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Addressing stigma and discrimination towards school re-entry of teenage mothers in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how teenage mothers in Ghana experience stigma and discrimination during their post-pregnancy and childbirth school re-entry phase. It evaluates the effectiveness of current interventions—the Guidelines for Prevention of Pregnancy Among School Girls and Facilitation of Re-Entry into School after Childbirth, aimed at fostering a supportive and an inclusive school environment to re-engaged teenage mothers. Through a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with 55 teenage mothers, 18 teachers, and 10 school management committee members, we identified three key themes: lived experiences, assessment of interventions, and strategies for creating an inclusive school environment. Our findings reveal the protential of the policy guidelines but also acknowledge the ongoing challenges that re-engaged pregnant teenagers and mothers still face acrossed the municipalities. Interventions like awareness programs, networking/supportive groups, training/reorientation of teachers, and community engagement can further bolster the policy's overall effectiveness. Consequently, this study contributes to enhancing educational opportunities for teenage mothers in Ghana by providing insights for localized interventions.

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Stigma; Discrimination; school re-entry; pregnant teenagers; Ghana

Introduction

Pregnant adolescent girls and teenage mothers often encounter challenges, as they strive to balance parenting and schooling responsibilities (Adangabe, 2020; Chilisa, 2002; Morgan et al., 2022, 2023)—compelling many to drop out of school. Consequently, disparities in school completion rates between boys and girls, stemming partly from pregnancy-related dropouts (Adangabe, 2020; Stromquist, 2015), make gender equity in education largely elusive (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2017). For instance, Evans et al. (2020) reveal that in 90 out of 126 countries, women's educational attainment lags behind men's, emphasizing a significant global disparity in educational equity. Furthermore, studies by Adangabe et al. (2021), Naidoo et al. (2021), and Narita and Diaz (2016) established an inverse relationship between teenage motherhood and girls' educational attainment, with such a situation hindering the achievement of zero gender inequality in education. This is particularly so in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where over 12 million adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 become mothers each year (Darroch et al., 2016), with adverse effects on their educational and economic accomplishments (Bhana & Mcambi, 2013; Reddy et al., 2016).

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The incidence and prevalence of teenage pregnancy is not uniformed across the globe: and unfortunate as it may be, sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has the highest rate of adolescent pregnancy and teenage motherhood, with 99.4 births per 1000 women, despite a global decline from 64.5 births per 1000 women (15–19 years) in 2000 to 41.3 births per 1000 women in 2023 (World Health Organisation, 2023). Ghana's case is indifferent, as depicted in a 2020 Ghana Health Service (GHS) survey where 2,865 pregnancies occurred among adolescent girls aged 10 to 14 years and 107,023 pregnancies among those aged 15 to 19 years (Ghana Statistical Service [GSS], 2023; Morgan et al., 2023). Unavailability and non-usage of contraceptives, stigma and misconceptions on the use of contraceptives, sexual and gender-based violence (Duby et al., 2021; Kassa et al., 2018; Parida et al., 2021; Usonwu et al., 2021), insufficient sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education, and early marriage (Gerbaka et al., 2021; Vincent & Alemu, 2016), contribute to this trend in SSA and Ghana.

In-school pregnant adolescents and teenage mothers face one of three outcomes: expulsion, re-entry, or continuation (Chilisa, 2002). The expulsion policy violates girls' human rights, is indifferent to the needs of the girls, and perceives teenage pregnancy as solely a girl's problem (Suleman & Mohamed, 2019; Suleman et al., 2020). The school re-entry policy reintegrates teenage mothers back into formal education. This process includes providing support, tailored programmes, and a welcoming environment to empower these young mothers to resume their studies and pursue their educational goals (Kubek et al., 2020; Thwala et al., 2022). While so, the re-entry policy has been criticized for its discriminatory nature. For instance, schoolboys who become fathers or are expectant fathers are not required to leave school until the child is born. While the continuation policy respects the human rights of the girl's education, it may overlook other rights such as the right to support and comfort during pregnancy and after childbirth. Factors influencing teenage mothers' educational re-engagement include health issues (Al-Sahab et al., 2012; Khanum et al., 2015), schoolwork, childcare responsibilities, and stigmatization (Bhana & Mcambi, 2013; Malatji et al., 2020; Onyango et al., 2015; Reddy et al., 2016). Depriving teenage mothers of the needed support to pursue their education sentences them and their infants to a cyclical trap of poverty and deprivation (Adangabe, 2020).

For instance, teachers in a study by Treffers et al. (2001) reveal the sensitivity and stigma associated with adolescent pregnancy, in contrast with the perception among many young men, for whom it is considered a mark of honour. Teachers are reluctant to assist pregnant teenage girls and mothers, asserting their role as educators rather than providers of midwifery services, and viewing schools as institutions for students, not pregnant teens and mothers (Adangabe, 2020; Rudoe, 2014). Moreover, teachers who attempt to accommodate the needs of pregnant students and mothers argue that doing so poses challenges to effective teaching (Chigona & Chetty, 2008). For illustration, a school principal, as quoted by Chigona and Chetty (2007), dismissed the absence of a pregnant teenage girl, stating, 'This is her own business.' The principal further instructs the student to catch up on missed lessons independently without any additional support or accommodations. Adding to this layer of complexity, peer discrimination emerges as a significant challenge faced by teenage mothers, affecting their experiences at home, in school, and within the community (Chiyota & Marishane, 2020). Teenage mothers encounter discrimination and derogatory name-calling from teachers and peers (Chigona & Chetty, 2008; Morgan et al., 2022). These highlight aspects that re-entry policies may not necessarily address, showcasing the complex socio-cultural challenges faced by teenage mothers in educational settings.

Juggling the dual responsibilities of motherhood and student life poses an additional challenge for teenage mothers (Chiyota & Marishane, 2020). Failure to strike a balance often leads to a lack of concentration in school and, in some cases, re-dropout (Chigona & Chetty, 2007). The effectiveness of the school re-entry policy is compromised when implementers disregard the perspectives and challenges voiced by teenage mothers regarding childcare, financial constraints, and the lack of social support. This oversight diminishes the policy's impact, rendering it a mere bureaucratic regulation on paper with minimal positive influence on the lives of teenage mothers (Chiyota & Marishane, 2020). As argued by Chiyota and Marishane (2020), the mere existence of the re-entry policy is insufficient to promote gender equality in secondary schools. Continuous reviews are

imperative to address emerging trends and obstacles, ensuring the policy's relevance and efficacy in fostering a supportive environment for teenage mothers.

Each year, over 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 and 1 million under 15 give birth, with 41.6% dropping out of school due to pregnancy, resulting in over six million out-of-school pregnant and parenting girls (African Health Organisation [AHO], 2020; Sobngwi-Tambekou et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2024). Thus, teenage pregnancy, a significant factor influencing school dropout rates among basic school adolescents in Ghana (Adam et al., 2016), presents challenges during the transition to teenage motherhood, exacerbated by the lack of parental and social support (Dzotsi et al., 2020; Espinel-Flores et al., 2020). These challenges create barriers to education for teenage mothers, prompting the need for policy interventions. To address educational hurdles, a school re-entry process has been developed, allowing pregnant girls to return to school after giving birth (Bhana & Mcambi, 2013; Malatji et al., 2020; Reddy et al., 2016). While existing studies have identified stigma and discrimination as barriers to the school re-entry of teenage mothers in Ghana (Ajayi et al., 2023; Asomani, 2017; Baa-Poku, 2019; Baafi, 2020; Haruna & Haruna, 2022), a comprehensive examination of how schools respond to these challenges and the ensuing impacts is noticeably lacking in the literature. These studies touch upon the issue but fall short of delving into the intricate details of school responses and the resultant consequences. Thus, our study provides a nuanced dynamics on stigma and discrimination within the Ghanaian context. Through the evaluation of current interventions, we seek to gauge their effectiveness in mitigating these challenges while contributing to strategies for a supportive and inclusive school environment for teenage mothers.

Methods

Study setting and research context

The research was conducted in Ho and Hohoe Municipalities of the Volta Region of Ghana [see Figure 1 for details]. Between 2014 and 2016, the Volta Region had the second-highest incidence of

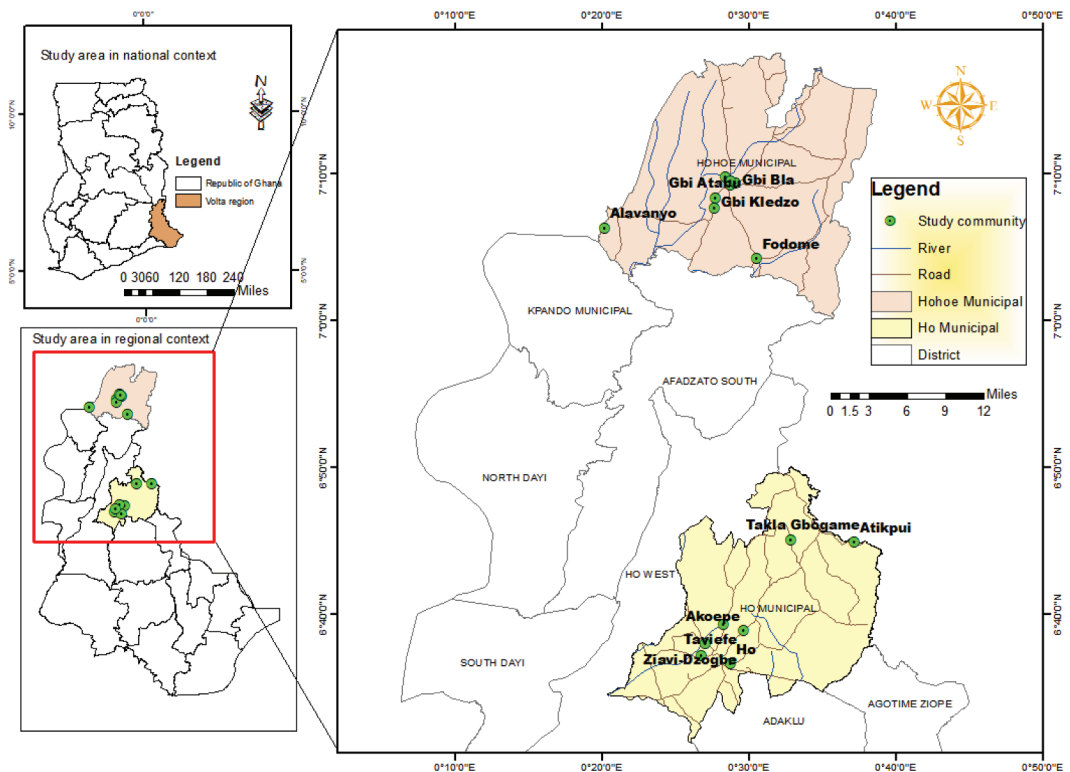


Figure 1. Map of Ho and Hohoe municipalities.

adolescent pregnancy, with 10,296 adolescent pregnancies, accounting for 15.3% of all registered teenage pregnancies in Ghana. Furthermore, the GSS, GHS, and ICF International (2015) reported that the frequency of adolescent pregnancy is prevalent in the Volta Region. According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census, the population of the Hohoe Municipality is largely youthful, with children under the age of 15 constituting 35.9% of the total population (GSS, 2014). Gbogbo (2020) highlights the prevalence of teenage motherhood and the significant challenges that affect their well-being. These challenges have adverse effects on their educational and socioeconomic prospects. Similarly, young people under the age of 15 years represents 31% of Ho Municipality's total population. Evidence shows that the Ho Municipality has a 44.1% teenage pregnancy prevalence (Birhanu, 2010).

Source: Morgan et al., 2023

The Guidelines for Prevention of Pregnancy Among School Girls and Facilitation of Re-Entry into School After Childbirth were developed in 2018 by the Ghana Education Service (GES) through the Girls' Education Unit (GEU) to address the challenges faced by pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers (GES, 2018). The policy guideline aims to support the reintegration of these girls into schools while also focusing on pregnancy prevention (ActionAid Ghana, 2022; Morgan et al., 2023). However, significant challenges exist, including entrenched socio-cultural beliefs that stigmatize teenage pregnancy, limited awareness of prevention strategies, inadequate infrastructure like daycare centres, and a lack of policy knowledge among school heads (ActionAid Ghana, 2022; Africa Education Watch, 2022). To address these gaps, local-level assessments are essential to understand community perceptions and improve the policy's effectiveness in promoting education for all girls. As a national policy, the implementation guidelines provide little variation between and within the two municipalities. This uniformity ensures a consistent approach to addressing the challenges faced by pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers across the country.

Study design and approach

'Addressing Stigma and Discrimination towards School Re-entry of Teenage Mothers in Ghana' formed part of a larger research project on 'Making School Re-Entry Feasible in Ghana.' The study employed a mixed methods design, specifically utilizing the sequential explanatory design. It began with the quantitative phase, involving questionnaire administration, followed by the qualitative phase, which involved interviews. This design allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and contributed valuable insights to the larger research (Dawadi et al., 2021). However, for this specific paper on stigma and discrimination, the focus was solely on the qualitative aspect. The qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and perspectives, shedding light on the factors influencing their experiences. The research design was a qualitative case study to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of teenage mothers with school re-entry. This approach was chosen for its ability to explore complex social issues within their real-world context (Schoch, 2020). The case focused on the implementation of the Guidelines for Prevention of Pregnancy Among School Girls and Facilitation of Re-Entry into School After Childbirth (2018) in Ghana to address the challenges faced by schoolgirls and the community.

Study participants and recruitment

We gathered data from teenage mothers who had re-entered school, specifically targeting students at the junior high and senior high school levels. We captured the experiences of

teenage mothers within these educational contexts. Interviews were also conducted with various stakeholders involved in the educational space (teachers, school administrators, counsellors, and community leaders), to gather diverse perspectives on the school re-entry process. The study's sample consists of 83 participants (55 teenage mothers, and 18 stakeholders). Inclusion criteria for teenage mothers include a) age—13 to 19 years; b) pregnant while in school; c) temporarily left school but has since returned; d) provide consent (18+), or assent(<18); e) currently enrolled in educational institutions within the study districts; f) recently re-engaged in the past year; and g) willingness to share their experiences. Teachers, school administrators, and counsellors must have (i) a minimum of four years of work experience, with at least two years before the implementation of the policy and two years afterwards; (ii) resided in the study municipalities (Ho and Hohoe) for at least four years; (iii) experienced at least two incidents of teenage pregnancy in their schools, since the policy's implementation in 2018; and (iv) must have responsibilities related to student welfare and support. Community leaders needed to a) have lived in the community for at least five years before the study; b) be actively involved in local educational policies and interventions during that time; and c) possess knowledge about teenage pregnancy and the school re-entry policy.

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling approaches was employed. Initially, researchers purposively recruited teenage mothers who met specific inclusion criteria to participate in the study (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Denscombe, 2010). This ensured that participants had relevant experiences related to school re-entry after pregnancy. After identifying the initial respondents, the researchers utilized snowball sampling to discover additional participants, relying on the suggestions and networks of the initial respondents. This method facilitated access to a broader pool of teenage mothers who had re-engaged in school, enhancing the understanding of their experiences and challenges during the re-entry process (Goodman, 1961; Handcock & Gile, 2011). To ensure participant diversity, the research team considered factors such as academic performance and socio-economic background. Participants included both high and low achievers, enabling an examination of how stigma and discrimination affect academic outcomes differently. Additionally, selecting participants from various socio-economic backgrounds ensured the study represented the experiences of teenage mothers across different social and economic contexts.

Data collection instrument

Participants' experiences and perceptions were captured through the utilization of the in-depth interview approach, which allowed for a comprehensive exploration of their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. To facilitate the interviews, semi-structured interview guides were developed. These guides provided a framework for the interviews while allowing for flexibility and adaptability to follow up on specific areas of interest. The development of interview guides ensured consistency across interviews and allowed for comparability of responses, while still allowing for the exploration of individual experiences and variations among participants.

The interview guide, developed in line with current literature in the field comprised: 1) Experiences of pregnant teenagers regarding stigma and discrimination in the process of re-entering school: a) What are the specific forms of stigma and discrimination faced by pregnant teenagers during the school re-entry process in Ghana? b) How do pregnant teenagers perceive and experience stigma and discrimination from peers, teachers, and school administrators? 2) Effectiveness of existing interventions in reducing stigma and discrimination faced by pregnant teenagers in schools: a) What interventions are in place to address stigma and discrimination

against pregnant teenagers? b) How effective have these interventions been in reducing stigma and discrimination and promoting a supportive environment for pregnant teenagers in schools? 3) Strategies for creating a supportive and inclusive environment for pregnant teenagers during the school re-entry process: What factors contribute to creating a supportive and inclusive environment for pregnant teenagers? The effectiveness of interventions to reduce stigma and discrimination was measured using metrics such as changes in attitudes and behaviours, frequency of discriminatory incidents, self-reported experiences of stigma, and the availability and access to supportive services mandated by the policy. The behaviour change encompassed both students and staff.

Data collection procedure

Data collection occurred between December 2020 and February 2021, involving a team of five independent research assistants—three females and two males – alongside the first author. The process included several key steps: 1) Training of Research Assistants: The research assistants underwent comprehensive training on study objectives, research questions, ethical considerations, and data collection procedures, focusing on interview techniques, confidentiality, and participant comfort. 2) Participant Recruitment: In collaboration with the first author, the research assistants identified and recruited eligible participants based on predefined inclusion criteria, employing purposive and snow-ball sampling methods to ensure diversity and capture a range of experiences. 3) Informed Consent and Assent: Before data collection, the research assistants explained the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant, with parental or guardian consent and assent obtained for those under 18. 4) Data Collection Process: Face-to-face interviews were conducted in private settings, lasting 45 to 60 minutes, audio-recorded with consent, and supplemented by detailed field notes. 5) Data Management and Quality Control: Audio recordings and field notes were securely stored and transcribed verbatim, with research assistants cross-checking transcriptions for accuracy and completeness. Rigorous adherence to COVID-19 safety protocols was implemented for the safety of both participants and the research team. This included pre-data collection COVID-19 testing of the team, mandatory use of masks, observation of social distancing measures, and disinfection of equipment and areas used during interviews. These measures were very necessary to ensure the safety of all parties involved.

Data analysis

The study employed thematic analysis to transcribe and code data verbatim, focusing on the stigma and discrimination faced by pregnant teenagers during school re-entry (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Researchers read transcripts multiple times to understand participants' narratives, generated initial codes from key concepts and refined these codes iteratively. Broader themes were identified based on similarities among codes, enhancing the rigor of the analysis. The research team engaged in discussions and peer debriefing to resolve discrepancies, ensuring integrity. Final themes were examined for relationships and presented narratively, supported by participant quotes. We used pseudonyms to describe the participants and make distinctions between them.

Ethics

Before conducting interviews, research assistants adhered to a standardized protocol, informing participants about the study's purpose and objectives. They emphasized voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent and assent (for teenagers < 18) were obtained to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of each participant.

Rigor and trustworthy

The study implemented various measures to ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of its findings. Utilizing multiple research assistants enhanced reliability, while a systematic data analysis process included rigorous coding, theme development, and peer debriefing. Direct quotes from participants further increased transparency, providing a solid foundation for meaningful conclusions regarding the stigma and discrimination faced by teenage mothers in Ghana.

Findings

We identified three key themes: Lived Experiences of Teenage Mothers, highlighting challenges faced by teenage mothers re-entering school; Assessing Interventions for Stigma Reduction, evaluating existing efforts; and Creating a Supportive and Inclusive School Environment, focusing on strategies to foster inclusivity during the re-entry process. See [Appendix 1](#) for details.

Lived experiences of teenage mothers

Social isolation and alienation

Young teenage mothers often find themselves isolated from their peers, feeling detached and ostracized as a result of their pregnancy. The social dynamics in school settings contribute to their sense of being left out and hinder their ability to fully engage in academic and social activities. This social isolation reveals the urgent need to create a more inclusive and supportive environment that addresses the unique needs of pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers in schools.

Going back to school, I held hope that my peers would offer me support and understanding during this challenging time. Unfortunately, my experience was far from what I had anticipated. Instead of the acceptance I longed for, I faced harsh judgment and exclusion. . . The weight of societal stigma seemed to weigh down on me, making my education journey even more difficult. - Efua, 18 years old.

Pregnant teenagers often face social isolation and alienation in school. Other students may distance themselves . . . which can have a significant impact on their well-being and academic performance. - Teacher, Hohoe Municipality.

Some teenage mothers, however, shared positive experiences of acceptance and support from their peers and the school environment upon their re-entry, creating a sense of belonging.

I was pleasantly surprised by the support and understanding I received from my school community. Instead of facing stigma and discrimination, I found teachers and classmates who encouraged me to continue my education and believed in my potential. Their acceptance gave me the strength to overcome any obstacles and pursue my dreams. - Elorm, 18 years old.

Negative stereotypes and Labelling

Here, we uncovered the unfair judgements and negative labels that teenage mothers face in society. These stereotypes could undermine their self-esteem and create additional barriers for them in various aspects of their lives.

I've faced the weight of society's unfair judgments and labels. But I refuse to let these labels define me. Society needs to see beyond the stereotypes and embrace the potential and strength within teenage mothers like me. - Nana, 17 years old.

Educational barriers and challenges

The young mothers often face difficulties in balancing their responsibilities as mothers and students. Educational institutions may not provide sufficient support or understanding to accommodate their unique circumstances, resulting in challenges such as missed classes, limited access to childcare facilities, and limited flexibility in academic schedules. These barriers impede their educational progress and limit their future opportunities.

Every day is a balancing act for me as a teenage mother trying to pursue my education. I juggle diapers, feedings, and sleepless nights while also trying to keep up with schoolwork. It's heartbreaking to see my dreams held back by the lack of support and understanding from my educational institution. - Akosua, 17 years old.

It deeply saddens me to witness the profound educational challenges that teenage mothers encounter. Many teenage mothers face limited access to quality childcare, inadequate flexibility in academic schedules, and a dearth of targeted resources tailored to their unique needs. - Mr Mensah, Head Teacher, Ho Municipality

Coping mechanisms and resilience

Despite the discrimination, societal pressures and the daunting task of balancing caregiving and academic work, some of these young mothers find ways to cope with the emotional, financial, and practical demands of motherhood while pursuing their education. They display determination, adaptability, and strength in managing their responsibilities and striving for personal growth and success.

Despite the obstacles they face, they demonstrate an unwavering determination to pursue their education and create a better future for themselves and their children. - Madam Harriet, Teacher at Hohoe Municipality.

I refuse to let society's stereotypes define my capabilities. I lean on my family and friends who offer understanding and encouragement. It's not always easy, but I remind myself of the importance of my dreams. - Efua, 18 years old

Being a teenage mother has taught me the true meaning of resilience. I am determined to break the cycle and prove that being a teenage mother does not limit my potential. - Abena, 17 years old.

Assessing interventions for stigma reduction

Awareness and sensitization programs

We found that awareness and sensitization programmes played a crucial role in promoting school re-entry among teenage mothers. Participants reported that such programmes created a more inclusive and supportive environment, where teenage mothers felt accepted and understood. The knowledge gained through these programmes led to a shift in attitudes and behaviours, with students and teachers becoming more supportive and accommodating towards teenage mothers.

I was fortunate to attend a school that had implemented programs to address the stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy. It made a significant difference in my experience, as I felt accepted and included in the school community. - Ama, 19 years old.

We have implemented policies and programs that aim to eliminate stigma and discrimination. We provide counselling services, peer support groups, and awareness campaigns to educate the school community about the challenges these young mothers face. - Mrs Abena, School Management Committee Member.

Support services and counselling

Participants reported that the counselling provided by schools played a significant role in helping them address the emotional and psychological stress associated with their circumstances. The

availability of support services, such as access to parenting resources, childcare assistance, and academic support, helped alleviate some of the barriers they encountered in continuing their education.

As educators, we need to foster empathy and understanding among students, promoting a culture of acceptance and support. - Mr Mensah, Head Teacher, Ho Municipality.

Educators must provide them with the emotional support and guidance they need. Together, we can ensure their success in both their education and personal lives. - Mr. Boateng, School Counselor, Hohoe Municipality.

Access to support services and counselling made a world of difference in my journey as a teenage mother returning to school. I felt more empowered and motivated to pursue my education while also fulfilling my responsibilities as a young parent. - Edzodzinam, 19 years old.

Peer support and mentorship programs

Peer support and mentorship programmes played a crucial role in promoting school re-entry among teenage mothers. These programmes provided a safe and inclusive space for young mothers to connect with others who shared similar experiences. The mentorship component offered guidance from experienced individuals who provided valuable insights, role modelling, and encouragement to help teenage mothers navigate the challenges they faced. The positive relationships formed through these programmes fostered a sense of belonging, empowerment, and motivation, ultimately contributing to their successful reintegration into the school environment.

The peer support and mentorship program created a compassionate community, empowering teenage mothers through shared experiences, friendship, and encouragement, fostering confidence in their educational journeys. - Elorm, 18 years old.

Creating a supportive and inclusive school environment

Policy and structural changes

Measures such as creating a supportive framework within educational institutions that ensures the availability of appropriate accommodations, such as daycare centres or flexible scheduling options, to support teenage mothers in balancing their educational pursuits with their responsibilities as parents were discussed. A school management committee member from the Ho Municipality expressed their perspective on this matter, stating,

It is essential to have clear policies in place that provide guidance and support for these students, ensuring they have access to the necessary resources and facilities. – Mr Adotey.

Teacher training and sensitization

Teacher training and sensitization emerged as vital components to ensure that educators are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively support and accommodate teenage mothers. This includes understanding the needs of teenage mothers, being aware of the available support services and resources, and employing appropriate teaching strategies that consider their circumstances. A school management committee member shared this perspective, *'Providing educators with the necessary knowledge and understanding, can empower them to meet the needs of these students and create an environment that fosters their educational success.'* Similarly, another concurred saying, *"I have witnessed the positive impact of teacher training and sensitization on teenage mothers' educational experiences. It enables us to better understand their unique challenges and develop strategies to support them effectively."*

Peer support networks

Participants highlighted the importance of avenues for pregnant teenagers to connect with their peers, including both those who have shared similar experiences and compassionate friends who offer support. These networks serve as valuable sources of emotional support, encouragement, and advice, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing feelings of isolation. A teacher noted, *'Peer support networks empower them to navigate the challenges they face, boosting their confidence and resilience.'* A student added *'Being part of a peer support network has been a lifeline for me as a pregnant teenager. It is comforting to have friends who understand my journey and are there for me without judgment. We share our struggles, celebrate our achievements, and lift each other during difficult times. It has made a tremendous difference in my school re-entry experience.'*

Collaboration with community and stakeholders

Emphasis was placed on engaging parents, community leaders, and organizations to support pregnant teenagers' educational journeys. This effort must aim at dismantling societal stigma and fostering understanding and acceptance. A participant stated, *'We are advocating for a sense of responsibility and shared commitment towards supporting teenage mothers in their education.'* Some of the educators also noted that collaboration provides insights into the challenges faced by these young mothers, enhancing tailored support, while the need for community dialogues to promote acceptance and create an inclusive environment was encouraged.

Discussion

Lived experiences of teenage mothers

Our findings revealed a complex interplay of educational, personal, and social factors that characterize the lived experiences of teenage mothers within school settings in the Ho and Hohoe Municipalities of the Volta Region of Ghana. This finding aligns with the plethora of scholarly research that has documented the social isolation faced by teenage mothers, often stemming from entrenched societal norms and perceptions surrounding teenage pregnancy (Dzotsi et al., 2020; Ruzibiza, 2021; SmithBattle & Phengnum, 2023). Specifically, our finding gives illumination to Dzotsi et al.'s (2020) research which discovered strained interpersonal relationships, survival difficulties, and educational disruption as major challenges associated with teenage motherhood in Ghana, exemplifying the prevalence and rippling effects of stigma and discrimination among this group of people in the country. As demonstrated by our study participants, teenage mothers may face rejection and discrimination from their peers and teachers which can have profound negative effects on their personal development, educational aspiration, and psychosocial development as well as exacerbated feelings of loneliness and low self-esteem (Boateng et al., 2023; Gyan, 2017; Nang-Bayi et al., 2021; Tetteh et al., 2022). Scholarly evidence on sister LMICs suggests that in some jurisdictions, teenage mothers are labelled as a nuisance to society which negatively affects their re-integration into educational institutions (Ruzibiza, 2021). However, it is important to emphasize that despite grappling with discrimination, societal pressures, and the multifaceted responsibilities of early motherhood, these young mothers appeared to be steadfast in the pursuit of their personal and academic aspirations. This unwavering commitment amidst the emotional, financial, and practical challenges of early motherhood is a testament to their strength and resilience, thereby challenging entrenched social beliefs that teenage pregnancy inevitably leads to failure, both academically and personally (Gyan, 2017; Ruzibiza, 2021). This discovery is especially outstanding given Ruzibiza's (2021) finding that some pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers in Mahama, Rwanda, self-isolate themselves from peers and social groups as a means to self-protective from social stigma. The latter approach according to Easterbrooks et al. (2011) is an important risk factor for depression among teenage mothers. Meanwhile, a recent study by Morgan et al. (2023) demonstrates that girls from

poor homes who are living in the Ho and Hohoe Municipalities are less likely to re-engage in education after pregnancy due to a combination of socioeconomic and structural factors which could create multiple barriers that can limit their access to resources such as school fees, uniforms, textbooks, and transportation. Morgan et al. (2023) further argued that as opposed to their wealthy colleagues, pregnant teenage girls from poor homes may face societal stereotypes and stigmatization, which can erode their self-confidence and discourage them from re-engaging in school. This suggests that to effectively support teenage mothers to return to school, it is imperative to recognize that the onus should not solely rest on them to overcome deep-rooted societal barriers that incite and perpetuate social stigma and discrimination. Rather, it is incumbent upon society at large to calculatedly combat these forms of inequality and exclusion that hinder the educational and socioeconomic advancement of teenage mothers.

Assessing interventions for stigma reduction: effectiveness and impact

Our study further discovered that assessment of interventions for stigma reduction among teenage mothers in schools could be a viable strategy to foster a supportive and inclusive educational environment. These interventions, spanning awareness and sensitization programmes, support services and counselling, as well as peer support and mentorship programmes, could play critical roles in addressing the stigma and discrimination faced by pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers. Similar studies have shown that tailored and responsive programs could lead to positive shifts in attitudes and behaviors among students and educators, to create and promote a more supportive school environment (Jadhav & Avachat, 2019; Mabila et al., 2023). Jadhav and Avachat's (2019) study in India amplified the role of educational campaigns in increasing awareness and reducing stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy and reproductive health. Extant evidence further suggests that access to counselling and support services could help mitigate the emotional and psychological stress associated with teenage pregnancy and motherhood, thereby, ultimately improving academic outcomes and well-being for young mothers (Amod et al., 2019; Mabila et al., 2023). For instance, studies by Harding et al. (2020), Knafl (1998), and Letourneau et al. (2004) all highlight the importance of comprehensive support services in promoting the educational attainment of pregnant and parenting teenagers across diverse socio-spatial contexts. Thus, through responsive tailoring of interventions for their unique needs (child-related support and teenage mother-related support) as well as providing practical assistance (including flexible timelines and alternative forms of assignment), educational institutions could create a conducive environment for teenage mothers to succeed and thrive both academically and personally (Barnet et al., 2004; Bennett & Assefi, 2005; Smithbattle, 2006). Moreover, peer support and mentorship programs are important approaches (SmithBattle & Phengnum, 2023). Richardson et al. (1995) noted that peer support and mentorship programs provide valuable emotional encouragement, practical advice, and role modeling opportunities which ensures a sense of belongingness and empowerment among teenage mothers. As Bunting and McAuley (2004) and De La Rey and Parekh (1996) all established, the positive impact of peer and community support in enhancing the resilience and self-esteem of teenage mothers can culminate in enhancing their educational attainment and well-being.

Creating a supportive and inclusive school environment for teenage mothers

Finally, our study also found that there is a need to create a supportive and inclusive school environment for pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers during their re-entry to school. This implies the critical importance of implementing strategies and initiatives that foster a nurturing learning environment where these students feel valued and supported. Extant literature supports the notion that policy reforms and structural adaptations within schools can significantly impact the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers (Chiyota & Marishane, 2020; Hoffman & Maynard, 2008). For instance, research by Hoffman and Maynard

(2008) highlights the importance of flexible scheduling options and access to childcare facilities in facilitating the academic success of teenage mothers. Moreover, it is a known fact that teacher attitudes and behaviors can significantly influence the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers. For example, Nabugoomu et al.'s (2020) study conducted in Eastern Uganda emphasizes the positive impact of teacher training in promoting empathy and understanding towards pregnant teenagers. Thus, by providing teachers with the necessary tools and resources to support these students effectively, schools can create an inclusive and supportive learning environment that enhances the academic success and well-being of pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers (Kearney & Levine, 2020, Nabugoomu et al., 2020). Facilitating connections between pregnant teenagers and their peers in schools could also create a supportive environment where these students feel valued and understood. Collaboration with the community and other stakeholders could also be essential in creating such an environment for pregnant teenagers. Evidence suggests that by engaging parents, community leaders, and relevant organizations, schools can foster a sense of shared responsibility and commitment towards supporting the educational journey of pregnant teenagers (Blunch, 2018; Isaksen et al., 2020; Meherali et al., 2021). Community involvement can help dispel myths and prejudices surrounding teenage pregnancy, thereby promoting acceptance and understanding within the wider society (Okine & Dako-Gyeke, 2020). As Nabugoomu et al. (2020) noted, collaborative efforts between schools and community stakeholders can lead to the development of comprehensive support networks and resources tailored to the needs of pregnant teenagers and mothers. Thus, schools and communities can create a nurturing environment where pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers are empowered to succeed academically despite their setbacks.

Implications for policy and research

Our findings have important implications for policy and future research. Policymakers must implement gender-sensitive school policies to combat stigma against pregnant teenagers, prioritizing awareness programs, teacher training, and community engagement. Future research should evaluate the long-term impacts of interventions, assess the effectiveness of support services, and explore societal attitudes contributing to stigma. These efforts will ensure continuous improvement in educational opportunities and well-being of pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers in Ghana and similar contexts.

Strengths and weaknesses

This qualitative study effectively explores the lived experiences of pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers in Ghana, enriching insights through diverse perspectives from teenage mothers, teachers, and school officials. However, its focus on specific municipalities limits generalizability. Social desirability bias and reliance on retrospective accounts may affect data accuracy, while the lack of a longitudinal approach restricts long-term impact analysis. Nonetheless, the study provides valuable insights to guide social policy and future research.

Conclusion

This study examines the challenges faced by pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers re-entering schools in Ghana, specifically in the Ho and Hohoe Municipalities. We identified three key themes: experiences of stigma and discrimination, evaluating stigma reduction interventions, and creating supportive school environments. Barriers such as peer judgement, biased teacher attitudes, and stigmatizing policies hinder scholol re-entry educational success of pregnant teens and teenage mothers alike. By way of recommendation, we proposed a framework that advocates for gender-responsive policies,

localised awareness campaigns, and educator training to foster inclusivity. We also emphasize the significance of supportive peer associations and accessible counseling services in creating conducive re-entry environments. Ultimately, the study calls for collaboration among stakeholders to reshape attitudes and dismantle entrenched discriminatory societal norms against teenage mothers.

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Availability of data and material

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from the participants by agreeing orally to participate in the study.

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Appendix 1: Table describing the themes, sub-themes and codes

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes (Short Quotations)
Lived Experiences of Teenage Mothers	Social Isolation and Alienation	'I felt like an outcast at school. My classmates ignored me and didn't want to associate with me because of my pregnancy.'
	Negative Stereotypes and Labeling	'People judged me and called me names like "irresponsible" and "slut" just because I got pregnant at a young age.'
	Educational Barriers and Challenges	'I faced difficulties in catching up with my studies after returning to school. The teachers didn't provide much support or understanding.'
	Coping Mechanisms and Resilience	'Despite the discrimination, I stayed determined and focused on my education. I wanted to prove that I could succeed as a teenage mother.'
Assessing Interventions for Stigma Reduction	Awareness and Sensitization Programs	'The school organized sessions to educate students about teen pregnancy, but more efforts are still needed.'
	Support Services and Counseling	'The counselling provided by the school helped me deal with the emotional challenges I faced during re-entry.'
	Peer Support and Mentorship Programs	'Talking to other girls who went through similar experiences made me feel less alone and gave me hope for the future.'
Creating a Supportive and Inclusive School Environment	Policy and Structural Changes	'The school should provide better facilities for pregnant students, like a daycare centre.'
	Teacher Training and Sensitization	'Teachers should be trained to handle the needs of pregnant students and avoid making them feel uncomfortable.'
	Peer Support Networks	'Having a support group of other pregnant students would be beneficial for sharing experiences and advice.'
	Collaboration with Community and Stakeholders	'Engaging parents and community leaders can help create a more understanding environment for pregnant students.'