



**Psychosocial Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of Teen Student Mothers
Re-Admitted in Non-Formal Secondary Education Centres in Coast
Region, Tanzania**

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Abstract

This study sought to assess psychosocial challenges and coping mechanisms of teen student mothers re-admitted in non-formal secondary education centres in Coast region, Tanzania. Given the nature of the problem under study, qualitative approach incorporating case study design was adopted to guide this study. A purposive sampling technique was used to select thirty-two teen mothers from three non-formal secondary education centres. The interview was conducted to generate qualitative data. Data analysis followed a thematic approach. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly read to facilitate immersion in the data. Coding, categorisation, and theme development were conducted iteratively using constant comparison techniques. The final themes were presented narratively and supported with direct quotations from participants to enhance credibility and illustrate key findings. The study findings indicated various psychosocial challenges facing teen student mothers re-admitted in non-formal secondary school centres. They reported to be mocked, embarrassed, and insulted by their teachers, own family members and peers. To cope with aforesaid psychosocial challenges, teen student mothers adopted different mechanisms such as seeking social support, managing their time well, and encouragement from friends and teachers. The study recommends non-formal secondary education centres to provide counselling services to teen student mothers to help them deal with their psychosocial challenges.

Keywords: Psychosocial challenges, coping mechanisms, teen student mothers, non-formal secondary education

Introduction

Teenage pregnancy is a critical global issue that affects millions of young girls each year, significantly impacting their educational and health outcomes. Over sixteen million girls aged 15 to 19, along with an additional one million girls under the age of 15, give birth annually (Muyunda, 2021; Mackatiani et al., 2022). This situation contributes to a cycle of disadvantage, as many young mothers struggle to balance parenting responsibilities with educational pursuits, leading to a significant number of them unable to continue their education (Muyunda, 2021; Mackatiani et al., 2022).

In Tanzania, the situation is particularly alarming, as the country has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in East Africa, with approximately 360,000 girls between the ages of 15 and 19 giving birth annually (Human Rights Watch, 2021). This statistic translates to an average of 986 girls getting pregnant every day, raising significant concerns about the implications for their reproductive health and educational goals. According to Timothy and Juhudi (2023), teenage pregnancy is a leading cause of school dropout among schoolchildren in Tanzania.

Dropout creates barriers to education amongst teenage mothers in Tanzania, like many other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, prompting the need for policy interventions (Denya, 2024). To address educational hurdles, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, in 2021, announced a new re-entry policy No. 2 of 2021, which allowed all students who dropped out of school due to different problems, including pregnancy, to return to school (WyEST, 2021; Timothy & Juhudi, 2023). According to this circular, teen mothers are allowed to return to formal schools within two years after giving birth or use alternative pathways (Mwila & Asumini, 2024). For students who return to school, their education provision falls under various systems of education, including formal and alternative pathways such as non-formal secondary schools that offer an accelerated curriculum (WyEST, 2021). This study focused on teen student mothers re-admitted in non-formal secondary education programme.

Institute of Adult Education offers non-formal secondary education. The programme has two stages. Stage one is related to Form One and Two levels are studied for a year, and a student sits for the Form Two Qualifying Test. Most learners under this category are those who have never attended a formal secondary school education or those who dropped out from secondary school before sitting for the Certificate of Secondary Education Examination (CSEE) due to various reasons, including early pregnancy (UNICEF, 2023). Stage two comprises those who passed the QT or Form

Two national examinations, and those Form Four re-sitters who should study the Form Three and Four contents for one year and thereafter sit for the Form Four National Examinations (CSEE) (Mushi, 2012). Since the inception of the re-entry policy in 2021, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology through IAE and the World Bank through the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project Alternative Education Pathway (SEQUIP-AEP), has helped a total of 10,239 girls (equivalent to 114 percent) to return to school in non-formal secondary education centres in all Tanzanian mainland regions over three consecutive years from 2021/2022 to 2023/2024; amongst them are teen student mothers (Daily News, 2025).

Parenting can be challenging and stressful for any person, including teen student mothers. Teen motherhood is mostly unplanned and as a result, teen student mothers are relatively exposed to varied psychosocial challenges. This is usually because teen motherhood subject teen student mothers to varied psychosocial crises in their developmental journey. Macharia and Kessio (2021) denote that parenting poses psychosocial implications for teen student mothers because they become overwhelmed with difficulties in meeting financial, physical, educational, and emotional needs. Haruna, Kuranchie and Addo (2022), for instance, observed that teen mothers experience more emotional tantrums, behavioural problems deprivation, mental health difficulties and low educational attainment. In the same line of argument, Adqasuraq and Kualaga (2012) insist that motherhood responsibilities lead to emotional instability among teen student mothers.

According to Onyango, Kioli and Nyambedha (2015) the double role of being a mother and learner is a major concern that impacts the psychological development of the teen student mothers. For example, Smith and Brown (2020) indicate that motherhood responsibilities cause physical and emotional stress to teen student mothers. This is because they cannot balance motherhood responsibilities and education demands. Likewise, Undie and Birungi (2022) observed that teen student mothers are mostly characterized by loneliness, disgrace, shame and stigmatization, which result them experiencing psychological challenges. These conditions most often lead to complicated situations where these students feel uncomfortable and low self-esteem. Students undergo psychological challenges which negatively affect their psychological welfare (Ruedinger & Cox, 2018; Akter, 2019; Badebi, 2021). Some eventually end up abandoning their studies.

While existing studies have identified educational challenges as barriers to the school re-entry of teenage mothers (Mmassy, 2023; Asumini & Mwila, 2023; Timothy &

Juhudi, 2024), a comprehensive examination of psychosocial challenges and how teenage mothers cope with these challenges is noticeably lacking in the literature. These studies fall short of delving into the intricate details of specific psychosocial challenges faced by teenage mothers and their coping mechanisms. This knowledge deficit is incongruent with the urgency of addressing barriers to education re-engagement for adolescent mothers to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 on education (SDG 4) (Baa-Poku, 2019; Kawala, 2021). Thus, this study aims to bridge this crucial research gap and contribute to this field's growing body of knowledge. Specifically, the study is guided by the following two questions:

- i) What psychosocial challenges do teen student mothers face in non-formal secondary education?
- ii) How do teen student mothers cope with the psychosocial challenges they encounter in non-formal secondary education?

Methodology

A qualitative approach was found to be the most appropriate for addressing the aim of this study. Contemporary qualitative scholars argue that numerical representations alone often fail to capture the complexity of individuals lived experiences (Nowell & Albrecht, 2021). Qualitative inquiry therefore enabled the researcher to build ethical, trust-based research relationships with teen mothers, facilitating the development of deeper insights into their psychosocial realities (Tracy, 2020). Moreover, qualitative methods are well suited to exploring how and why individuals interpret and respond to their social world, and they offer strong capacity to illuminate the nuances of human actions and behaviour through situated interaction (Dwyer et al., 2022). Within this methodological frame, the study adopted a case study design. A case study is recognised as an approach that generates an in-depth and multifaceted understanding of a complex phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2023). This design was selected because it allows for the use of multiple data collection techniques and supports the production of rich, contextually grounded accounts of what teen mothers think, experience, and report regarding psychosocial challenges and their coping strategies. Data was collected through in-depth interviews. A purposeful sampling technique was employed in this study because the researchers were interested in acquiring a piece of reliable information, rather than an increase in the number of participants. A purposive sampling technique was employed in this study because the researchers sought rich, credible, and context-specific information rather than a large sample size. Purposive sampling enables the

intentional selection of participants whose characteristics and experiences align closely with the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2021). In this study, teen student mothers were selected from three non-formal secondary education centres in the Coast region. The primary participants were teens who had returned to school after childbirth and had been enrolled at the centres for at least one year. To identify eligible participants, counselling teachers at each centre provided a list of re-admitted teen mothers meeting the inclusion criteria. A total of 32 participants were selected, which aligns with guidance indicating that qualitative case study research benefits from small, information-rich samples that support depth rather than breadth of inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

An in-depth, semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data. The items were developed directly from the research questions to ensure alignment with the study focus while also allowing space for unstructured, emergent responses. The instrument captured information on the psychosocial challenges faced by teen student mothers and the coping mechanisms they employed. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded. To ensure validity, the interview guide underwent expert review by two senior researchers at the Institute of Adult Education in Dar es Salaam. Their assessment contributed to confirming both content and face validity.

Ethical procedures were strictly observed. A data collection permit was obtained from the Resident Tutor, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights during participation. Written consent was obtained, and confidentiality assurances were provided, including secure handling of all collected data.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly read to facilitate immersion in the data. Coding, categorisation, and theme development were conducted iteratively using constant comparison techniques (Nowell et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2022). The final themes were presented narratively and supported with direct quotations from participants to enhance credibility and illustrate key findings.

Findings and discussion

Findings are presented basing on two research questions: What are the psychosocial challenges experienced by teenage mothers re-engaging in school through non-formal secondary education, and how do they cope with them?

Psychosocial Challenges of the Re-admitted Teen Mothers

Findings indicate differences and similarities in each participant's psychosocial challenges. These psychosocial challenges are highlighted in the following themes.

Challenge with teachers

The findings indicated that most teen mothers share similar challenges, such as being mocked and given bad names by their teachers inside and outside the classroom. They said that some of their teachers used disapproving remarks towards them, including reminding them of their past mistakes that led to early pregnancy. The participants also said that they were called all sorts of embarrassing names by some teachers. This name-calling sometimes intimidated them to the extent that they had to skip some of the lessons. They were also accused of being responsible for tarnishing the image of the centre by increasing the number of failures. Commenting on how the intimidation of teachers affected their learning, a 16-year-old participant says:

I remember one day a mathematics subject teacher told me in the class that I was wasting my time, and that it was better to go home and look after my child or find a man who would get married to me because I would never pass the subject and I may be more useful in a husband's home than being in school. This remark pierced my heart like a sharp object.

Although interviewed respondents had similar views regarding the intimidation in class by male teachers, one explicitly stated:

Very unfortunately, our centre is in the same school I was in before, many teachers knew me before I got pregnant and dropped out of school. So, I am facing unfair judgments and labels from male and female teachers. It is such painful when I see my fellow women embarrassing me because of this situation, calling me bad names.

It is not easy for teen student mothers to endure bad words coming from male teachers, but it is even harder if those words come from female teachers. This situation discourages them from moving forward, and if they don't get immediate support, it can contribute to school dropping out. For example, Moonga's (2014) study found that teen student mothers did not see school as a welcoming environment because teachers labelled them as 'bad women'. Likewise, Haruna et al. (2022) recommended that teachers need education on how to handle adolescent mothers because they often receive more negative attitudes from teachers than in general.

Ridiculed by fellow students

According to the findings, some teen mothers share similar experiences like mockery, ridicule, gossiping about, being rejected and stigmatized by their fellow students at the learning centres. Their mates address them by using their child names, laugh at them because of being neglected by their children's fathers, unable to feed their children, being chased away by parents or going out of the class to breastfeed their kids. Such ridicule and treatment make teen student mothers challenge psychological challenges. While five teen mothers, specifically, talked about this challenge, a 17-year-old participant amongst them further said:

Sometimes my classmates embarrass me. They name me bad names, some irritating ones. They also like to laugh at me when they see me rushing home to breastfeed my child.

For some participants, the name-calling initiated sudden outbursts of frustration and anger:

Other fellow students embarrassed me. Someone will go outside and come back running and shouting to me.... go and breastfeed your child, can't you hear the child crying...and the whole class will laugh.... really annoys me.

Out of fourteen participants who spoke about feeling uncomfortable and shy because of unattractive comments from their fellow students and friends, one said:

My classmates used to laugh at me because I was coming from school with my child and sometimes breastfeeding her in the classroom. As you know there is nothing that hurts like being mocked by fellow women because of breastfeeding my little child in front of them.....This is the hardest challenge for me at this learning centre.

Assertions show that teen student mothers feel embarrassed about their situation, especially when they are ridiculed and mocked by classmates. This causes psychosocial challenges to teen student mothers. Teen student mothers unveil that they decided to isolate themselves from their mates to avoid their mockery, ridicule and unattractive comments. This finding aligns with Gyasi (2020) who found that teen student mothers were lonely because of negative comments made by their friends on them. Likewise, Imbosa et al., (2022) identified that teen student mothers were verbally and physically abused by peers. This situation most often leads to complicated situations whereby these teen student mothers may have low self-esteem and feel uncomfortable in school (Grav et al., 2012; Ghogbo, 2020).

Feeling guilty

Interviewed participants said that they had a sense of guilt for being mothers, as this a 17-year-old teen student mother narrated:

Honestly speaking, I regret being in this situation. Since I discovered that I was pregnant up to this moment, I have never stopped thinking about my situation... I am concerned that I have disappointed my parents who spent money and had trust in me to proceed and finish my secondary education. Look at me now, do you think they are happy...so I think a lot.

Another 19-year-old participant added:

I cannot succinctly express, but the whole situation is stressful...I am thinking a lot about what will be my destiny...who will support me and my child? ... It is very sad because at this very young age, I am a mother...I don't have any income...I am living and depending on my parents.

Some even contemplated quitting school and taking care of their child. This is what some of the participants said:

I think I was just experiencing a lot of pressure to meet the school demands and motherhood responsibilities which led me to consider whether I should continue with both or quit school and look after my child.

All other participants shared the same sentiments as:

I am a first born in our family, so to say I was supposed to be a good example to my young sister...this is what real hurting me. I did a big mistake conceive before completing my education...I have now set a bad precedence for my younger sisters....it is a shame to me.

Assertions unfolded guilty feelings among most of the teen student mothers who thought they had done something unpardonable. Some of the participants felt guilty about their actions because they felt they had set bad precedence for their siblings. The teen student mothers felt disappointed by their situation and blamed themselves. This finding seems to agree with studies that found that teenage motherhood brings shame to entire families (Grav *et al.*, 2012; Gatsinzi, 2022).

Challenges with babysitting

Most of the interviewed teen student mothers unveiled that they did not have time to concentrate on their school works at home because of motherhood responsibility. This is because the moment they reached home from school they had to switch to babysitting. Out of four teen student mothers who spoke about struggling with schoolwork and motherhood responsibilities, one explicitly narrated:

The moment I left this area and reached home, I had no time to do schoolwork because as a mother my priority at home is to wash my child's clothes, bathe the child, and prepare food for her. ...Sometimes I feel like just leaving this programme because I cannot balance the two...

Another teen student-mother narrated her ordeal in this regard:

Always I am in very high anxiety due to the workload waiting for me both at home and in class...I have to perform in class like any other student but remember I must take care of my child at home...I don't rest at all...if I don't prepare sufficient food for my young child, then I am in trouble the following day because I will miss class or she will cry the whole day”.

Further, teen student mothers reported not being able to participate in group assignments and discussions after class hours due to motherhood responsibility. The struggles that teen student mothers challenge are narrated as follows:

It is not easy to find time to sit with my fellow students to learn together or even do group assignments after class hours... I don't have time because of my child...I must go home to look after my baby and do house chores. This is affecting my academic performance, and I have doubt whether I will real perform well”

This implies that teen student mothers face challenges in balancing school and motherhood responsibilities. The demands of motherhood, coupled with the school demands, contribute to increased stress levels and the fear of academic failure. This finding is supported by Tezza and Gulanhem (2010) who found that adolescent student mothers failed to balance motherhood and their schooling. To them, the moment they reached home, their priority shifted to bathing, dressing and feeding their children. These make adolescent student mothers undergo psychological challenges (Tezza & Gulanhem 2010; Chiyota, 2020; Babedi, 2021; Evans & Yuan, 2022) that affect their academic performance.

Challenges with parents and relatives

Under this theme, many teen mothers complained that their parents had distanced themselves from them and were not ready to support their education. Participants expressed feelings of isolation and a lack of support from their parents. It was found that some of the parents were still angry and they left daughters to face the consequences of their mistakes. Speaking about rejection from her parents likely to affect her psychological well-being and education, one teen mother said:

I feel like my parents have disserted here without any help...I think my parents are still angry with me. They have disowned me, and my father normally tells me that you are not my child anymore; you are a disgrace to me. You just brought

shame to my family and that hate, coming from my father is bad...they call me all bad names which sometimes I don't understand...It is a very stressful situation, I wish I could die instead of experiencing this rejection.

Distance themselves from their daughters causes communication breakdown between the parents and the teen student mothers. Subsequently, teen student mothers find nobody at home to share their feelings and education needs. While five teen mothers specifically talked about this issue, a 16-year-old teen mother said:

Even if I need a pen, exercise book, shoes or even if I have a problem at school, I cannot tell my father...he will never support me with anything, even a piece of advice because he is very angry with me...so I must keep all with myself... My heart is full of tears....

Furthermore, it is clear from the teen student mothers' interviews that harassment, humiliation and rejection of parents forced some of them to leave home and live with other relatives. On living with relatives, a 17-year-old teen student mother narrated that:

I decided to run away from home and now I am living with my old grandmother. I did so because I could not resist embarrassment from my parents. They blamed me for spoiling their names and reputations... and bringing shame to the family. Here I am happy, even though I must do small business to feed my child. As a result, some days I miss classes.

The assertions from the participants shed light on the psychological impact of rejection experienced by teen student mothers. Teen student mothers felt rejected and stigmatized by their parents. The stigmatization and social isolation they faced could lead to a range of negative outcomes, including psychological harm and social ostracization. In turn, these effects could contribute to academic difficulties, making it challenging for teenage mothers to complete their education. Schultz (2016) narrates that "too often, pregnancy during high school is a signal for school personnel and families to abandon young women, designating them as school failures p.287". On this issue, Pillow (2014:11) argued that "all teen mothers need help and support. They need the support that any mother parenting as a single parent with limited income needs.

Individual challenges

Interviews with teen student mothers uncovered that almost all interviewed teen student mothers mentioned time management, low self-esteem, identity crises, inferiority complex and physical changes as major individual-based psychosocial challenges they experience. They said that they were under pressure with their new

situation. They had no time to take their children to the clinic since the time they were supposed to go to the clinic; it was also time they were required to attend class. This prompted the teenage mother to justify why they missed classes, and the child's appointments at the clinic. Furthermore, the teenage mother students were gripped with an inferiority complex, and lack of assurance thinking that their fellows were looking for them down or gossiping about them. One teen student's mother narrated:

I did not had prepared to be a parent...I wish It could be a dream or just a nightmare...I am too young to be a parent...see now most of the time, I come late to school or leave early because I have to make sure that I feed the child and wash her clothes. This is causing me a lot of stress. And I can say for sure that, it is the main reason I did not perform well in my stage one exam.

Teen student mothers felt that they were not happy with their lives anymore:

My classmates like teasing me because my breasts have grown big... they mock me and gossip about me; I find myself ashamed and embarrassed due to the way they laugh at me.

Assertions show teenage student mothers regret having children, they feel that they have brought burden and regret in their lives. This finding is in line with Kitoo-Tarus (2017) who revealed that adolescent school-going mothers challenge feelings of change and are frightened of being torn between the responsibilities of adolescence and motherhood. Adolescent school-going mothers felt depressed because of their unique unusual experiences of dual responsibilities (Komora, 2014).

Coping with the psychosocial challenges

The study revealed that teenage mothers used different coping strategies to cope with psychosocial challenges. Most mentioned coping mechanisms include social support, make-up for the missed lessons, placing the baby with family, time management techniques, staying away from home, skipping classes and resilience.

Social support

Interview findings revealed that most of the teenage student mothers acknowledged that social support was one of their main coping mechanisms. The most cited form of social support was close relatives and friends. One teen student mother shared her story, as she said:

I am coping very well because my baby is with my grandmother. I don't worry much because she is safe with my grandmother. I don't see her often because of the distance. I can only see her once every week.

Another teen student mother narrated:

I manage to find balance because I have loving friends who help me. Even when I don't have food, she will give it to me. She also supports my child by buying her some clothes... she has been a of a good help to me...without her support, I could not be here learning.

The findings suggest that social support from close relatives and friends is an important coping strategy for teen student mothers. This finding concurs with the study of Koech, et al. (2019) that social support is a critical factor for the resilience of individuals. The existence of social support from a warm and supportive environment and a close relationship with others helps individuals to develop positive emotions that are useful in dealing with stress (Moonga,2014; Menon, *et al.*, 2020).

Time management

During the interview, some of the teen student mothers said that they used their free time to write notes on lessons they missed to catch up with other learners. To do so, they either arrive very early at school or stay behind in the evening. Given her experience, one teen student's mother said:

I wake up early in the morning so that I can finish doing all my chores or I just go home running and do all the required chores very fast to finish them early so that I can have enough time to read my notes.

Similarly, another participant shared her experience:

I have prepared my timetable to study, and I tried to follow it... I also squeeze my routine work at home to get more time to study; I minimize my sleeping time to have enough time to study”

The narratives show that teenage mothers manage their time well to perform dual roles. This finding concurs with Niboye's (2018) study which found that time management and priorities are one way to manage student mother's roles. They make sure that they can manage each role despite their busy schedule. In this study, proper time management of teen student mothers is done by playing their roles as mothers in the morning (household chores and taking care of their children) and being students at noon. Also, parents' help in taking care of the student's mother's child while they are studying is a huge help in managing their dual roles. Ntinda et al. (2016) find that the support of other people helps them to manage their dual roles although they stated that their current situation is hard.

Encouragement

Interviews with teenage mothers revealed that encouragement was another coping strategy that added up their energy to continue with their education. They indicated that encouragement came from friends, some teachers, spiritual leaders, and good Samaritans from the public. Sharing her experience, one participant said:

I am still at this learning centre because some of my fellow students, and a spiritual mother who encourages me to complete my studies. Their words of encouragement are the only things that keep me here, despite the challenges.

The other five teen student mothers also shared similar voices as revealed from one of them who said:

I can say that if it was not encouragement and testimony, I got from my close friends who had similar challenge, I could have given up due to many challenges. Their words give me strength and motivation to overcome all the challenges, and I will finish my studies.

The assertions show that peers' testimonies and words of encouragement help teen student mothers to cope with the psychosocial challenges they encounter and continue with their studies. This finding aligns with stage-environment fit theory, peers can foster a learning environment that is responsive to adolescents' developmental needs (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Developmental needs include high-quality friendships, peer acceptance, and close relationships with non-familial adults as well as dynamic cognitive, social, personal, and emotional needs (Rodrigo & Byrne 2011). Similarly, Haruna et al. (2022) states that continuing education after giving birth is not an easy process and comes with various socio-emotional challenges, while teen student mothers can overcome these psychosocial challenges and remain resilient in pursuing their education, it is important to acknowledge that it is not an easy feat, but various factors can help teenage mothers to overcome these psychosocial challenges, such as word of encouragement from close friends, spiritual leaders, sibling and even the women leaders.

Self-drive

Teenage mothers said that their own initiated drive helps them cope with the psychosocial challenges they face. They also use social media to keep their minds occupied and sometimes decide to engage in economic activities such as petty trade to generate little income to support their education. One also expressed her views in the following quotes:

When I feel lonely and shy at the centre, I normally listen to music or read newspapers to keep my mind busy. Sometimes I get involved in some economic activities like selling charcoal or even working for others at home.

Another teen student mother said:

I have some people around me whom I admire in their life, and I regard them as my role models to make me succeed. By looking at them and how they have managed their education...I tell myself... even I will finish my studies.

Two assertions show that teen student mothers, despite facing many psychological challenges, can persevere to continue and complete their education. These teenage mothers could overcome the psychosocial obstacles and setbacks that may have hindered their academic progress by using self-motivation. This finding agrees with Babedi (2021) and Kiptoo-Tarus (2020) who claim that despite the challenges and difficulties they encountered as teen mothers, the participants displayed remarkable determination and resilience in pursuing their goal of completing their education.

Missing classes

Interview findings revealed that some teenage mothers decided to miss some of the class sessions to avoid teachers and classmates' embarrassment comments. However, missing class sessions affected their level of involvement in lessons, learning activities and learning in general.

I would skip some subject sessions for some days and stay at home...I would stay away from this centre just to avoid hearing bad comments from the teachers and fellow students.

Another 17 years old teen student mother added:

Some male teachers would embarrass us in front of other students and we feel ashamed. I would then miss their lessons even for one month because of that shame and guilt being thrown on my face by teachers who are supposed to guide and help us.

These two assertions imply that teenage mothers sometimes decided not to attend some class sessions to avoid teachers' mockery, embarrassment and peer ridicule. This finding is in line with Imbosa & et al., (2022) who reveal that teenage mothers were assaulted on school grounds and did not feel safe anymore. As a result, they stayed out of school for a year during which they suffered from depression.

Desire to prove sceptics wrong

The interview findings from teenage mothers unveiled that the desire to prove sceptics wrong helped them to continue with their education despite the psychosocial

challenges they had to grapple with. The following narration was repeatedly said by many interviewed teenage mothers:

The wish to prove my critics wrong by completing school pushes me to study hard despite many challenges I face. I want to silence them by completing my studies, pass the national exams, and join Advanced level....

Another teen student mother insisted:

I have decided to ignore all criticisms from all the people including some of the teachers to concentrate on completing my studies and achieve my dream.

They disclosed that some family members, peers and even teachers had lost hope in them and treated them as if their lives had been ruined. They intimidated that this situation gave them the impetus, not only to go ahead and complete school, but also to pass well in their final national examinations.

Accepting reality

Interviews with teenage mothers revealed that some teenage mothers confess that they have decided to accept their situation, something which gives them strength to move on with other life and their education as well. Some of the teenage mothers reiterate the following statement:

At the beginning, it was very stressful I could not accept my situation, but after returning to school and meeting my fellow teenage mothers, I have now accepted my present situation as I cannot do anything anymore to go back to my past. This is my reality now, so all I can do is study hard and strive hard to ensure my child has something to eat while I continue with my studies...this is the only thing that will help me to move ahead.

This assertion represents the voices of a considerable number of teenage mothers interviewed and concurs with Kukali (2021) that one of the coping mechanisms of teen student mothers is to acknowledge what had happened and accept the fact that they are already in that situation. Further, he added that having a positive outlook in life by accepting reality made them stronger.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The challenges of teen student mothers in non-formal secondary education centres are marked by persistent psychosocial challenges that affect both their personal well-being and academic performance. While many of these young mothers demonstrate resilience and adopt various coping mechanisms, the demands of parenting alongside schooling continue to hinder their educational progress. Supporting teen student

mothers is therefore essential not only for their academic success, but also for their emotional stability and long-term empowerment.

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are made to multiple key stakeholders who have influence over policy, education, financing and girls' empowerment.

- i) Establish routine psychosocial support sessions within centres to address emotional stress, stigma, and parenting-related pressures.
- ii) Deploy trained counsellors to offer continuous, confidential counselling tailored to the needs of teen mothers.
- iii) Allow adjusted class schedules, make-up lessons, and flexible assessment timelines to accommodate childcare responsibilities.
- iv) Facilitate government or partner-funded stipends or material support to reduce the economic burden on teen student mothers.
- v) Engage teachers, coordinators, families, and community partners in a unified support system to ensure consistent monitoring and assistance.

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