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Research Article

Exploring The Challenges Facing Teenage Mothers in School and How They Cope in the Wa West District

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ABSTRACT

Education is a built-in mechanism that retains its essential value as a human right, not as a static commodity to be viewed in isolation from its larger context. Every person has the right to quality education and the ability to guarantee their human rights are secure for the long term. This research examined teenage mothers' struggles in school. The study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach. Twelve teenage mothers were selected, using a snowball sampling approach. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from these teenage mothers by audio taping. The data was transcribed, pursued and analysed thematically. The research revealed that teenage mothers in school face various difficulties in school, including lack of financial support, poor time management, low self-esteem, and emotional instability. The further revealed that majority of teenage mothers in school employ direct problem solving, cognitive decision-making, understanding, and constructive cognitive restructuring to cope with the challenges they face.

Keywords: *Teenage Mothers, Challenges, School, Coping Strategies*

Background

In any country's social and economic growth, education plays an important role. This is more important to enhance the quality of life of their people. The acknowledgement of the "centricity of development education and its impact on other rights" (Tomasevsky, 2003:1) has resulted in an increased international and domestic interest in the achievement of global education objectives. "A specific focus on girls' education as a key path to gender equality in

developing countries" (Unterhalter, 2007:39-40). Although fundamental and inalienable, the right to education is enshrined in international law as any other human right, many Conventions have made it binding obligations to ratify states.

Most recently, the UN adopted three human rights treaties, all of which recognise the right to a high-quality education that includes human rights concepts (UNESCO:1989). This right is also supported in chapter 5 (25) (I) of the

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1992 Ghana Constitution, which states that 'fair education opportunities and facilities for all persons shall be granted and to achieve the full fulfilment of that right,' it furthermore adds in subparagraph (a) that basic education is free, obligatory and available to all.'

Equal access for everyone to good education; an academic process in which girls and boys, men and women have equal opportunities to grow their talents fully; and results that offer social and economic benefits to every person with no discrimination (UNESCO, 2007: 28). Discrimination against teenage mothers thus becomes a fundamental violation and/or threat to human rights. Pregnant girls and young mothers are frequently stigmatised and discriminated against by family members, teachers, school personnel and the media and society in general (UNESCO, 2014). Thus, the issue arises as to what happens to these young mothers after they return to school.

Statement of the Problem

The study set out to explore the challenges facing teenage mothers in school and how they cope in the Wa West District.

Research Questions

1. What are the difficulties that young mothers face in school in the Wa West District?
2. How do young mothers in the Wa West District cope with the obstacles they face at school?

Literature Review

Challenges faced by Teenage Mothers in School

Several challenges are facing teenage mothers in school; these include; low self-esteem, stigmatization and discrimination, poor time management, role conflict and poverty amongst others.

Low Self- Esteem of Teenage Mothers

Low self-esteem is a worry for certain people, since it stops them from making the proper choice for their life and their education. Low self-esteem, according to Kenway (1990), is a key factor of poor academic achievement. Many teenage mothers express their feelings of being out of reach, worthless, or useless to their

family. This was a tremendous let down for them because they had no idea how capable they were of realising their ambitions. Teenage mothers are susceptible to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

Teenagers can have a tremendous bearing on the way they view themselves and their circumstances in their particular surroundings, carers or parents, friends, peers and teachers. This is evident in the study of Bhana and Bhat (2010), which found that 85% of the pregnant women expressed disapproving of their pregnancy among their families. Their study showed that this may eventually lead to family stress and could impair young mothers' self-esteem and self-confidence.

Zarina (2010) points out that the prevailing discourses in society had a key part in the construction of themselves and their views that they were excluded from mainstream culture. The investigation has shown that, despite certain challenges, the participants could continue to achieve their aims and ambitions, such as academic performance and a strong feeling of themselves.

Teenage mothers do not believe in themselves and have low self-esteem. "I doubt myself now, I do not think I am going to be able to finish school," reported one of Dlamini's teenage mother respondent (2005:7). McCauley-Brown (2005) confirms the low moral expectations of teenage mothers when he says they have weak self-confidence and are no longer sure of their ability to develop university skills. Teenager mothers do not fit well in group discussions or activities anymore because they feel they do not belong to the school anymore (Canadian Ministry of Education, 1998).

Teenagers must be motivated to do so as much as possible through their schooling. This will enable them to raise their children and so improve the national economy.

Stigmatization/Discrimination of Teenage Mothers

Stigma is a sign of social unacceptability: the humiliation or shame associated with anything that is regarded socially undesirable. The stigma attached to being a teenage mother is real and present. Advocates say prejudice towards teenage mothers frequently results in

cruel social stigma, are morally disturbed and often forced into different classes and sitting arrangements, so that they do not pollute others with teenage sexuality (Gillham, 1997).

Stigmatization and prejudice are problems these young mothers confront as they strive to reconcile their roles as mothers and learners. With the challenging responsibilities of motherhood and the societal humiliation, these young mothers are frequently traumatised by society, including the school. It is possible for teachers, parents, peers, and society to be absurd (Oyaro, 2008). For young mothers at school, this harsh treatment causes emotional scars and, most importantly, a dull future.

According to Banda (2007), teenage mothers at certain mission schools have turned away from school, relocated to public schools, received poor home education, and participated in special programmes, and as a result, too many teen mothers believe they have nothing to strive to but disgrace and shame. This is exacerbated by their poor familial connections, as well as their peers' dismissive attitudes of them as benefit cheats. Girls had to face a hostile atmosphere where their fellow students are alienated, humiliated and stigmatised; with hardly any successful teacher interventions (Chigona & Chetty, 2007). This does not seem to be unlike Ghana, where young mothers are named 'Born One' without teachers' involvement. According to a 2010 UNESCO study of pregnant schoolgirls and mothers within their school group in Tanzania, young mothers reported that as news of pregnancy began to circulate, their peers began mocking them relentlessly. These teenage mothers have also been tortured by mental scars, according to UNESCO, and they have broken down and screamed about it. Boys would start making sarcastic remarks to make the other students laugh, according to one of the students' mothers (UNESCO, 2010). According to Chigona and Chetty (2007), repetitive comments might cause young mothers to feel isolated and unsupported. According to Chevalier and Viitanen (2003), unpleasant school labels transmit negative messages to students, lowering their self-esteem. The shock of an unexpected pregnancy can be emotionally difficult for a young adolescent. While some teenagers receive emotional

support from their family members, others do not. Without emotional support, the teenage may experience anxiety and rage, while others may experience depression (Marlene and Mackey, 1998). It is said that the pregnancy and subsequent motherhood are defined by shame, embarrassment, a lack of schooling, and, in many cases, the person's dreams of pursuing a better degree of education.

Poor Time Management of Teenage mothers

Chetty and Chigona (2001) state that many teenagers would feel fatigued and sad as a result of managing home and school responsibilities. Chetty and Chigona (2007) discovered that teenage motherhood is a significant factor of females dropping out of school, and that social, economic, and cultural issues frequently force girls to make difficult choices as young mothers. This was owing to their planned positions not being permitted due to time constraints and school. Kaufman, Wet, and Stadler (2007) discovered that it is difficult for teenage mothers to return to school following childbirth because they struggle to balance studies and parenting responsibilities. This has also been reiterated in the United States of America, where it is difficult for teenagers to manage a kid while still dedicating adequate time to school (Arlington Public Schools, 2004). Stress occurs when a person's objective structures are in conflict, most notably when a person is committed to two or more goals that cannot be accomplished concurrently (Santrock, 2009).

Role Conflicts of Teenage Mothers

Although many young people view adolescence as a period of adult conversion and training (Phoenix, 1991; Nsamenang, 2002), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) describes a child as being in an indeterminate condition when they are under the age of twenty (commonly referred to as adults' mothers). Lowenthal & Lowenthal (1997) appear to have acknowledged that it is exceedingly difficult to master developmental tasks throughout adolescence while also becoming parents (Phoenix, 1991; Nsamenang, 2002). Both of these responsibilities are prone to conflict, which means that a teenager may occasionally forego one or both. Teens upend the

established cycle of first graduating, then finding job, then marrying, and finally becoming parents.

Additionally, the literature indicates that while these teenage mothers have attained a new status, their situations remain uncertain due to various schooling, motherhood, and wife emergency concerns (Kaufman, 2001). According to Fennel and Arnot (2008), women's lives are not compartmentalised by time into child, sister, and mother divisions. However, these might overlap and coexist throughout her life. Their research demonstrated that teenage mothers or re-entry girls' roles as mothers, daughters, and learners coexisted and clashed concurrently. Additionally, Mulongo (2005) believes that living under their parents' control as young unmarried mothers compelled them to fulfil their socially given roles as gender-divided labour-regime daughters.

Teenage Mothers and Poverty

In Australia, evidence indicates that teenage mothers experience social issues as a result of their restricted educational and employment opportunities, which may result in poverty and financial hardships (Boulden, 2000).

Moffit (2002) believes that young mothers have historically faced increased socioeconomic hardship, a lack of physical and social resources, and mental health problems. Additionally, the study discovered that their wives are less trustworthy and cooperative economically and emotionally, as well as more anti-social and aggressive. Kelly (1998) demonstrated that family income, gender, and dropout relationships all indicate that girls from the poorest homes are less likely to attend school than males. Thus, for the majority of Zambian females who have dropped out of school, poverty is a "plausible excuse" for school disruption (Mwansa, 2011). The direct and indirect costs of education, such as transportation to and from school, school fees, school uniforms, and other PTA payments, contribute to girls dropping out (Mwansa, 2011).

Coping Strategies of Teenage Mothers in school

The word coping describes strategies that people employ while they are under stress.

Treatment is viewed as a means of assessing the impact of stress on one's mental health and well-being (Aldwin, 2007; Folkman & Lazarus, 1991). Skinner and Wellborn (1995) define coping as "the process by which individuals exert control over their behaviour, mood, and direction under psychological stress." Coping, in this sense, is a process that directs individuals' attention to their thoughts and behaviours in order to overcome the cause of stress and manage emotional responses to stress as a result of birth at school.

Successful coping, according to Ayers et al. (1996), needs direct problem solving, cognitive decision making, the pursuit of knowledge, and effective cognitive restructuring. Each of these approaches focuses on stresses in order to manage intellectually or behaviourally with them (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Guthrie, 1997; Skinner, 1995).

Coping is a mechanism that directs persons' attention toward the objective of overcoming the stressor and exerting control over emotional stress reactions (Lazarus, 1993). Coping with reactions is a term that refers to intentional physical or mental behaviour in response to a stressor that is directed towards the surroundings or one's inner condition.

Teenage Mothers who fail to cope with schooling

The amount of missing school may frequently be observed where they deal with difficulties relating to their children, such as when they are sick or when parents are taking the infant to the doctor. Mohase (2006) says that it was difficult to get children to various health facilities for check-ups since most teenagers who become pregnant are teens who already aren't in school (postnatal exam). This causes the teenage mothers to miss the rest of the day's classes. From the information presented above, it can be fairly assumed that a teenage mother will miss one day of school every month due to difficulties connected to her children, with the exception of any personal reasons for absence, such as illness. According to Hofferth et al, the younger a woman becomes with her first kid, the less likely she is to complete her education (2001). Barnet, Arroyo, Margo, Devoe, and Dugan (2004) believe that young mothers drop

out of school during or shortly after pregnancy, as a result of having so many absences. In order to raise their children, teenage mothers tend to leave school permanently (Grant & Hallman, 2006). Teenage mother from Chigona and Chetty (2008) puts it this way: *'I have a baby, and when I want to finish my schoolwork, it is difficult... I'm sorry, but I simply don't have the time. It's really difficult to find the time. Housework has to be done'*.

According to Zondo, teenage mothers have had a hard time managing their school responsibilities while also caring for their child (2006). In Grant and Hallman (2006), they assert that having a baby represents the end of schooling for teenage mothers. When young women have their babies, they find it very difficult to commit to school; several issues influence whether or not a teenage mother chooses to continue her education, as Kaufman et al. found (2001). Most of the variables are contingent on the ability of the females to simultaneously undertake childcare and education-related obligations. Dunn and Theron (2006) stated that females' schooling is harmed by their ability to have children, and, as a result, many adolescents drop out of school and never return. Adolescents could have failure syndrome, failure to remain in school, and that having a child while in school may negatively impact one's ability to continue going. Ehlers (2003) found that teenage childbearing negatively impacts on education, stating, "Many teenage mothers' drop out of school, diminishing their prospects of employment and making it harder for these women and their children to earn a steady wage." According to Mangino (2008), mothers are almost twice as likely to quit school before they are 18 as shown by Hofferth et al (2001). This fact was mentioned in the first source, which also describes early motherhood as meaning a decrease in the probability of a young woman to get the degree needed for a high-paying profession. The percentage of 18-year-old teens who become parents before they graduate from high school is just 32 percent. In 31% of all females who leave school to get married, 31% of all school dropouts are girls who are pregnant at a young age (Mulama, 2011). Some teenage mothers,

despite the financial support offered, are nevertheless unable to balance their duties as parents with their education. When the child is not excellent, or if you are at school, she feels it is tough to be both a parent and a student.

Teenage mothers who cope with schooling

In terms of time and context, the effect of teenage motherhood on schooling seems to have shifted. According to the results, the effect of teenage motherhood on schooling suggests that, relative to developed countries, teenage motherhood seems to be an issue in developing countries.

Hofferth et al (2001), suggest that while early childbearing affects the education of young women, its effect is weaker than previously thought. Meanwhile, when talking about teenage motherhood and education, Preston-Whyte (1991) agrees with ZeckBjelic-Radish, Haas and Greimel (2007) that parents must take responsibility for taking care of the grandchildren so that they would send their daughter back to school after they had given birth by whatever means. The Canadian Ministry of Education (1998) states that if they are to meet their educational goals, teenage mothers need help, and the support must include, among other things, accommodation, better child care, and advice and therapy.

Methods

Research Design

A descriptive phenomenological approach was employed in this study. The population was made up of all teenage mothers who returned to school and are in the Wa West District within the age range of 13-19 years were the population of the study. Out of which twelve (12) of them were sampled using snowballing, also known as network sampling. In the study, semi-structured interviews were used for the gathering of data from teenage mothers (O'Leary: 2005). The interpretation and description of what was really stated were the focus of the data analysis, thematically. The audiotapes were transcribed. The researchers listened to the audio for words having contextual or unique meanings and wrote them down as they went through the transcription. Data was

broken down, examined, compared, conceptualised, and categorised using "open coding" techniques and descriptive codes. This allowed the researchers to break down the data into distinct pieces, analyse each carefully, and evaluate the similarities and differences.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: What are the difficulties that young mothers face in school in the Wa West District?

The following themes based on the analysis came out strongly.

Challenges Facing Teenage Mothers in School

It was discovered that numerous challenges were facing teenage mothers who are in school in the interview data gathered in the Wa West District. However, the majority of the interviewees explained that their greatest challenge was that of finance. The challenges culminating from the interview data have been classified into four (4): financial and economic challenges, educational challenges, emotional challenges and social challenges. The findings related to each of these challenges and their effects are presented under relevant themes below.

Financial and Economic Challenges facing teenage mothers in school

It emerged from the data collected those financial challenges were facing teenage mothers. Majority of the interviewees expressed concern that they had little or no financial support from their families and the boys who impregnated them. Below is a transcription of some of the interviews illustrating the financial situation some teenage mothers find themselves in.

During holidays whilst my colleagues are having fun and resting, I have to go down south to find some work to do to be able to cater for my child and myself. I go to do "kayayei" (head port) work to get money to enable me to buy the needs of the child, which in itself is not easy. (PTM-5)

Because I do not have any work doing it is my mother that is providing everything for me however there are times that she also cannot afford.

At such times I have to go and look for work to do so I will be able to provide our basic needs. That means that the days I will go to work I will not go to school. (PTM-9)

The above remarks indicate that teenage mothers in school face many financial and economic difficulties. Thus, it indicates that although some are assisted by their parents, others go to school to work to support themselves and their children. This confirms Bayona and Kandji-Murangi and Mwansa's position. Bayona and Kandji-Murangi (1996) found that it is not a suitable place for most people to become a mother at a young age. Teen mothers in this age group continue to develop physically and mentally and they are not always as eager to take on their responsibilities. Teenage mothers face adult roles long before they are born and the responsibilities endure for years. Stress, financial problems and the lack of quality education are among the experiences of teen mothers. According to Mwansa (2011), the inability of teenagers to increase their school fees helped most young births since some of the individuals who failed to raise their school fees helped the older men who sought sex. Teenage children in schools are also expected to follow the same pattern to fulfil the wants and needs of the infant.

Educational Challenges facing Teenage Mothers in school

The interview data also revealed that teenage mothers in school face diverse educational challenges. With further probe why they choose to come back to school, the teenage mothers reveal that in today's world education is the only sure way to make one live slavery and ignorant free life. They explained that people would not respect them if they decided not to continue their education hence their decision to come back. They went ahead to intimate that though they knew things would not be easy they did not expect it to be education-related. Majority of the respondents agreed that their education had been delayed by a minimum of one year and a maximum of two years. These were some of the responses from the participating teenage mothers and teachers regarding the educational challenges facing teenage mothers.

The pregnancy came to disrupt my education, if not by now I should have been in SHS1. As a mother now I have to wake up at 5:30 am to prepare food for my child and bathe before I start to prepare myself to go to school whilst my counterparts who are not mothers might wake up and revise their notes or even still be in bed. Because I wake up too early and do some work before going to school, I get tired and usually see myself dozing whilst lessons are going on. Most often I was late to get to school. (PTM-1)

Since I came back, I am not able to go to school all the time especially when the child is sick and it affects my studies. Most often I am not able to make it to school as early as I want it. There are times that lessons start before I get to school. (PTM-11)

It could be deduced that some teenage mothers have challenges in their education, it, therefore, affirms existing literature. Shaningwa (2007), argues that teenage mothers frequently stress about worrying about what could happen to their kids. The absence of focus decreases their success in school.

Emotional Challenges facing Teenage Mothers in School

Emotional challenges are one of the challenges that teenage mothers face regularly in school. The interview indicates that this comes as a result of the child not being well, stigmatization, and the inability to provide for the needs of the child. When asked whether teenage mothers face any emotional challenges, some of the interviewees had this to say;

... So usually in the morning I leave the child with my mother and go to school and then go after school I go for her to suck, as a result, it was making the child sick. At that time, I nearly stopped schooling because the issue was disturbing me a lot. I was always thinking if this child should die it means I have suffered in vain. (PTM-1)

Sometimes the teachers even tell students that that is my lifestyle, that is why I became pregnant and have come back after giving birth. They virtually paint me like a prostitute to other students. Sometimes I feel sorry for coming back to school because what I am going through in the hands of these teachers does not make me happy. (PTM-8)

It could be inferred from the above responses that teenage mothers face several situations that interfere with their emotions. It is, therefore, an undeniable fact that the responses of the participants above confirm the assertion of Moonga (2014) when he argues that teenage mothers experience emotional instability which is as a result of the bond of attachment with their children which gives them undue pressure and a great challenge of emotional stability.

Social Challenges facing Teenage Mothers in School

The interview data also highlighted several social challenges that teenage mothers face in school. Majority of the participants revealed that they were being labelled and stigmatised be it in school or at home by their peers, teachers and some community members. They explained that sometimes it was done at public places and that embarrasses them. They also explained that when they decided to talk back then they were seen as the ones misbehaving just because they were young mothers. These were some of the responses from the participating teenage mothers regarding the social challenges they face.

I realised that at school nobody wants to sit with me at the same desk. Each day they keep making disrespectful comments about me in a very offensive way. The other day when I had a little confusion with one of my classmates, he virtually called me a prostitute, he was not even afraid to say it because that is the way many of them see me. Sometimes they will gather and be talking but the moment I appear there they immediately stop their discussion and start laughing then, I get to know that they are talking about me. (PTM-3)

Often students spoke to each other laughing at me, but when I got close, they stopped talking, so I know they talked about me because I had a kid. I feel left out sometimes, but I cannot do anything. I must just forget them. I just ignore them. (PTM-5)

Inferring from the response above one could see that teenage mothers face social challenges which are not restricted to the school alone but extend to society, it appears that there is little they can do. The responses,

therefore, come to confirm the position of Chigona & Chetty. Chigona and Chetty (2007) contend that teenage mothers do not feel free when other girls are chatting and when people are looking at them.

Research Question 2:2. How do young mothers in the Wa West District cope with the obstacles they face at school?

The following themes based on the analysis came out strongly;

How Teenage Mothers Cope with the Challenges they face

No matter the situation or challenge that people face in life, they develop strategies to adapt or to cope. Several strategies were identified from the interview data. In an attempt to find out how participating teenage mothers coped with the challenges they faced as they blended their roles as students and as mothers and how teenage mothers coped with the financial and economic, educational, emotional and social challenges, the participating teenage mothers had this to say;

There are days that I have to sacrifice to go and sell to get a commission out of the sales to enable me to provide for myself and my child. (PTM-6)

Sometimes when I get to school late, I go to explain to the teacher in the classroom at that moment the reason why I am late for school. (PTM-5)

The replies of the participating teenagers show that teenagers employ problem-focused coping techniques to address the problems they experience. Problemated coping strategies are oriented to the stressor and thus the individual undertook to eliminate or evade or reduce his impact if it cannot be avoided according to Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The teenagers involved accomplish this by either working after school, sailing to school and selling for a commission or by explaining things to the teachers. Other participating teenage mothers had this to say concerning how they cope with the challenges they face as learners and mothers;

Sometimes when I am going to a place be it in school or at home and I know I will not be welcomed I try as much as possible not to go there.

It is better not to go than to go and be teased at and insulted. (PTM-12)

I told myself I will not allow this to end my education. So, I try to cooperate with my mates and the teachers both in school and at home. (PTM-9)

The importance of the above answers can be drawn from the use of other coping mechanisms such as evasion, decision-making and constructive cognitive restructuring. This supports Ayers et al' stance. Ayers et al (1996) report that the solution of immediate issues, cognitive decision making, the pursuit of understanding, and successful cognitive restructuring entail construction-related coping. Any strategy can be used either cognitively or behaviourally to directly manage the stressor. It was released from the interview that a cross-section of the participating teenage mothers could not cope well with the challenges they faced. Some could not stand being mocked or teased. Others said they could not have allowed themselves to be insulted so they had to 'fight' back. Below is the response of one of the respondents;

.....as for my friends when they make fun of me, I insult them and sometimes we quarrel. (PTM- 11)

The above response indicates that a few teenage mothers in school could not cope with the challenges they face and as such, they employed and used the expression of negative emotion. The above response seems to agree with the expression of negative emotion by Folkman and Lazarus. Effortful emotion-focused coping entails reducing the emotional distress associated with stress, fear, and humiliation, according to Folkman and Lazarus (1984). As a result, several teenage mothers had to stand up for the cause.

Conclusions

The study's findings revealed that teenage mothers in school face several obstacles, including stigma, poverty, role conflict, time management, and low self-esteem. Additionally, it became evident from the data that teenage mothers employed problem-focused coping techniques to overcome some of the obstacles

they encountered; a few were unable to overcome the obstacles and thus engaged and used negative emotion expressions.

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