic interventions, including boarding services and direct material support.

Framed within the Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory (CMRT), these financial pressures influence student mothers' secondary appraisals, where they evaluate their coping resources. When mothers perceived themselves as lacking adequate support, they reported feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, and chronic fatigue, which are markers of weakened emotional coping. Some turned to problem-focused strategies such as informal trading or domestic labour to finance school-related expenses. However, this often exacerbated their stress, reducing time and energy for academic engagement. This aligns with Nyariro's (2018) study in Kenya, which observed that while income-generating activities may promote autonomy, they also compound the academic and emotional workload of adolescent mothers. Kurevakwesu et al. (2025) further argue that school re-entry frameworks in Sub-Saharan Africa will remain ineffective unless they are accompanied by targeted financial assistance mechanisms that account for the lived realities of young mothers.

Despite Tanzania's progressive Education Circular No. 2 of 2021, most participating schools lacked the institutional capacity to support adolescent mothers effectively. Key services such as counselling, flexible scheduling, and on-site childcare were either unavailable or inconsistently provided. Implementation was largely ad hoc and dependent on the discretion of individual teachers, reflecting a persistent disconnect between policy formulation and on-the-ground execution. These findings are consistent with Mwalongo's (2023) analysis, which highlighted policy-practice gaps in Tanzanian secondary schools, and UNICEF's (2022) broader concerns regarding limited institutional preparedness to accommodate re-entering student mothers.

Comparable implementation challenges have also been documented in Zambia. Muyunda (2021) reported that the success of re-entry policies was impeded by weak intersectoral collaboration and poor stakeholder awareness, while Chulu (2016) found that administrative inertia and limited policy dissemination undermined the effectiveness of Zambia's re-entry framework. Similar issues are evident in the Tanzanian context. Furthermore, Bhana and Mcambi (2013) illustrated how, despite policy provisions in South Africa, adolescent mothers continued to face entrenched stigma, emotional neglect, and exclusion within school spaces. This suggests that formal policy frameworks are insufficient on their own unless reinforced by cultural shifts in school climate and

broader societal attitudes, a dynamic that has been mirrored in the Tanzanian experience as well.

According to the Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory (CMRT), such gaps in support systems impact both primary appraisals, which involve how individuals assess potential threats, and secondary appraisals, which involve evaluating available coping resources (Lazarus, 1991). Many student mothers in this study perceived schools as unsupportive environments, which led to emotional responses such as frustration, helplessness, and social withdrawal. These findings align with Grant and Hallman's (2008) study in South Africa, which underscored the importance of institutional provisions such as flexible timetables, counselling services, and non-discriminatory environments for the retention and success of adolescent mothers. The lack of these provisions in Tanzanian schools, as revealed in this study, points to a broader systemic failure to accommodate the unique needs of young mothers re-entering the education system.

While some student mothers in this study reported receiving certain forms of support, their experiences revealed wide variation in both quality and emotional tone. Many described the support as inconsistent, sometimes helpful, other times marked by judgement, indifference, or even condescension. As noted by Mutua and Wambiya (2023) in the Kenyan context, it is not merely the existence of support that matters, but how it is perceived. In this study, informal gestures of empathy, such as a teacher offering encouragement or a peer checking in, often had a greater positive impact than more formal assistance delivered without sensitivity or compassion. According to the Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory (CMRT), these perceptions are central to the secondary appraisal process, where individuals assess the resources available to them. When support was seen as genuine and dependable, student mothers tended to show more motivation and adopt constructive coping mechanisms.

In contrast, when support was perceived as conditional or moralizing, it frequently triggered emotional withdrawal, anxiety, and a sense of exclusion. This supports Atakilil et al. (2023) findings that inclusive school cultures and empathetic educators are crucial for enhancing resilience and academic self-efficacy among adolescent mothers in African contexts. Furthermore, Silver (2022) highlights how dominant school discourses often position adolescent mothers within restrictive moral binaries such as the 'virgin versus mother' frame which deepens stigma and undermines their sense of belonging. This moral judgement was deeply felt by many participants in this study, who internalized the sense that they were being tolerated rather than genuinely supported.

Without consistent institutional or family support, many student mothers in this study resorted to coping strategies like multitasking, asking peers for help, or temporarily stepping away from school activities. While these actions show resilience, they also highlight the failure of structural systems to offer adequate and ongoing support. From the perspective of Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory (CMRT), such dependence on emotion-focused coping- especially in environments lacking tangible resources- can lead to emotional exhaustion, internalized blame, and burnout. Atujuna and Levy (2022) note that while inner strength and moral encouragement are helpful, they cannot replace formal support systems within education. Ramadwa and Musie (2022) emphasize that without practical supports like on-campus childcare and flexible schooling options, even

highly motivated adolescent mothers risk disengagement and dropping out. The current findings support these points by showing that, although student mothers often display courage and adaptability, the ongoing stress of managing dual roles without systemic support makes these coping strategies ultimately unsustainable.

Synthesis and theoretical reflection

These findings reveal a troubling discrepancy between Tanzania's rights-based policy framework and the actual experiences of adolescent student mothers. Although Circular No. 2 of 2021 and SEQUIP demonstrate a formal dedication to educational inclusion, their implementation has yet to adequately address the psychosocial, economic, and caregiving aspects of adolescent motherhood.

The CMRT provided a useful lens to understand how adolescent mothers evaluate their challenges and assess their coping resources. Primary appraisals of threats (such as stigma, poverty, strict school rules) and secondary appraisals of coping potential (like emotional support, finances, institutional aid) significantly influence their emotional states, motivation, and engagement in school. When support was lacking or perceived as ineffective, student mothers felt emotionally drained and contemplated withdrawing. Conversely, when support was genuine and accessible, even if limited, they demonstrated greater perseverance. To translate policy goals into actual practice, educational interventions must reflect the real experiences and appraisals of student mothers. Only then can Tanzania's re-entry initiatives become truly empowering rather than symbolic gestures of inclusion.

Limitations of the study

The study identifies three main limitations. First, it was limited to the Mbeya region, which may not reflect the diverse experiences of student mothers across other Tanzanian regions. Second, there was a potential for social desirability bias, particularly during focus group discussions. The researcher addressed this by actively managing group dynamics, encouraging quieter members to participate and curtailing dominance by more vocal participants. Additionally, open-ended questionnaires were used to facilitate individual reflections outside of group contexts. Third, ethical considerations in group settings necessitated careful handling of confidentiality due to the participants' vulnerability (Ary et al., 2012). To uphold ethical standards, measures such as anonymizing data and conducting data collection in private venues were implemented.

Implications and conclusion

Implications of the findings

The study's outcomes have significant policy and practical implications for aiding adolescent student mothers in Tanzania. While SEQUIP addresses tuition fees, broader reforms are essential to tackle the complex challenges faced by these young women. Policies should focus on establishing school-based childcare to ease caregiving demands, integrating psychosocial support like counselling, and engaging families and communities to

foster an inclusive support network. These reforms would fill current gaps and support adolescent mothers in managing their educational and maternal responsibilities.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, Tanzanian education authorities should enhance institutional support by creating formal psychosocial counselling and flexible learning programmes tailored for adolescent mothers. Financial aid should go beyond tuition waivers to include subsidies for books, transport, and childcare. Schools should promote inclusive environments through teacher training that fosters empathy and reduces stigma, along with safe spaces for peer support. Engaging families and communities is crucial to challenge cultural stigmas and improve emotional and practical support. At the policy level, consistent enforcement and oversight of re-entry guidelines, like Circular No. 2 of 2021, are necessary to ensure equitable access to support services. Further research should also explore the views of teachers, parents, and community leaders, as well as assess the long-term effects of re-entry policies on educational achievement and well-being.

Conclusion

This study explored the availability and perceived effectiveness of support systems for adolescent student mothers in Mbeya Region, Tanzania. Using Lazarus's Cognitive-Motivational-Relational Theory (CMRT), it was found that although some emotional and informal support exists, the lack of structured, school-based services like counselling, financial aid, and childcare hampers the educational participation of young mothers.

The CMRT sheds light on how the perception of support influences coping strategies and emotional health. Inconsistent, judgemental, or poorly coordinated support often results in disengagement and emotional fatigue, while inclusive and empathetic interactions promote continued academic pursuit. Despite its regional and sample limitations, the study highlights the disconnect between national re-entry policies and practical realities. There is an urgent need for policy implementation to include practical, context-sensitive measures that address the emotional, material, and institutional needs of student mothers. Supporting these young women comprehensively throughout their education is vital for promoting gender equity and sustainable learning outcomes.

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Data availability statement

The data supporting the results or analyses presented in this paper can be found from the author upon reasonable request.

The use of AI

I have used AI (QuillBot) for language assessment and summarising.

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