



Exploring Personal, Social and Academic Experiences of Teenage Mothers Who are Re-admitted to Selected Secondary Schools in Nzega District, Tanzania

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Abstract: *This study examined the personal, social, and academic experiences of re-admitted teenage mothers in selected secondary schools in Nzega District, Tanzania, using a qualitative approach guided by a hermeneutic phenomenological design. 19 purposively selected participants were involved, including teenage mothers as the main participants, with peers and an academic master as supplementary participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews for teenage mothers and the academic master, and focus group discussions with peers, then analyzed thematically. Trustworthiness was ensured, and ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed. The findings showed that teenage mothers experienced emotional distress, shame, parental neglect, strained family relationships, and helplessness, which weakened their self-confidence and psychological well-being. Socially, they faced stigma, discrimination, and peer isolation, limiting their support networks and sense of belonging in school. Academically, they reported unfair treatment from some teachers, limited study time, and poor school attendance resulting from difficulties in balancing childcare responsibilities with school routines, all of which negatively affected their academic performance and educational continuity. The study concludes that re-admitted teenage mothers encounter interconnected emotional, social, and academic barriers that hinder their well-being and academic success. It recommends strengthening support systems in families, schools, communities, and policy frameworks to promote inclusive, non-discriminatory learning environments, provide counseling and academic support, and ensure policies that safeguard the educational continuity and welfare of teenage mothers.*

Keywords: *Teenage motherhood; re-admission; teenage pregnancy, Inclusive Education, re-entry.*

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1. Introduction

Teenage mothers and their education have become a major concern in many countries across the globe, including

Tanzania. According to the World Health Organization, approximately sixteen million adolescents aged 15-19 give birth each year, with an additional two million births among girls under 15 worldwide (WHO, 2017, as cited in Muzingili, 2024). Global trends show that regions such as

North America, Europe, and East Asia have experienced substantial declines in teenage pregnancies, largely attributed to comprehensive sexuality education, access to contraception, and supportive cultural norms that promote continued schooling (Nalaila & Massawe, 2026). In contrast, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) continues to face significant challenges, as approximately 95% of births to teenage mothers occur in developing countries including SSA (World Health Organization, 2024). Countries such as Niger, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, and those in East Africa continue to report high teenage pregnancy rates, driven by sociocultural factors such as child marriage, sexual violence, and limited access to reproductive health services (African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child [ACERWC], 2022; Breda & Mokoena, 2022). Furthermore, according to UNICEF and UNESCO (2024) more than six million girls who are either pregnant or mothers are currently out of school in SSA alone, and approximately four million girls drop out of school annually due to pregnancy (MSI Reproductive Choices, 2021). As this happens, many girls do not return to school after childbirth because of social, economic, and institutional barriers across countries (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2024).

Studies by Adhena and Fikre (2023), Desai et al. (2024), and Moyo (2023), as cited in Muzingili et al. (2024), demonstrate that teenage childbearing remains a significant barrier to educational attainment and lifelong learning opportunities. As a result, it undermines progress toward United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), particularly Target 4.1, which seeks to ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education for all by 2030. Beyond its educational implications, teenage motherhood also poses broader socio-economic challenges by threatening national economic productivity, labour market participation, and social and political development (Johansen et al., 2024). At the individual level, being a teenage mother is associated with increased risks of unemployment, economic dependency, morbidity, and mortality, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty (Moyo et al., 2023). In the context of Tanzania, reports indicate that approximately 42,954 schoolgirls dropped out of school between July 2021 and June 2022 due to pregnancy or childbirth (Controller and Auditor General [CAG], 2023), while the World Bank (2021) estimated that nearly 6,500 girls leave school annually as a result of pregnancy or childbirth. Moreover, Tanzania continues to record one of the highest rates of teenage childbearing in East Africa, with approximately 27% among girls aged 15-19 years, compared to the regional average of 23-24% (Isano et al., 2025).

Responding to the high rates of school dropout associated with teenage childbirth, the government of Tanzania introduced the “Re-entry Policy” in 2021 and subsequently

revised its Education and Training Policy (ETP) in 2023. The ETP serves as the national framework guiding educational provision and has explicitly endorses the re-enrolment of students who discontinued their studies due to various reasons, including pregnancy, thereby enabling teenage mothers to return to formal schooling after giving birth (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2021; 2023). Despite achieving this milestone, a significant challenge persists within the broader legal and institutional framework governing the rights of adolescent girls. Notably, the Law of Marriage Act still permits girls as young as 14 years to be married with parental or court consent. This legal provision creates a contradiction with child protection and education policies, as it exposes girls to early marriage and consequently increases the risk of school discontinuation, undermining the intent of the re-entry framework. Although the Court of Appeal ruling in 2019 established 18 years as the minimum legal age of marriage for both boys and girls (UN Women, 2024), the inconsistency between judicial interpretation and statutory law has not yet been fully resolved. These conflicting legal provisions limit the effective implementation of re-entry initiatives for teenage mothers and weaken broader national and international commitments to gender equality and inclusive development, including the African Union’s Agenda 2063 (Goal 17) and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 and SDG 10 (UN Women, 2024; United Nations, 2025).

Furthermore, the re-entry policy guidelines issued in 2022 provide limited clarification regarding the support mechanisms and services that should be offered to teenage mothers within school settings. In addition, the guidelines lack clear supervisory, monitoring, and implementation procedures to guide education stakeholders and government officials in ensuring effective policy implementation at the school level. The study conducted in Tanzania context by Timothy and Juhudi (2023), revealed that teenage mothers experienced an increased responsibilities, poor time management, and lack of support from peers, teachers, family, and society. Mgunda et al. (2023), identified among others issues such as childcare burdens, social stigma, financial hardships and academic pressure as challenges. According to Ngaza and Mwila (2022), the policy itself lacked directives on how it could be applied or employed adding more challenges to its implementers and a vacuum for inconvenience. This policy and implementation gap creates a limited understanding of the lived experiences of teenage mothers, particularly those who re-enter school or drop out again after re-entry. Consequently, the present study sought to close this gap by exploring the personal, social, and academic experiences of teenage mothers re-admitted to selected secondary schools, with the aim of generating insights that may inform the development of effective

support strategies and improve policy implementation practices.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Before the introduction of the re-entry policy in Tanzania, thousands of teenage girls who became pregnant were expelled from school and denied the opportunity to return to the formal education system even after childbirth, as pregnancy was considered as an offense against morality (Haki Elimu, 2024; URT, 2002). Despite presence of legal and policy frameworks that enable teenage mothers to continue their education after childbirth, recent studies show that most of them do not complete their studies, with many dropping out even after being re-admitted (Asumini & Mwila, 2024; Handmaker, 2024; Laurencio et al., 2024; Mtoi, 2024). This situation undermines the country's progress toward key targets set out in international frameworks, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015) and Agenda 2063 of the African Union (African Union Commission, 2015), particularly those related to education. Moreover, little is known about the actual lived experiences of teenage mothers within school settings (Mwakililo, 2025). To address this gap, the present study seeks to explore personal, social and academic experiences of teenage mothers who rejoined secondary education within Nzega District.

1.2 Objective of the Study

This study focuses on understanding the lived experiences of teenage mothers who have been re-admitted to selected secondary schools in Nzega District. It specifically examines their personal, social, and academic experiences in order to gain insight into the challenges they face as they continue with their education after childbirth.

2. Literature Review

The following subsections present the reviewed literature, covering both theoretical and empirical perspectives.

2.1. Theoretical Literature Review

This study explores the experiences of re-admitted teenage mothers in selected secondary schools through the lens of the Ecological Systems Theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979). The theory emphasizes the influence of environmental and social factors on human development and behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), making it relevant for understanding the complex

experiences of teenage mothers within interconnected social systems. The theory consists of five interrelated layers: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Cherry, 2023). The microsystem refers to immediate environments such as family, peers, school, and neighbourhoods. These direct interactions shape behaviour and motivation (Tong & An, 2024). In this study, it is argued that such interactions may expose teenagers to risky behaviours that can lead to teenage pregnancy, as individual behaviour is shaped by nested environmental contexts (Tong & An, 2024). The mesosystem explains the relationships between microsystems, such as interactions among family and school, and religious institutions (Munsaka & Kalinde, 2017), which can further influence adolescents' values and behaviours.

The exosystem includes indirect environmental influences such as parental workplaces, social services, media, and government policies, all of which may affect family wellbeing and adolescents' development (Guy-Evans, 2020). The macrosystem encompasses broader cultural values, traditions, and societal norms of the community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These factors also shape behaviour and perceptions, including beliefs that may contribute to early motherhood. Lastly, the chronosystem highlights how human development, motivation, and behaviour are influenced by time-related social changes, including technological advancement and educational reforms. In this regard, ongoing temporal shifts in educational policy and digitalization continually reshape, either positively or negatively, individual experiences and developmental pathways (Samuelsson, 2025). Consequently, the theory provides a useful framework for understanding how interconnected environmental factors may contribute to early teenage childbirth, also shape the lived experiences of teenage mothers returning to school.

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

The experiences of teenage mothers who return to school after maternity are multifaceted, encompassing personal, social, and academic challenges that may have long-term implications for their lives. Existing empirical literature similarly indicates that re-admitted teenage mothers encounter a range of interconnected challenges, including social stigma, economic hardship, psychological strain, and academic disengagement, which collectively affect their reintegration and educational progression. Regarding this, Mmassy (2023) conducted a qualitative study on the challenges faced by teenage mothers re-admitted to non-formal education in Tanzania. Using purposive sampling, the study involved 20 teenage mothers enrolled at Wamo Open School, and data were collected through in-depth interviews. The findings revealed that teenage mothers

experienced stigma, discrimination, financial hardship, childcare responsibilities, psychological stress, and fear of dropping out again, all of which negatively affected their educational continuity and school connectedness. The study concluded that despite the availability of re-entry opportunities, teenage mothers remain vulnerable without adequate institutional and social support, and therefore recommended counselling services, financial assistance, and school-based childcare support to enhance retention and academic success. However, the study was conducted in an open and distance learning school setting characterized by flexible school regulations, whereas the present study is conducted in formal secondary schools with structured academic and disciplinary systems, thereby addressing a contextual gap in the existing literature.

Similarly, Nyaisa and Njowele (2025) examined the experiences of teenage mothers under the re-entry policy in secondary schools in Uyui District. The study adopted a qualitative case study design and used a purposive sample of 10 teenage mothers who had re-entered school. Data were collected through unstructured interviews, and thematic analysis was applied. The findings indicated that teenage mothers faced psychological distress, stigma from peers, financial constraints, and limited participation in school activities, which negatively affected their reintegration process. The study concluded that policy implementation alone is insufficient without supportive school environments. The researchers recommended community awareness programmes and school-based interventions to reduce stigma and improve acceptance of teenage mothers in schools. This study was conducted in the realm of case study design leaving a methodological gap for this study.

The study conducted by Mwakililo (2025) investigated the availability and effectiveness of support systems for adolescent mothers in secondary schools in Mbeya Region. The study used a qualitative embedded case study design and involved 20 teenage mothers across five schools. Data were collected using focus group discussions and open-ended questionnaires. Findings revealed that while some informal support exists, formal school-based support systems are fragmented and inadequate. Teenage mothers experienced difficulties such as emotional stress, financial challenges, and institutional neglect, which limited their successful reintegration. The study concluded that existing support mechanisms are insufficient to address the lived realities of teenage mothers. It recommended integrated psychosocial, financial, and institutional support systems to enhance effective school re-entry. This study adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological research design while the previous study employed a case study design.

Nalaila and Massawe (2026) conducted a qualitative multi-case study involving 70 teenage mothers across four regions in Tanzania. Data were collected using interviews, questionnaires, and documentary review, and analysed thematically. The study found that teenage mothers faced stigma, self-doubt, caregiving responsibilities, and structural barriers within schools, which contributed to low academic engagement and dropout risk. The findings further showed that existing re-entry structures often reproduce social exclusion despite formal inclusion policies. The study concluded that school re-entry programmes may not fully address structural inequalities affecting teenage mothers. It recommended policy reform focusing on gender-sensitive education systems, counselling, and structural support mechanisms. Equally, studies by Muthelo et al. (2024) and Lesinskienė (2025) showed that depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, hopelessness, and emotional distress further weaken teenage mothers' connection to education and social support systems. Research by Rahim et al. (2024) also indicated that adolescent mothers face high risks of postpartum depression and related mental health conditions due to factors such as social isolation, unemployment, and inadequate access to basic needs, as highlighted by World Health Organization (2020). However, evidence from Kenya by Gebrekristos et al. (2025) demonstrated that strong connectedness through parental encouragement and emotional support from close female friends significantly reduced postpartum depressive symptoms and strengthened teenage mothers' resilience and educational continuation. Previous studies did not explore the perspective of teenage mothers themselves leaving the gap for present study.

Similarly, the previous studies in Kenya have highlighted the experiences affecting teenage mothers' educational participation and school connectedness after re-enrolment. In her doctoral dissertation, Okondo (2022) examined the experiences of teenage mothers in secondary schools in Bondo Sub-County using a qualitative descriptive design. Through in-depth interviews with 15 purposively selected participants, the study found that stigma, financial hardship, poor academic performance, loss of social status, and multiple responsibilities negatively affected teenage mothers' educational engagement and sense of belonging within school environments. Similarly, Oriki and Nyakundi (2020), in a descriptive survey conducted in Nyamira South Sub-County, reported that stigma, discrimination, and financial challenges significantly contributed to school dropout and social exclusion among school-going teenage mothers. While these studies provide valuable insights into the barriers limiting educational connectedness, they primarily employed descriptive approaches. The current study adopts a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of teenage mothers and address the identified research gap.

Furthermore, recent studies in Kenya and Rwanda have further demonstrated how social, psychological, and economic experiences affect teenage mothers' wellbeing and educational connectedness. Kithinji (2025), using a phenomenological design in Roysambu Constituency, found that teenage mothers experienced stigma, financial instability, disrupted education, and limited access to healthcare and government services, although many displayed resilience in coping with these challenges. The study recommended life-skills empowerment, mental health support, and inclusive government interventions to strengthen teenage mothers' social and economic integration. Similarly, Gatsinzi (2022), in a qualitative case study conducted in Rusororo Sector, reported that out-of-school teenage mothers faced depression, loneliness, parental rejection, economic hardship, and educational discontinuity, which weakened their social support systems and sense of belonging. Both studies highlight the significant barriers limiting teenage mothers' educational and social connectedness; however, they focused mainly on socio-economic challenges and out-of-school teenage mothers. In contrast, the current study explores broader lived experiences, including personal, academic and social challenges faced by teenage mothers, while combining the perspectives from teenage mothers, their female peers and academic masters as participants to address the identified research gap. The next section discusses the methodology employed in this study.

3. Methodology

This study explored the experiences of re-admitted teenage mothers in selected secondary schools in Nzega District, Tanzania. The study adopted a qualitative approach guided by a hermeneutic phenomenological research design to facilitate an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences. A total of 19 participants were purposively selected based on their direct experience and relevant knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation. The study sample comprised 8 teenage mothers, including 4 who re-entered school and 4 who subsequently dropped out

following re-admission, 6 female peers, and 5 academic masters who served as supplementary informants. The sample size was considered appropriate for a phenomenological study, as Creswell (2013) and Creswell and Poth (2016) recommend a range of 5 to 25 participants for such studies. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teenage mothers and academic masters, while focus group discussions were conducted with female peers. Data were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically to identify key patterns, meanings, and interpretations related to the reintegration of teenage mothers into the school environment. To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to the principles of transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability throughout the research process. To ensure adherence to ethical standards, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were observed throughout the study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Zambia Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. HSSREC IRB 00006464). In Tanzania, permission to conduct the study was granted by the District Executive Director (DED) through written authorization (Permit No. NDC/E1/57/193), which allowed access to the selected secondary schools for data collection. The following section presents the study findings.

4. Results and Discussion

During the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, participants described various experiences encountered after their readmission into secondary education in Nzega District, highlighting personal, social, and academic barriers to successful re-entry. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach enabled an in-depth exploration of these lived experiences. The themes and sub-themes grounded in participants' accounts, reflect their reported realities and are presented in the thematic map below and discussed in the subsequent sections.

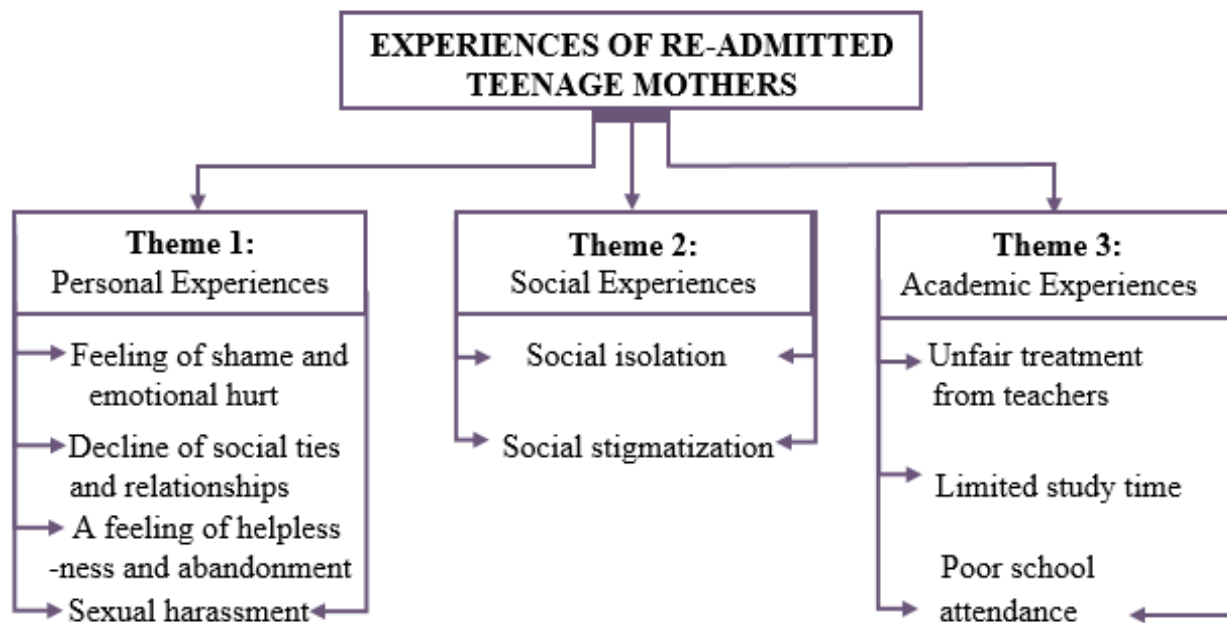


Figure 1: Thematic Map Showing the Relationships Among Themes and Subthemes

1: Thematic Map Showing the Relationships Among Themes and Subthemes

4.1 Personal Experiences

At the personal level, the findings indicate that teenage mothers face significant emotional and relational challenges upon returning to school, including feelings of shame and distress, weakened social relationships, and perceived parental abandonment that fosters helplessness. The findings are presented and further examined in relation to existing literature in the sections that follow.

4.1.1 Feeling of shame and emotional hurt.

The study findings revealed that teenage mothers experienced intense feelings of shame and emotional pain following their return to school. Participants reported by describing their school experiences as “more than an education,” as they involved significant personal and emotional challenges. They shared stories of how they were mocked, laughed at and how their status changed as they were now being called a mother and not a student by fellow peers, teachers and members of the neighborhood. Experiences of shame and emotional hurt increased their anxiety and negatively affected their academic efforts. One teenage mother reflected on her journey, stating: “*I tried to smile, but deep down I felt like I did not belong*” (Asha, 18years). When reflecting on her personal experiences, the same teenage mother student said:

“...I often kept my head down and avoided talking to people because I was afraid of how both teachers and students would look at me... I was happy to have another chance to study, but inside I carried this huge

shame. I felt like everyone was whispering, “That’s the girl who had a baby.” I tried to smile, but deep down I felt like I did not belong...” (Asha, 18years).

During the focus group discussion one of the peers reported: “... Some students gossip... They whisper or laugh when she walks in. You can tell she feels it. Then she stays quiet all the time” (P2). In the same focus group discussion, another peer added: “...Some are strong; they walk in proudly. But others, you can see tears sometimes when people talk badly” (P3). Also, one of the academic masters also narrated how teenage mothers appear psychologically distracted at school: “...Yes, a few. Some keep a low profile the entire year, barely speaking in class, avoiding leadership roles, and sometimes dropping out quietly. Their inner shame or family rejection keeps them emotionally disturbed (AMO3).

These findings are consistent with previous research conducted in Rwanda by Gatsinzi (2022) and a systematic review by Lesinskienė (2025), which reported that teenage mothers experience shame and emotional distress. Similarly, Chemutai et al. (2020), in a phenomenological study on the lived experiences of adolescent mothers attending Mbale Regional Referral Hospital, found that teenage mothers experienced emotional hurt and also reported that teenage mothers felt shamed due to being labelled as mothers out of wedlock, which caused embarrassment for both themselves and their families. These findings are also consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, which guides this study. Within the mesosystem, when both schools and families express disapproval or fail to provide adequate support,

negative messages become consistent and mutually reinforcing across settings. Poor communication between home and school further intensifies feelings of isolation, thereby increasing emotional suffering among teenage mothers. At the microsystem level, where individuals experience direct interactions, negative peer reactions, insults, and lack of support directly contribute to feelings of shame and emotional pain.

4.1.2 Decline in social ties and relationships

Participants reported that some of their close friends distanced themselves from them after they became teenage mothers. They also explained that their social relationships often deteriorated due to changes in their life circumstances. This withdrawal of friendship and social ties further contributed to feelings of isolation and emotional distress among teen mothers. During a focus group discussion, one participant revealed that even some teachers distanced themselves from teenage mothers, stating: “...*Teachers ignore and neglect them or keep reminding them of their past*” (P3). Another participant shared her experience saying:

“...Before, we used to laugh and eat together, talk about small things like movies or other social matters. Now, when I walk toward them, they lower their voices or change the topic. One day, I heard a classmate say to another, ‘My mother told me never to sit near Edda, she has a baby.’ Those words hit me like a slap. From that day, I stopped trying to sit with groups” (Edda, 18years).

These findings are consistent with those of Moganedi and Mudau (2024), who reported that teenage mothers were rejected and marginalised by community members, peers, and close relatives, despite these groups being expected to provide them with support. Also, similar findings have been reported in Uganda by Alanyo et al. (2025), who noted that teenage mothers often experienced strained relationships with significant individuals in their lives, resulting in inadequate social support. According to Thomas (2020), social support, social ties, and relationships play a crucial role in the lives of teenage mothers. Due to their young age and limited ability to secure employment, teenage mothers often lack the financial means to support themselves and their children. As a result, they rely heavily on their social support networks for assistance (Mazhar, et al., 2025). This support is typically provided across five key domains: tangible support, affectionate support, positive social interaction, emotional support, and informational support (Peter et al., 2016, as cited in Thomas, 2020).

Furthermore, these findings are consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s Social Ecological Systems Theory,

which emphasizes the importance of social relationships and environmental systems in shaping individual experiences. Within the microsystem, a teenage mother interacts directly with her immediate environment, including family members, friends, partners, and the school. It is within this system that social support, emotional care, and everyday interactions occur. For example, when parents provide childcare, friends offer emotional support, or neighbours encourage school continuation, these represent forms of support within the microsystem. Furthermore, the mesosystem refers to the interconnections between different components of the microsystem, such as the relationship between family and school. This system explains how coordinated support across these settings can strengthen outcomes for teenage mothers. For instance, when a teenage mother’s family collaborates with the school to support her education, the combined effort enhances her overall well-being. Strong social support networks have been shown to alleviate stress, reduce levels of depression and anxiety, promote breastfeeding, and improve the overall mother-child relationship (Gray, 2014, as cited in Thomas, 2020).

4.1.3 Feeling of helplessness and abandonment by parents.

The study findings revealed that teenage mothers experienced a feeling of helplessness and abandonment by parents and those who were close to them. Participants reported that some parents went as far as expelling them from their homes upon learning of the pregnancy, while others withdrew both emotional and material support. Participants shared the following: “...*I eventually stopped attending school because I could not manage both roles alone. At home, my parents were not supportive, and meeting basic needs became difficult*” (Linda, 22years). One of academic masters shared their observed experience:

“Most of them struggle with how to obtain money to support their children. Many parents neglect them, demanding that the person responsible for the pregnancy to take responsibility. They also believe that once a girl becomes pregnant, her education should come to an end” (AM01).

In a focus group discussion, A peer of teenage mother explained how parents or guardians often abandon their adolescent daughters without support, a situation that leads to increased psychological trauma and school dropout:

“Many parents perceive adolescent pregnancy as a serious mistake. As a result, they often withdraw their care and support, believing that the girl has brought shame to the family. Some parents consider her grown up and expect her to establish her own household or get married. Consequently,

although some girls initially return to school, many eventually drop out due to limited support” (P1).

These findings align with those of Wainaina et al. (2021), who reported that teenage mothers often experience neglect and abandonment from significant others. Similarly, recent studies by Alanyo et al. (2025), Moganedi & Mudau (2023), and Rahim et al. (2024) indicate that rejection and lack of family support contribute to heightened emotional distress, including anxiety and feelings of helplessness. Evidence from Twintoh et al. (2021) in Ghana further shows that abandonment by family members is closely associated with emotional neglect, often stemming from familial conflict and perceived lack of love and support. These findings are consistent with the Social Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes the critical role of the microsystem, particularly family relationships, in shaping adolescents’ wellbeing. Within this framework, the absence of familial support increases the likelihood of isolation, emotional distress, and maladjustment, which may ultimately contribute to school dropout during this vulnerable stage of development.

4.1.4 Experiencing sexual harassment

The study revealed that teenage mothers experienced sexual harassment from men in their surroundings who sought to exploit them sexually. Sexual harassment, in this context, refers to unwanted and inappropriate sexual comments, advances or behaviours directed toward teenage mothers, leading to feelings of discomfort, fear, and vulnerability (Salazar, et al., 2023). Many men attempted to take advantage of these young mothers under the assumption that, since they had already engaged in sexual activity, they would be receptive to further sexual relations. One academic master stated: *“...their body shapes changed and enlarged after childbirth, which attracted more attention from men. They believed now it is easy to approach them since they had already been sexually active.”* (AMO2). Another reported:

“There have been cases where female students report harassment. Some male students engage in inappropriate behaviours toward them. Teenage mothers are particularly vulnerable in such situations. Not all cases are reported due to fear or shame. This makes it difficult for the school to intervene effectively. It remains a concern in maintaining a safe learning environment.” (AMO4).

A school dropped out teenage mother said: *“There were times when some men stopped me on the road and said they would give me money if I agreed to meet them somewhere,*

which made me feel really uncomfortable and uneasy.” (Linda, 22years).

Another teenage mother student added: *“...During my way back home, some men do follow me and say things such as they want to be my suitor...”* (Agnes, 17years).

These findings are supported by evidence from sub-Saharan Africa, which shows that adolescent girls experience various forms of sexual violence both within and outside school environments, often perpetrated by peers and community members, thereby contributing to their heightened vulnerability (Evans et al., 2023). Similarly, global research confirms that sexual harassment is prevalent during early adolescence and disproportionately affects girls, while exposure to such violence is strongly associated with subsequent teenage pregnancy and early motherhood (Reidy et al., 2023; Melendez-Torres et al., 2025).

Generally, this highlights the urgent need for strengthened protective mechanisms and responsive support systems for teenage mothers and adolescents at risk.

4.2 Social Experiences

From a social perspective, the findings indicate that negative peer and community attitudes hinder the social reintegration of teenage mothers, undermining their confidence and sense of belonging within both school and the broader community. These experiences of stigma and isolation are further discussed in relation to existing literature in the sections that follow.

4.2.1 Experiencing social isolation

The study findings revealed that teenage mothers experienced social isolation from both community members and schoolmates. One of the re-admitted teenage mothers reported: *“...most avoid me. Some girls whisper. I lost all my friends. I often eat alone and stay quiet. A few teachers are fair, but some treat me like a warning sign to others”* (Agnes, 17 years). Also, another dropped out teenage mother revealed: *“My classmates mostly avoided me. The girls said I was “spoiled,” and the boys made fun of me. I only talked to one or two who were kind”* (Mary, 20 years). During a focus group discussion one participant explained how teenage mothers were often isolated at school: *“... Some friends stay close, but others also disappeared”* (P1). Highlighting that some teenage mothers experience social isolation within school or the community around, one school academic master stated:

Social acceptance among teenage mothers tends to be a gradual process. Initially, peers often avoid them and whisper behind their backs. In traditional settings, moral judgment frequently manifests indirectly through disapproving glances, laughter, or exclusion from informal peer groups. (AM04).

These findings are consistent with those of Moganedi and Mudau (2023), who found that teenage mothers in rural Makhado, Limpopo Province, South Africa, experienced social isolation which were manifested through rejection by peers and community members, as well as persistent societal judgment. Similarly, Vaca (2020) reported that stereotypes significantly contribute to social isolation and affected negatively the emotional well-being of teenage mothers. Conn et al. (2018) also noted that young parents commonly face multiple stressors, including role restriction and social isolation. In addition, Sheppard et al. (2021), in a Human Rights Watch report, highlighted that many parenting students experience heightened anxiety, stress, and isolation. Participants' interpretations further indicated that social exclusion was experienced not only from peers and community members but, at times, also from teachers, from whom support was expected. Peer avoidance and differential treatment reinforce feelings of isolation and marginalization, undermining both social interaction and engagement in school activities.

4.2.2 Social stigmatisation

Participants reported experiencing stigma from both peers and community members. These experiences ranged from disapproving looks to overt negative social judgement and confrontations. A teenage mother narrated: *"People look at me differently now that I am a mother. Some of my classmates avoid sitting near me. I feel judged whenever I enter the classroom. It makes me feel like I don't belong here anymore"*. The academic master also confirmed this when explained:

"In my experience as a teacher, teenage mothers often face stigma in school settings. Some students tend to distance themselves from them socially. There are noticeable negative attitudes in classrooms and group work. This affects their confidence and participation in school activities" (AMO2).

During the focus group discussion, a peer of teenage mothers explained that teenage mothers are sometimes given nicknames by their peers or neighbours, a practice that adds to their stigmatization. The participant reported: *"Some start calling her 'Mama Fulani,' 'To mean mother of someone.'* Even if it sounds funny, it hurts. She feels separated from others" (P2). Further, a teenage mother who had dropped out of school reported that female teachers

often stigmatized them for being teenage mothers. She explained: *"It is normal here. Most female teachers did not encourage us; instead, they often nagged and discouraged us. Such negative attitudes made us feel unworthy, even though they were supposed to support us"* (Rehema, 19years).

The above findings are supported by Owens (2022), who found that young parents in the United Kingdom (UK) experienced stigma, negative judgment, uncomfortable staring, and were often regarded as hopeless within their communities. Similarly, a Tanzanian study by Mmassy (2023) on challenges facing teenage mothers re-admitted to the non-formal education system revealed that teenage mothers in informal schooling contexts experience social stigma and discrimination. Similar findings were also reported in South Africa by Moganedi and Mudau (2023), who observed that teenage mothers experience discrimination and stigmatization. Likewise, Mudau (2019) and Pueyo (2022) argue that teenage mothers are stigmatised because they violate age norms of parenting and are often labeled as deviant. According to Maleka (2020), many forms of stigma are expressed through labeling, stereotyping, separation, and status loss, which collectively contribute to psychological distress, including feelings of shame, loneliness, and reduced self-worth.

4.3 Academic Experiences

Academically, the findings suggest that teenage mothers encounter multiple experiences that constrained their participation and academic performance. These experiences include; unfair treatment from some teachers; limited time for study due to childcare and domestic responsibilities; and irregular school attendance. The findings are presented and further interpreted through three subthemes discussed below.

4.3.1 Unfair treatment from teachers

The study findings revealed that teenage mothers experienced unfair treatment from teachers within the school setting. Participants reported that they were subjected to the same disciplinary measures as other students without consideration of their circumstances as teenage mothers, and in some cases, they experienced verbal abuse and harassment. During the focus group discussion one peer of teenage mothers reported: *"The rules are never flexible here. For example, when they come to school late, they might get punished, even when the reason is that their baby was sick or crying"* (P1). A dropout teenage mother reported that female teachers, were expected to support them, instead they harassed them. She narrated: *"...Most female teachers did not encourage us;*

instead, they often nagged and discouraged us. Such negative attitudes made some of us feel unworthy, even though they were supposed to support us” (Rehema, 19years). The same teenage mothers again reported being unfairly treated as she was not given the chance to redo the test she missed. She explained: *“...But one teacher refused to let me redo a test I missed because my child was in the clinic...That was unfair”* (Rehema, 19years).

Similarly, another participant reported that some teachers treated teenage mothers unfairly. While certain teachers provided academic support by offering make-up tests and clarifying missed subtopics, others demonstrated judgmental attitudes, often making disparaging comments such as: *“You should have thought about that before having a child”* (P3). Participants also noted that teacher attitudes vary considerably. A teenage mother remarked: *“Teachers are also different; one female teacher acts like a mother to me, but others treat me with suspicion, as if I have come to corrupt morals”* (Asha, 18years). This finding suggests a discrepancy between the expected role of teachers as providers of guidance and support and the actual experiences reported by the participants, thereby adversely affecting their school engagement and overall learning experience.

These findings are consistent with a study conducted in Kenya by Kubwimana et al., which examined stakeholders’ attitudes toward teenage mothers among principals, deans of studies, and teachers in public secondary schools in Kathiani Sub-County, Machakos. The study revealed that some education stakeholders believed teenage mothers should bear the consequences of their actions independently and perceived them as a negative influence on other female students. Such perceptions reflect the stigmatization and unfair treatment frequently experienced by teenage mothers within educational settings.

Furthermore, the findings above are corroborated by a study conducted in Zambia by Nkwemu et al. (2019), which reported that some teachers refused to assist teenage mothers with extra lessons, made hurtful remarks, and treated them unfairly. Also, Mwakililo (2025) found that although informal support mechanisms exist, formal and coordinated systems remain fragmented and insufficiently responsive to the needs of teenage mothers, thereby allowing instances of unfair treatment to persist. Similarly, a systematic review by Yakubu and Salisu (2018) across Sub-Saharan Africa revealed that teenage mothers often drop out of school due to negative attitudes and inadequate support from parents and school administrations.

Collectively, these studies underscore the need for more supportive, inclusive, and responsive school environments for teenage mothers.

4.3.2 Limited study time

The findings revealed that teenage mothers felt overwhelmed by the combined demands of academic work and household responsibilities, resulting in limited study time. Subsequently, they experienced difficulties in concentration and full participation in school activities, which adversely affected their learning and academic progress. A dropped out teenage mother stated: *“I used to wake up at 4 a.m. to prepare bottles, then leave the baby with my aunt. After school, I went straight home to relieve her. It was exhausting but manageable at first”* (Joana, 23years). During the focus group discussion, a peer of a teenage mother explained how difficulty it was to balance being a mother and a student noting: *“...One girl study after midnight, when her baby finally falls asleep...”* (P1). Another dropped out teenage mother narrated: *“Some nights I barely slept because my baby was sick or crying. By morning, I was tired and could not concentrate. It made time management difficult. I had to choose between studying and caring for my child.”* (Linda, 22years). Also, a teenage mother student explained:

“...Every day, I deal with the pressure of waking early, feeding the baby, rushing to school, and coming back to cook and clean. I’m constantly exhausted. I get body pain and sometimes a fever because of stress. I also forget things easily these days” (Asha, 18years).

The findings are consistent with those of Mwakililo (2023) in Tanzania, who reported that teenage mothers struggle to balance childcare responsibilities with school demands, resulting in academic stress, reduced concentration, and limited time for studying and completing assignments. Similarly, Kawala (2021), in a study conducted in Uganda, found that the dual demands of being a mother and education negatively affect teenage mothers’ academic performance. Equally, Mgunda (2023) supports these findings, reporting that teenage mothers lacked sufficient time to allocate to both academic and parenting responsibilities. In addition, studies by Nnadi and Nazim (2025), Otegbayo et al. (2023), and Issa and Temu (2023) revealed that teenage mothers frequently experience persistent anxiety about falling behind academically as they struggle to balance educational demands with parenting responsibilities.

Generally, the findings and reviewed literature indicate that the combined responsibilities of schooling and caregiving significantly limit teenage mothers’ ability to fully participate in learning activities and sustain consistent academic performance.

4.3.3 Poor school attendance

The study findings indicated that teenage mothers had low school attendance due to various challenges, including the responsibility of caring for their infants, such as feeding, managing illness, and the lack of reliable childcare support. The academic masters responded when asked about what contested teenage mothers most: *“The immediate obstacle is irregular attendance. Many miss lessons due to baby care or sickness, tiresome or stress that affects their concentration”* (AM01). Similarly, another academic master noted: *“Motherhood affects attendance significantly. If the baby is sick, the girl misses school...”* (AM05). Also, a teenage mother said: *“...My baby fell very ill. I missed school for two weeks, and when I came back, my classmates had finished a whole topic. I gave up, it felt impossible to catch up”* (Naomi).

In addition, household responsibilities further limited their school attendance. A teenage mother explained: *“I became overwhelmed trying to balance my responsibilities. I missed several exams and was unable to get money to pay someone who could take care my child...”* (Joana, 23years). Also, financial constraints, including the inability to afford transport and school-related expenses, contributed to absenteeism. A teenage mother stated: *“...Many girls drop out again because they cannot afford the basics. If we had government bursaries, our attendance would improve”* (Edda, 18 years). Another added: *“...I miss school a lot when my baby’s sick or I have no money for transport. I fail some tests because I could not attend lessons”* (Agnes). These findings corroborate those of Sobngwi-Tambekou et al. (2022), who, in a study involving 18,791 adolescent mothers in Cameroon, found that teenage childbearing resulted in poor school attendance, school dropout and interrupted schooling. Similarly, the Zizi Afrique Foundation (2025) reported that teenage mothers who return to school continue to experience irregular attendance due to childcare responsibilities, stigma, and economic hardship. In the same vein, Mwakililo (2025), in a study conducted in Tanzania, agree that teenage mothers continued to face irregular school attendance despite efforts toward educational reintegration. Likewise, studies by Issa & Temu (2023) and Nkwemu et al. (2019) further indicate that childcare demands and limited social support frequently contribute to inconsistent school attendance among teenage mothers in Zambia and Tanzania.

Therefore, the findings and reviewed literature demonstrate that teenage motherhood disrupts consistent school attendance and academic engagement, underscoring the importance of implementing targeted interventions to enhance school participation and improve academic achievement among teenage mothers.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This section summarizes the major findings of the study and provides practical recommendations and area for further research for improving support, inclusion, and educational opportunities for re-admitted teenage mothers.

5.1 Conclusion

The findings revealed that teenage mothers re-admitted to selected secondary schools in Nzega District, Tanzania, frequently experience emotional distress, stigma, social isolation, strained family relationships, and difficulties in balancing childcare responsibilities with schooling, which contribute to poor school attendance and academic performance. The study concludes that re-admitted teenage mothers encounter interconnected emotional, social, and academic barriers that hinder their well-being and academic success.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that support systems within families, schools, communities, and policy frameworks be strengthened to promote inclusive and non-discriminatory learning environments. Such measures should include the provision of counseling and academic support, as well as the implementation of policies that safeguard the educational continuity and overall welfare of teenage mothers.

5.3 Area of Further Research

Future research should explore the attitudes and perceptions of teachers, school administrators, and peers towards teenage mothers to better understand how stigma and discrimination influence reintegration.

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