Negotiating Education and Motherhood: A Sociological Inquiry Into the School and Community Experiences of Teenage Mothers in Lusaka District, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Background: Globally, adolescent pregnancy and parenthood present major obstacles to girls' educational attainment and future socioeconomic mobility. In sub-Saharan Africa, an estimated six million pregnant and parenting girls are out of school, and in Zambia the re-entry of teenage mothers into formal education remains under-examined. This study explores how teenage mothers in Lusaka District negotiate the dual demands of schooling and motherhood within school and community contexts.

Aim: To examine the lived experiences of teenage mothers who returned to school post-birth, and to identify enablers and barriers in their schooling and community engagement.

Methods: This was a qualitative study with a Hermeneutic Interpretive Phenomenological research design. The study purposively selected three secondary schools in the Lusaka urban area. Forty-five (45) participants (24 teenage mothers, 3 headteachers, 9 teachers/guidance counsellors, 6 parents of teenage mothers, 3 religious leaders) were recruited using purposive sampling. Data was collected using in-depth and key informant semi-structured interview guides. Interviews were audio recorded. Thematic Analysis method was used for data analysis.

Findings: The findings reveal that many teenage mothers demonstrate strong motivation to resume schooling, driven by a desire to correct past mistakes, achieve financial independence, and secure a more stable future for themselves and their children. However, this motivation is frequently undermined by persistent challenges, including stigmatization by peers and community members, absenteeism linked to childcare responsibilities, severe economic constraints, and limited institutional responsiveness within schools. Academic performance among teenage mothers initially declines due to divided attention and emotional stress but shows gradual improvement where supportive home environments and encouragement are present. The study further establishes that school-based support systems remain weak, with limited guidance and counselling services, insufficient teacher training, and an absence of structured re-entry programs tailored to the needs of teenage mothers. Family and community responses are mixed, ranging from strong maternal, sibling, and religious support to judgment, mockery, and emotional exclusion, particularly from male parents and partners. Although Zambia's school re-entry policy provides an important framework for access to education, its effectiveness is constrained by its non-binding nature and the lack of coordinated implementation mechanisms.

Conclusion: The study concludes that teenage motherhood does not inherently impede academic success; rather, educational outcomes are shaped by intersecting structural, institutional, and cultural factors. To enhance schooling outcomes for this population, policy and practice must prioritise flexibility in school systems, teacher training on motherhood reintegration, and community-based support networks. The study recommends that the Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (MOESVTEE) should strengthen the

legal framework on re-entry policy, school responsiveness, and implement community-based awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and promote shared responsibility, including the involvement of fathers and male guardians in supporting teenage mothers' education. These measures would enable teenage mothers to remain in school, complete their education and contribute to national development.

Keywords: Teenage Motherhood, Education Re-entry Policy, Community, and Reintegration

INTRODUCTION

Education is a vital instrument for social transformation, economic mobility, gender equality, and individual empowerment. It plays a critical role in improving life outcomes, especially for girls, by reducing poverty, delaying marriage, and enhancing civic participation (UNESCO, 2022). Globally, education is recognized as a basic human right and a critical pillar for achieving sustainable development and gender equity (UNESCO, 2021). Teenage pregnancy is a pressing social issue, with deep-rooted implications on the educational trajectories and life outcomes of young girls. The World Health Organization (2020) defines teenage pregnancy as pregnancy occurring in a girl aged 10-19 years.

In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the challenges of teenage pregnancy, motherhood and schooling are particularly acute. It is estimated that over six million pregnant and parenting girls aged 10-19 are out of school in SSA, with many never returning to education (Kasura et al., 2025). Teenage motherhood in the region thus constitutes both a gender and education frontier. Qualitative research from South Africa underscores how pregnancy and motherhood act as intrinsic barriers to girls' access and success in education: for example, Mcambi (2021) conducted a qualitative study in a South African township and found that motherhood led to school dropout or reduced academic attainment, largely mediated by gendered norms and inadequate school support systems. These findings reflect broader systemic patterns in SSA whereby schools often lack flexibility, teachers are insufficiently trained in supporting returning young mothers, and community stigma remains entrenched. As a result, programs aimed at reintegrating teenage mothers into schooling emphasise not only policy re-entry rights but also community sensitisation, childcare support, and tailored catch-up mechanisms (Kasura et al., 2025; UNICEF, 2024).

In Zambia, as in many sub-Saharan African countries, education is a strategic priority for addressing intergenerational poverty and inequality. However, systemic barriers such as teenage pregnancy continue to undermine efforts to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all, particularly for the girl child (World Bank, 2022). The UNICEF (2024) reported that pregnant and parenting girls experience amplified risks including school exclusion, stigma, early repeat pregnancy, and limited employment prospects. According to the Zambia Demographic and Health Survey (ZDHS), 29% of adolescent girls aged 15-19 in Zambia have already begun childbearing, one of the highest rates in the region (CSO, MOH & ICF, 2019). These pregnancies often lead to school dropout, social exclusion, and long-term poverty. This not only affects their health and socio-economic prospects but also hinders the nation's progress toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNICEF, 2022).

In an effort to mitigate the negative impact of early motherhood on girls' education, the Zambian government through the the Ministry of Education introduced the School Re-entry Policy in 1997. This policy allows adolescent mothers who fall pregnant to return to school after childbirth (Ministry of General Education [MoGE], 2016). This policy was designed to uphold the right to education and prevent the marginalization of pregnant school-girls and young mothers. However, while the policy provides a structural framework for educational reintegration, the realities on the ground are often starkly different. Studies have shown that many school-going mothers face systemic barriers including institutional discrimination, lack of psychosocial support, poverty, social stigma, inadequate childcare provisions, and negative attitudes from peers, teachers, and community members (Katwishi et al., 2023; Muleya & Mayimbo, 2023; Mwaanga & Zulu, 2022). These obstacles not only deter many from returning to school but also affect the academic performance and psychological well-being of those who do. These disparities suggest that policy alone is insufficient without contextualised understanding of the socio-cultural and institutional dynamics affecting young mothers. This underscores the importance of exploring teenage mothers' lived realities in both school and community settings.

Emerging research has shown that returning to school after childbirth is not simply a policy issue but a sociocultural challenge. Teenage mothers often experience multiple layers of discrimination and exclusion, both within educational institutions and in their home communities (Masaiti & Phiri, 2021). In schools, they are frequently labeled, isolated, and made to feel ashamed, which impairs their academic performance and psychological well-being. At the community level, they are perceived as moral failures, and their identity is reduced to that of "failed girls," reinforcing patriarchal expectations about female sexuality and motherhood (Nyirenda, 2022). According to Blumer (1969), the Symbolic interactionism theory in Sociology focuses on how individuals assign meaning to symbols, actions, and interactions in everyday life. In the context of teenage mothers, this theory helps explore how stigma, labels, and social interactions influence their school experiences. For example, teachers or peers may label teen mothers as "irresponsible" or "immoral," which may shape their self-perception and lead to exclusion or self-withdrawal (Lemert, 1951; Chigona & Chetty, 2008).

Moreover, the burden of navigating dual roles as both students and mothers is often overwhelming. Teenage mothers are expected to meet academic demands while simultaneously managing childcare, housework, and sometimes economic responsibilities. The lack of institutional support mechanisms such as on-site childcare facilities, psychosocial counseling, and financial aid further compounds the problem (Chibuye & Tembo, 2021). As a result, even those who re-enter school may struggle to complete their education or attain meaningful qualifications.

Although there are Non-Governmental Orgnaizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations such as Forum for African Women Educationalists in Zambia (FAWEZA) working to support girls' education through advocacy, bursaries, and mentorship programs, the effectiveness of these interventions remains uneven and localized. There is limited empirical data specifically focusing on the lived experiences of teenage mothers navigating the complex terrain of school reintegration and community perceptions in urban areas such as Lusaka (Zimba & Lungu, 2020). The intersection between early motherhood and formal education is a critical site of sociological inquiry, particularly given the social, cultural, and institutional forces that shape young mothers' experiences in both school and community settings (Mkwananzi, 2021).

In Lusaka District, which is both the political and economic capital of Zambia, the pressures faced by teenage mothers are particularly intense due to higher urban poverty levels, inadequate public services, and entrenched social stigma. Understanding the everyday realities of these young mothers is crucial for designing more responsive educational policies and community interventions. There is a growing recognition that unless the sociocultural barriers are addressed alongside policy implementation, the dream of inclusive education for all will remain elusive (UNICEF, 2022).

Sociologically, teenage motherhood intersects with key themes such as gender inequality, social exclusion, and the reproduction of disadvantage. Education systems often mirror societal attitudes, and thus, the treatment of young mothers in schools and communities reflects broader social norms and expectations surrounding motherhood, sexuality, and femininity (Mkwananzi, 2021). Understanding these experiences through a sociological lens is critical for informing inclusive policies and practices that not only accommodate but actively empower teenage mothers.

It is within this context that this study seeks to explore the school and community experiences of teenage mothers in selected schools in Lusaka District. It is premised on the belief that understanding the challenges, support mechanisms, and community perceptions faced by adolescent mothers is essential for the development of more responsive and contextually relevant education policies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

This study is based on a qualitative research approach with hermeneutic phenomenological research philosophy and feminist paradigm. Hermeneutics Phenomenology, which is given by Heidegger, is the theory of interpretation which means that participants would interpret their experiences and will not only focus on the

description (Qazi & Rashidi, 2018b; Addeo, 2013). This is a research design which aims to understand people's perceptions, perspectives, and understanding of a particular situation (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005). Using hermeneutics phenomenology in this study enabled teenage mothers to construct their lived experiences with education reintegration. It also allowed them to construct their social worlds in different ways. This design was used due to the fact that investigating the experiences of teen mothers was exploratory in nature and it required in-depth information from the participants.

Study Site

The study was conducted from three (3) selected secondary schools in Chilanga and Lusaka district of Lusaka Province. The main schools selected were located in Chilanga (Parklands Secondary), Lilayi (Lilayi Secondary) and Chawama (Kamulanga Secondary) in Lusaka town.

Target population

The research targeted teenage mothers who had gone back to school after giving birth as the main participants and head teachers, teachers, parents of school going teen mothers, religious leaders and the general community members as key informants. Creswell (2013:155) confirms this by stating that "It is essential that all participants have [similar lived] experience of the phenomenon being studied". Thus, qualitative research aims to allow participants with similar experience to begin a process of reflection and engagement with the meaning of their personal experience of having returned to school after birth and the impact of their school experiences (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008).

Sampling design

This study used a purposive non-random sampling method to identity participants with certain useful information for the study. Purposive sampling is defined as a type of non-probability sampling in which the participating units are selected on the basis of the researcher's judgment about which ones will be the most useful or representative (Babbie, 2011). In this regard, purposive sampling was employed as a feature of qualitative research in order to enable the researcher to select knowledgeable participants.

Sample size

The purpose of qualitative research is not to generate large quantities of data but to gather quality information for a deeper understanding of the participant's motives based on their experience. Smith (2008) posited that semi-structured qualitative studies commonly involve a sample size of 10 to 20 participants who must be information rich cases. Similarly, Creswell and Poth (2017) have recommended a sample size of 5 to 25 participants who have similar experience with the phenomenon being studied in qualitative research. As such, the commonality of their experiences can be captured and interpreted. Thus in this study, the sample involved 45 participants consisting of 24 teenage mothers, 3 heads of schools from each selected school, 9 teachers which include guidance teachers from each school, 6 parents of teen mothers and 3 religious leaders.

Data Collection Methods

This research employed in-depth and key informant interviews to gather information on the lived experiences of teenage mothers who returned to school post-birth. In-depth and key informant interviews are better suited to describe the meaning of the phenomenon as it is conducted in a way that invites participants to offer a rich, detailed, and first-person account of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Data collection took place from 3rd March to 4th April 2025. Code numbers were used to identify participants to ensure their anonymity. Each interview participant was identified by pseudo names which were different from the actual names of the participants. The selected schools were also made anonymous in the results. A recorder was used to minimise loss of data and ensure accuracy of the transcription. The recording of the interview data was done using note taking and audio recording as recommended by Huberman and Miles (2002).

Data analysis and interpretation

Thematic analysis was used to analyze data in this study and the process followed was based on the procedure described by Kings and Horrocks (2010). Kings and Horrocks recommended that phenomenological research focuses at first on a single interview transcript according to five steps, namely: familiarization with the data; identify themes; structuring themes; making a summary of the themes; and integrating themes across all transcripts. In phenomenological research, the analysis of data begins as soon as the first data are collected. In this study, interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. The audios were then transcribed and uploaded into the qualitative research software called Nvivo version 12 pro. The researcher read through the transcripts identifying open codes using the qualitative software Nvivo. Coding aided in identifying concepts, categories and sub-categories that were further broken down (Saldana, 2016; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Open coding involves reading the texts 'word-by-word', 'line-by-line', and repeatedly to identify phrases that interviewees were using to describe things and issues. The coded data was then categorised (grouped) according to different characteristics to better understand the data (Bryman, 2012; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). The categories were then grouped to form sub-themes and then eventually, the sub-themes were grouped to come up with the main themes.

Reflexivity and Positionality

The principle of reflexivity means that the researcher should be conscious about his/her own position, values, biases and decision in constructing knowledge of the social world in the research process right from designing the tools, data collection and interpretation of the findings (Hesse-Biber and Johnson, 2015; Draper and Swift, 2011). Being qualitative research, the researchers were aware that their background, values, beliefs, and experiences could influence the research process (Floyd and Arthur, 2012). To overcome the problem of positionality, researchers applied what Greenbanks (2003) recommended that reflexivity requires explicit self-consciousness and self-assessment about the researchers' views and positions and how these might influence the design, execution, and interpretation of research findings. Therefore, researchers endeavoured to put aside any preconceived ideas or what they may have personally observed about the experiences of teenage mothers at school and the community in Lusaka.

Ethical consideration

In any research conducted, ethical issues must be taken into consideration by the researcher (Bryman, 2016). This study involved human participants and their human rights needed to be protected. Several ethical issues were addressed during the research, including approval, access and acceptance, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, right to withdrawal, beneficence, justice, and fairness.

Study Findings (Results)

This section presents the findings of the study based on in-depth interviews with teenage mothers who returned to school after childbirth, as well as key informant interviews with teachers, school administrators, parents, and religious leaders in selected secondary schools in Lusaka District. The findings are presented thematically and reflect the context-specific experiences of school-going teenage mothers in urban Lusaka, rather than generalizable claims about all adolescent mothers.

Background Information of Participants

The primary participants were 24 teenage mothers enrolled in Grades 8 to 12 across three urban secondary schools. The majority (16) were aged between 20 and 24. Most participants were in upper secondary grades (12), reflecting delayed educational progression following childbirth. Key informants included school administrators, teachers, parents, and religious leaders, whose perspectives provided institutional, familial, and community lenses on teenage motherhood and schooling. Table 1 summarises the distribution of participants by age and levels of education.

Table 1: Distribution of Study Participants by Age

Age	Frequency
Below 15	1
15-19	7
20-24	16
Total Number	**24**
Level of Education	**Frequency**
Grade 8	1
Grade 9	3
Grade 10	2
Grade 11	6
Grade 12	12
Total Number	**24**

Specific codes and themes emerging from data

In lign with the hermeneutic phenomenological research design, the findings emphasized the importance of giving a voice to study participants who were school-going teenage mothers, teachers, school administrators, parents/guardians, religious leaders and community leaders from Lusaka District through their own accounts. This approach is in line with the epistemological methods of understanding the social worlds based on the lived experiences of research participants. Participants were asked to talk about their lived experiences with their motivation and attitudes toward returning to school, challenges faced by teenage mothers at school, academic performance of teenage mothers, support systems in schools, family and community support, and social and emotional impact of community and family treatment. Their accounts highlighted the complex realities of school-going teenage mothers in Lusaka District, emphasizing the challenges they face in balancing education and motherhood.

Table 2: Emerging themes and subthemes

Themes	Sub-themes
Motivation and Attitudes Toward Returning to School	Correction of mistakes
	Pursuit of financial independence
	Re-entry policy perceptions (Mixed Perceptions)
Challenges Faced by Teenage Mothers at School	Stigmatization and peer teasing
	Absenteeism due to childcare demands
	Economic burdens and lack of material support

Academic Performance of Teenage Mothers	Declining academic performance due to divided attention
	Gradual improvement over time
	Home environment influence on academic outcomes
Support Systems in Schools	Limited school-based support
	Lack of structured programs for teenage mothers
	Lack of teacher training on handling teenage mothers at school
	Guidance counselling gaps
Family and Community Support	Strong maternal and sibling support
	Inadequate or absent support from child's father
	Religious support
Treatment by Family and Community Members	Positive encouragement from some family members
	Internalized shame and reduced academic motivation
	Judgmental male parents
	Peer and Sibling Mockery
	Mixed Reactions from the community

Motivation and Attitudes Toward Returning to School

As a starting point, study participants were asked on how they felt about going back to school after giving birth. The first theme that emerged from this study was the motivation and attitutdes toward returing to school. Within this theme, participants constructed three (3) sub-themes as responses. Sub-themes were categorized into; (i) correction of mistakes, (ii) pursuit of financial independence, and (iii) re-entry policy perceptions and as presented and discussed below.

Correction of Mistakes

Across interviews, teenage mothers consistently described returning to school as a deliberate effort to reclaim disrupted life trajectories. Many framed re-entry as a moral and personal responsibility, linking education to self-respect and future security for their children. Teachers and parents largely corroborated this motivation, describing young mothers as more focused and goal-oriented after childbirth. However, educators also expressed ambivalence, noting that while some learners demonstrated renewed commitment, others struggled with discipline and consistency, highlighting variation rather than uniform motivation. This is attested by the quotes below:

"I felt good about going back to school because it is an opportunity for me to do better. What happened was a mistake, I didn't plan for it to happen so I told myself I have to accept it , I have to work on my mistakes to correct it" **[23year old, grade 12 pupil at school B]**.

"The re-entry policy is a good idea because the girl child is given chance to come back to school, the negative part of it is that the girls know they will come back to school so they play around" **[Guidance teacher, school C]**.

Pursuit of financial independence

Another strong motivation for returning to school was the teenage mothers' desire for future financial autonomy. The participants (girls) link eduction directly to future economic survival and dignity, especially in contexts where marriage alone cannot guarantee financial security. They expressed a desire to become "someone in life," illustrating the internal motivation driving the teenage mothers. This is illustrated from the verbatim below:

"Am happy about continuing with my education because I want to be financially independent. I know even if I get married my husband will not give me everything I need so if I go to school I can find a good job in future and do my own things and I also want my child to be educated" **[22year old, grade 12 pupil at school B]**.

"I was really happy to go back to school because I want to become someone in life because if I stop school my parents will not continue to support me so I think of the future of my baby and myself" **[21year old Pupil at school A]**.

Re-entry policy perceptions (Mixed Perceptions)

Regarding the re-entry policy, school administrators acknowledged its importance in facilitating access but emphasized implementation challenges. Teachers expressed concern that the absence of enforcement guidelines created uncertainty, while parents viewed the policy as protective to encourage the education of girls but insufficient without material and psychosocial support. Some teachers noted a growing trend where girls exploited it by repeatedly becoming pregnant, by taking advantage of the fact that even if they fell pregnant they would still be allowed to come back to school. They felt that this was reason why some girls would fall pregnant for the second or even the third time. This complex view reflects both appreciation and skepticism about the policy's long-term impact on behaviour and discipline. These thoughts are conveyed in the statements below:

"Re-entry policy is good because it gives a second chance to girls who fall pregnant because some fall pregnant due to unforeseen circumstance, others are raped against their will and others are defiled so the policy has given such girls a second chance, but I can safely say that some girls are abusing this policy because they are not raped but they do it willingly, some come from well to do families but they still fall pregnant. They know that at the end of the day even if they fall pregnant they will come back to school and in such a way , the policy has promoted immorality in school as well as indiscipline because those who come back as mothers have a different attitude towards school since they feel they are adults and can't be controlled" **[Head teacher, school B]**.

"The re-entry policy is a good idea in that a girl is given a second chance. However, it is abused by most of the girls. You find that many girls who fall pregnant will still play around and become pregnant for the second time" **[Head teacher, school B]**.

Challenges Faced by Teenage Mothers at School

The study participants were further asked about the challenges that they faced while at school. In order to capture the lived experiences of the teenage mothers, participants were asked on how they were treated by their classmates and teachers. Three (3) sub-themes were brought out by the participants as challenges and these are; (i) stigmatization and peer teasing, (ii) absenteeism due to childcare demands, and (iii) economic burdens and lack of material support as presented below.

Stigmatization and peer teasing

Stigmatization emerged as the most persistent school-level challenge, particularly during early reintegration of the girls. Teenage mothers reported experiences of labeling, social exclusion in group work, and derogatory remarks from peers and even school activities, which negatively affected classroom participation and emotional wellbeing. The girls shared painful stories of being called names, being mocked during lessons especially when learning subjects like biology and being excluded from group activities. Some of the teenage mothers even reported being brought to tears due to the rediicule. Sharing their experiences, some girls said:

"There are some classmates who pass funny comments, pointing fingers at me to say ali namwana uja (that one she has a child) and there are times when we are learning about a certain subject and someone would just say, teacher ask this one, she has a child" **[17year old pupil, school B]**.

"Whenever someone is making noise in class someone would just scream to say benangu imwe mulinabana but muli busy kupanga chongo, simungazichindike (some of you are adults but you are busy making noise, can't you respect yourselves)" **[23year old pupil, school B]**.

"At times they say, after all benangu imwe ndimwe bamai, mwasiya bana kunyumba but mufuna kuzionetsa. (Some of you are adults, you have left children at home but you are busy showing off)" **[22 years old pupil, school A]**.

Two girls while shedding tears narrated;

"there was a time we had spots day at school and the teacher paired me with a certain girl, but she refused to compete with me to say sininga tamange na sarafina, nimuzimai (I can't compete with sarafina she is an adult)" **[19 year old pupil, school C]**.

"At times when I quarrel with a friend, she would say bushe ndine nina pangitsa kuti unkhale namimba (am I the one who caused you to be pregnant)" **[18 year old girl, school C]**.

However, subject teachers acknowledged the presence of stigma but tended to minimize its severity, describing it as occasional teasing rather than systemic exclusion. This contrast reveals a perceptual gap between learners' lived experiences and institutional interpretations, underscoring the need for sensitization within schools. Commenting on the subject, some teachers had this to say:

"For sure we cannot rule out the fact that once in a while their friends tease them, but it has not reached those high levels where those cases are reported but of course teasing cannot be ruled out, it's there, their friends tease them by saying things like ndimwe bamake baby (you are a mother)" **[Head teacher, school C]**.

"Sometimes they are humiliated by those who have no children, or those who have never fallen pregnant before, you find that each time that they are quarreling, the friend will just hit on the point to say uzizichindika ndiwe mukulu ulinamwana peulili apo, uzinkhala na nzeru, (you should respect yourself after all you are a mother). I personally observed this when I was teaching grade 12D" **[Teacher, school A]**.

"Stigmatization does exits, you find that at times a biology teacher would ask a question on reproduction, then others would say sir we don't know the answer ask this one because she is a mother and she will give us a practical example" **[Guidance teacher, school A]**.

"Somehow they face stigmatization, like in a case where their friends call them bamake chite (the mother to someone), sometimes they are told to go and breast feed the child in mockery, at times they are told iwe nkhala zee uziba chani nchito nikugona nabamuna (you keep quiet, what do you know, all you know is sleeping around with men) so they become stigmatized and they do report to me" **[Guidance teacher, school B]**.

Absenteeism due to childcare demands

Absenteeism was closely linked to childcare responsibilities. Teenage mothers described missing classes when infants were ill or when caregiving support was unavailable. This can be illustrated by the quotes below:

"I have not been going to school for the past two weeks because I was in the hospital with the baby, he had hernia and he needed an operation" **[23year old pupil, school A]**.

"Sometimes I miss school because there is no one to remain with the baby or she is sick" **[17year old pupil, school C]**.

"I face a number of challenges especially if the baby is sick, it's really a challenge because I have to attend to the baby as well as to school. Even if my mother takes care of the baby but my child would also need my attention and I would not be happy to come to school when I know my child is not okay at home. I would wonder how she is felling, how she is bothering mum, all these things come to your mind. So it is very hard to concentrate in class" **[24 year old pupil at school B]**.

Teachers confirmed that attendance disruptions were common and contributed to learning gaps, particularly in examination classes. The teachers said that young mothers at times missed school because there was no guardian to look after the baby or the guardian would insist that the young mother takes care of the baby herself. This was further complimented by financial constraints that made hiring help impossible because they came from financially challenged families. The following statements exemplify this point:

"Absenteeism comes in, may be the baby is sick the mother would just say, that's what you wanted take the baby to the clinic, so they will miss out school" **[Guidance teacher, school B]**.

"At times they have a challenge of not having maids to take care of the baby. If there is no one who is willing to look after the baby on that day she stays away and looks after the baby" **[Teacher, school A]**.

"They come to me as the guidance teacher and report challenges like there is no one to look after the baby. The guardian who they think would look after the baby would just tell them she is going somewhere so the girl has to remain home and look after the child" **[Guidance teacher, school A]**.

Economic burdens and lack of material support

The study found that economic hardship further compounded these challenges. Parents and school administrators highlighted the burden of school fees, learning materials, and infant care costs, especially in households with limited income or absent paternal support. Some learners engaged in informal income-generating activities like plaiting hair to sustain their schooling and their babies, which further reduced study time. Most parents narrated that they found it hard to pay for their daughter's schooling because they were not in employment or they earned very little income to pay for the school fees of their daughters. This is conveyed in the following statements:

"It is hard to pay for her school fees because the father is not working, he is paralyzed. I am also not working. It is already a challenge to make ends meet so her having a baby also increases on the burden" **[Parent 2, whose daughter is at school A]**.

"The father is not working so it's very hard for us to provide for the baby. We just struggle to provide for the family so we do not even manage to pay for her fees. As we are speaking she has been chased from school because of not paying school fees" **[Parent 3, whose daughter is at school C]**.

"They can't even manage food for the baby, they prefer they don't come to school so that they go and do piece work so that they can care for the needs of the baby" **[Guidance teacher, school A]**.

Sharing her experience one girl stated:

"I don't receive any support from the father of my child, so it's hard to feed the child. I depend on plaiting hair in order to find some money. My parents also depend on someone else to give them money for my school fees but as it is, that person is not around and I have been chased from school. I have to wait until she comes" **[17 year old pupil, school C]**.

Elucidating on the challenge of taking care of the needs of the baby, some teachers and headteachers corroborated these realities, noting that teen mothers faced this challenge because they were impregnated by irresponsible men and young boys who did not even have a stable source of income. These intersecting hardships highlight how structural, social, and economic issues affect teen mothers' school experiences. They noted that:

"Most of the times they are impregnated by taxi drivers or someone not in employment so taking care of the needs of the baby is a problem and you find that they are staying with a grandmother who is also struggling" **[Head teacher, school C]**.

"Sometimes they get those babies from other people's husbands so there is no support from the men and some of them live with their grandmothers who are not doing anything so it's very difficult for them to look after the baby" **[Guidance teacher, school C]**.

Academic Performance of Teenage Mothers

The participants were asked about the academic performance of teenage mothers and three (3) sub-themes emerged from the responses of the informants. These sub-themes that came out were; (i) declining academic performance due to divided attention, (ii) gradual improvement over time, and (iii) home environment influence on academic outcomes as presented below.

Declining academic performance due to divided attention

The study found that most teenage mothers, teachers, and administrators from the selected urban schools reported an initial decline in academic performance following re-entry, attributed to divided attention, fatigue, and missed instructional time during the maternity leave period which made them lag behind in lessons. Learners described difficulty concentrating due to anxiety about childcare and household responsibilities especially when the baby is still an infant. This is shown by the following quotes:

"I didn't concentrate at first because my mind was divided so I could not understand because when am in class I would be thinking of the child that's why I failed last year" **[16 year old pupil, school C]**.

"You find that the moment I want to study, the baby starts crying so am forced to leave my books and attend to the baby. So when I first went back to school my performance went down because I would be overwhelmed with looking after the baby. I would be thinking of how I would provide for her needs in terms of food, soap and everything she needs so I didn't have time to study properly. I could not even remain for prep. I felt time was not enough to do everything" **[23 year old pupil, school A]**.

"At times I go late to school because I have to breastfeed the baby first" **[20year old pupil, school A]**.

"To say the truth before I was doing well but now it's not so good. I was behind because I stayed home so I missed a lot. I came back to school at a time when my friends were starting the end of term tests and I didn't have some notes and so I failed" **[24 year old pupil, school B]**.

Gradual improvement over time

The study revealed that both teachers and parents observed that academic performance often stabilized or improved over time, particularly when infants grew older and family support was consistent. Some parents explained that having a baby acted as a motivating factor for them to work harder so that they can properly look after their children. They mentioned that improvement was most evident among learners who received childcare assistance, emotional encouragement, and flexibility from teachers. These findings suggest that academic outcomes were not determined solely by motherhood status but were shaped by home environment, institutional responsiveness, and psychosocial support. Some parents explained that:

"She did not have enough time to study because you find that the baby is crying and even when I tried to get the baby so that she can study, he would want to be breastfeed by the mother, so it was difficult for her to study" **[Parent 2, whose daughter is at school C]**.

"At times the baby cries throughout the night and that draws her back with school work" **[Parent 3 whose daughter is at school A]**.

"The performance has improved because she now thinks about her future and that of the baby; she thinks what will become of me if I repeat what I did. In the past whenever they closed school she used to go for holidays but now she prefers going for extra lessons during holidays. I have seen a change; she thinks more of her future now" **[Parent 1 whose daughter is at school A]**.

Home environment influence on academic outcomes

Some teachers explained that there were a number of factors which determined the performance of the teen mothers. These factors include, how supportive the family where the girl is coming from is, how much work she has to do after she goes back to school and how much effort the girls themselves put in their school work. The majority of the teachers interviewed acknowledged that it was not easy for the young mothers to balance school work and the baby. The different sentiments are illustrated in the following quotes:

"For some the performance is good but others it is bad because of the problems they face at home. We conclude that the challenges faced at home contribute to this bad performance because you find that as she comes to school she leaves the napkins in a bucket and there is no washing powder. So we do not expect them to do very well when they are busy thinking of how the baby's nappies are going to be washed" **[Head teacher, school C]**.

"The performance varies, some do well while others don't depending on how serious they put in effort to study but generally it is average. This is because there are a lot of things they have to look at because they have a baby at home and they have to look at academic work also, so the pressure is a big challenge than those who are completely free" **[English Teacher, school A]**.

Three quarters, their performance is not good. Even if they were on average when they come back, it goes down. Except a few, for example we had one last year in grade 12 who has 9 points. Those who are coming from families were they are supported do well. But if even at home she is stigmatized, the performance is bad" **[Guidance teacher, school B]**

"Some it's good but others it's not because of their double responsibility. You find that she does not sleep during the night because the baby was crying so when she comes to school she won't concentrate" **[Civic education Teacher, school B]**.

Support Systems in Schools

Asked about the support they received from school, four (4) themes emerged from the responses that were obtained from the teen mothers. These themes include; (i) guidance counselling gaps, (ii) limited school-based support, (iii) lack of structured programs for teenage mothers, and (iv) lack of teacher training on handling teenage mothers at school as presented below.

Guidance counseling gaps

The findings of the study showed that most of the teen mothers said that they did not receive any support except the initial counselling that they receive after falling pregnant and immediately they came back to school. Guidance and counseling services were described as overstretched, with minimal follow-up. This gap left many learners without sustained emotional or academic support, increasing vulnerability to disengagement. This is clearly illustrated in the quotes below:

"There are no support programs for us as teen mothers. We do not receive counselling but it's up to one who has a problem to go to the guidance teacher if she has a problem" **[18 years old pupil, school A]**.

"We are not supported in any way at school. There is no counselling" **[19 years old pupil, school C]**.

Limited School-based Support

The study found that teenage mothers reported receiving limited formal support from schools beyond initial counseling at re-entry. The girls from the three schools said that beyond being permitted to resume studies, academic catch-up largely depended on peer assistance and individual teacher discretion. The sentiments by the girls were complemented by all the three head teachers who indicated that they only offered counseling to the girls and no other support program. The only programs which were available were targeted at all the girls in order to prevent them from getting pregnant. Regarding this issue, the heads of schools had this to say:

"We don't have any program for the teen mothers, but we have a program for all the girls. We arrange for a health personnel to come and have health talks with all of them but no programs specifically for the teen mothers" **[Head teacher, school A]**.

"We don't have a particular program but we have a counseling department so those pupils are counseled so that they feel at home, they feel loved and accepted. That's the bottom line. We also sensitize the parents to accept the mistake made by their child and we conduct remedial teachings with these girls when they notice that they are behind because of being away from school for a long time, but it's up to the teacher's discretion" **[Head teacher, school B]**.

"We don't have any program for one to one but what normally happens is that when the young lady is pregnant they are given leave. We talk to the parents and the father of the baby, we encourage the man to fend for the baby and also arrange for talks to them one to one at specified times. We also talk to the grandmother" **[Head teacher, school C]**.

Lack of structured programs for teenage mothers

Some of the teen mothers highlighted the absence of structured support systems in school beyond initial counseling. Teachers and headteachers confirmed the absence of tailored reintegration frameworks, citing resource constraints and lack of policy guidance specifically for teenage mothers. While general programs existed to discourage early pregnancies, nothing targeted the reintegration or sustained support of young mothers. When teen mothers missed school due to their children's illness, they had to rely on friends for notes and academic updates. The absence of structured support frameworks in schools reflects a policy-practice gap, undermining the re-entry policy's intent. The findings suggest that although the system allows re-entry, it lacks the practical mechanisms to ensure educational success for these girls. Without dedicated programs, counselling, academic support, or even childcare facilities, teenage mothers face a high risk of continued academic failure and potential dropout. The school officials from the three (3) schools acknowledged this gap, indicating that most programs were preventive in nature, not rehabilitative. This is evident from the quote below:

"We do not receive any support from school. When I miss class it's up to me to go and ask a friend for a book and copy the notes" **[17 years old pupil, school C]**.

Lack of training for the teachers on handling teenage mothers at school

Teachers also reported limited training on how to support pregnant or teenage mothers, resulting in inconsistent practices across classrooms and any assistance given was based on personal initiative. The teachers mentioned that it was up to the teacher's discretion to determine how they could help the teenage mother because schools had no programs in place to help teen mothers. As a results, a standardised mechanisms for reintegration of the teenage mothers were largely non-existent, relying heavily on individual teacher empathy.

Family and Community Support

The study participants were also asked about the kind of support they receive from the community and three (3) sub-themes emerged from the responses. These themes were; (i) strong maternal and sibling support, (ii) inadequate or absent support from child's father, and (iii) religious support as presented below.

Strong maternal and sibling support

The study found that at the family level, maternal and sibling support emerged as a critical enabling factor, particularly through childcare assistance and emotional encouragement. Mothers were frequently described as the primary facilitators of school continuation making it possible for the teenage mothers to concentrate on their schooling. The girls from the three (3) schools mentioned that mothers were the ones who remained with the baby when they went to school and they took good care of the children. Such support enables girls to stay in school and manage their new responsibilities. This is exemplified in the following quotes:

"My parents give me everything I need; am content with the support I am given. My mum takes care of the baby. She gives me enough time to do school work and when am free that's when I take care of the baby but if its school days mum takes care of the baby so I don't face any challenges" **[20 year old pupil, school A]**.

"Mum encourages me to continue with my education and she is the one who takes care of my child when I go to school. My elder brother pays for my school fees" **[21 year old pupil, school A]**.

Inadequate or absent support from child's father

In contrast, support from children's fathers was often minimal or absent, intensifying economic and emotional strain. The role of the father was negative, with many girls reporting emotional distance, scolding, or complete withdrawal of support. Only two of the girls interviewed acknowldged having received sufficient support from the father of their child. This neglect further compounds the teen mother's economic burden. Narrating their experiences some girls stated that:

"The father of the child does little to support me and the baby. Am not satisfied with the support I receive from him. I would like him to support the baby fully, the child needs so many things but the money that he gives me is not enough for me to buy what is needed for the baby" **[22 year old, school A]**.

"The father of the child does not provide any thing, no support at all. It is my parents who look after my child. I have to look for money myself by doing piece work because my parents are not working" **[20 year old pupil, school C]**.

"When I call him to ask for money for the baby, he tells me that I am finishing his talk time" **[23 years old pupil, school A]**.

Religious support

Religious leaders acknowledged this pattern and described their role as providing counseling and limited material (financial) assistance to the teenage mothers. They indicated that most of the boys who impregnated the girls would run away or deny the responsibility of looking after the child. Although these efforts exist, they appear to be isolated and not part of a formal support structure. One religious leader had this to say:

"I do counselling whenever I have a case of pregnancy. I sit down with the girl and try to help, I encourage the mother to take care of the grand child so that the girl can continue with her education and at times we organize funds for them" **[Reverend, United church of Zambia]**.

Treatment by Family and Community Members

In order to find out the challenges that teen mothers faced at home and in the community, study participants were asked on how they were treated by their family and community members. Five (5) sub-themes emerged from the responses of the participants and these sub-themes include; (i) positive encouragement from some family members, (ii) judgmental male parents, (iii) peer and sibling mockery, (iv) internalized shame and reduced academic motivation, and (v) mixed reactions from the community as presented below.

Positive encouragement from some family members

The majority of the participants said that they were treated well by their family members. In most cases the female parents were very supportive and cared for the baby while the girl was at school. One girl narrated as follow:

"At home mum is very encouraging, she understands the situation. But dad is proving to be a very big challenge because he is ever talking. He is not happy with what happened because the family I come from is one which is respected in the community; my dad serves as a role model to many. Am the first one in my family to get pregnant outside marriage so he is taunted by some community members who say that he is busy encouraging other people's children but his own daughter got pregnant outside marriage. As a result, dad is ever talking about the man who impregnated me. We do not communicate frequently we are not in good terms. He only talks to me when he wants to send me or when he wants to say something. He does not even support me fully now the way he used to do", **[23year old pupil, school B]**.

Judgmental male parents

The study found male parental figures were frequently described as judgmental and treated them badly because they felt that the girl had disgraced and ruined the reputation of the family in the community, contributing to emotional distress and, in some cases, reduced academic motivation. This gendered contrast in family support deeply affects the emotional well-being of the teen mothers. This is evident from what another girl said:

"At home the only problem I have is my father. He talks a lot in a negative way. He cannot accept my mistake, whenever I make a simple mistake he always refers to the fact that I have a child, but with others there is no problem. What pains me more is that he does not talk to me upfront but he tells other people who are not even close to us. The problem is when we are together he pretends to be okay with me but when am not around he says bad things" **[24 year old pupil, school B]**.

Peer and Sibling Mockery

The study revealed that some girls experienced negative treatment from sibling and peers at home. They mentioned that siblings adopted their father's judgemental stance and most of the girls who experienced constant verbal remiders of their mistakes from their fathers and siblings expressed frustration, sadness, and sometimes anger. Such treatment affected not only their emtional wellbeing but also their ability to concentrate on their school work. One girl stated that:

"My elder brother is very good but my young sister is a challenge. You find that whenever we argue she would say, why unamita, sumvera iwe. (Why did you get pregnant, you are very promiscuous). I think she has been influenced by my dad because my dad never used to talk to me and my daughter so even my sister started emulating his attitude of giving me a distance" **[23year old pupil, school B]**.

Internalized shame and reduced academic motivation

The results further revealed that some girls had developed suicidal thoughts, feelings of worthlessness, and a profound sense of rejection. As a result of such negative treatment, these girls are psychologically and emotionally affected. The psychological burden was hieghtened when negative treatment came from within the family, particularly from fathers or siblings. The fact that it is their own family members who give them such negative comments and treatment makes it more difficult for some girls to concentrate on school work as they feel they are a disgrace and a burden to their family. The quotes below clearly demonstrate the point:

"It hurts a lot that my own father says negative things. It really affects me because he is my own father, but he can't accept my mistake. Even when I want to study I can't because my mind is disturbed and am frustrated and angry" **[24 years old pupil, school B]**.

"You know when you come from a home where you are not treated well, you start thinking why am I treated like this. Sometimes you even reach the extent of saying I wish the day my mother was delivering me, I was just killed. You would think am I a mistake in this family? Did I commit the greatest mistake on earth? But I realize that only God alone will solve my problem" **[23year old pupil, school B]**.

Mixed Reactions from the community

The study also showed that community responses towards the teenage mothers were mixed with both encouragement and discouragement. While some community members encouraged school continuation, others reinforced stigma by questioning the appropriateness of education for young mothers, suggesting that the girls should abandon education and remain in marriage. These conflicting messages reinfornce the stigma while also highlighting some societal support for reintegration. The following statement clearly illustrates this:

"Others say you did well to go back to school but others say you can't manage to look after the baby and go to school, you will fail. You are not going anywhere" **[20 year old pupil, school B]**.

"Some people say, unamita why umayenda kusukulu, unzinkhala che muchikwati. (Why do you even go to school after all you got pregnant, you should just stay in marriage)" **[22, year old pupil, school B]**.

"Some in the community where saying, how can she go to school and leave her boyfriend, so they used to discourage me from continuing with my education telling me that I will find that my boyfriend has married" **[23 year old pupil, school A]**.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study sought to examine the lived experiences of teenage mothers who returned to school post-birth in Lusaka district, Zambia. The findings revealed several school and community challenges that significantly undermine the educational aspirations of teenage mothers. There are basically six elements coming out of this analysis.

Motivation and Attitudes Toward Returning to School

The study found that teenage mothers in Lusaka described a strong internal drive to return to school as a way of correcting the series of life choices that led to early motherhood. Many participants framed education as a second chance, indicating that completing their schooling could restore personal dignity and offer a future beyond the stigma attached to early pregnancy. This aligns with previous study by Groves et al (2022) in South Africa which revealed adolescent mothers' aspirations to resume education as a key facet of resilience and identity reconstruction after childbirth. In Zambia, anecdotal reports from school girls echo this desire for educational redemption, indicating pride and responsibility as core motivators for persisting with school despite motherhood responsibilities (Ndabala, 2025). Similar narratives of resilience have been documented among teenage mothers in Namibia, where returnees describe a renewed commitment to schooling as a means to defy negative societal expectations and create alternative life pathways for themselves and their offspring (Haipinge & Namakula, 2025). Systematic reviews of return-to-school policies highlight that internal motivations like correcting mistakes and achieving educational goals are central to successful re-engagement (Stephen et al., 2025). These intrinsic drives are crucial in shaping not merely the decision to return but sustained participation in formal education. Such motivations reflect the interplay of agency and societal expectations, suggesting that while motherhood imposes constraints, the desire to achieve educational goals can be a potent motivating force in adolescents' lives. Therefore, educational initiatives must recognize these intrinsic motivations when designing reintegration supports that validate young mothers' efforts.

Another salient motive for returning to school was the pursuit of financial independence, with many young mothers expressing awareness that educational attainment could mitigate long-term economic vulnerability. Participants linked improved academic credentials to future employment opportunities that would enable them to better support their children. This finding is consistent with studies of adolescent mothers in sub-Saharan Africa who see education as a strategy for economic empowerment (Chavula et al., 2025; Stephen et al., 2025).

In Lusaka specifically, narratives from school-going mothers reveal that educational aspirations are closely tied to a desire for self-sufficiency, with many young women articulating that completing school is the only realistic way to secure stable income and avoid cyclical dependency (Ndabala, 2025). This economic rationale reflects broader structural inequalities where motherhood heightens the urgency for both personal and familial economic security, particularly in low-income settings. Importantly, financial aspirations were not abstract but grounded in daily experiences of economic burden associated with childcare and schooling costs. This underscores the need for comprehensive policies that include economic support mechanisms such as bursaries and sponsorships to actualize young mothers' financial goals through education.

Participants exhibited mixed perceptions of Zambia's school re-entry policy; some praised it for enabling return to education, while others criticized it as insufficient or poorly implemented. Zambia's historic re-entry policy permits adolescent mothers to resume schooling after childbirth; yet, implementation remains inconsistent, leading to diverse perceptions among stakeholders (Ndabala, 2025). Systematic review evidence underscores that although many sub-Saharan African countries have re-entry policies; their uneven enforcement often results in ambiguity and hesitation among young mothers and school personnel (Stephen et al., 2025; Chavula et al., 2025). Similarly, misunderstanding and myths within communities sometimes portray the policy as condoning early motherhood, which in turn contributes to negative attitudes toward returning learners (Ndabala, 2025). Furthermore, regional comparative research reports that without integrated infrastructure, psychosocial services, and teacher training, re-entry policies remain largely symbolic rather than transformative (Ramatsetse and Ross, 2023). While the policy theoretically reduces barriers to re-enrolment, participants noted that lack of clarity and limited dissemination reduced its positive impact on actual school retention. Moreover, some young mothers and community members perceived the policy as inadvertently normalizing early pregnancy by assuring continued schooling, reflecting socio-cultural tensions around morality and education. These mixed perceptions suggest that policy alone is not enough effective communication, community engagement, and school-level implementation guidelines are crucial for policy acceptability and impact.

Challenges Faced by Teenage Mothers at School

The study findings revealed that stigmatization and peer teasing was one of the challenges faced by teenage mothers while at school. Teenage mothers reported pervasive stigma and teasing from peers, teachers, and community members upon returning to school, which undermined their self-esteem and sense of belonging. These findings resonate with contemporary studies in Ghana and other African by Moganedi and Mudau (2024) and Stephen et al (2025) whose findings revealed that stigma manifested through labeling, social isolation, and derogatory comments, contributing to psychological distress and educational disengagement. These dynamics echo Twalo (2024), who observed that in emotionally unresponsive school environments, adolescent mothers often internalize stress, leading to disengagement, absenteeism, and poorer academic performance. Evidence from Lusaka also indicates that stigmatizing attitudes from both peers and teachers reinforce a school climate that is hostile for teenage mothers, advancing internalized shame and reinforcing stereotypes of immorality (Ndabala, 2025). Such social exclusionary practices reinforce marginalization and signal that the school environment is not fully inclusive of learners with parenting responsibilities. Beyond emotional harm, stigma materially affects school participation by creating an environment where teenage mothers may avoid interaction, internalize shame, or withdraw from classroom engagement. Consequently, there is a critical need for school-based anti-stigma interventions and peer sensitization programs to foster a more supportive and respectful learning environment.

Childcare obligations also emerged as a significant barrier to consistent school attendance, with many young mothers missing classes to care for their infants, attend health appointments, or manage household responsibilities. This aligns with Nkwemu et al. (2019) study which showed that adolescent motherhood imposes competing time demands that negatively affect school engagement and continuity. The dual burden of schooling and caregiving often led to chronic absenteeism, which in turn compromised learners' academic performance and increased risk of dropout. In Lusaka, narratives from young mothers reveal that balancing childcare schedules with rigid school timetables results in chronic absenteeism, especially when childcare support is unavailable or unaffordable (Ndabala, 2025). Systematic reviews show that absenteeism due to childcare is a recurring theme in sub-Saharan Africa, reflecting broader structural gaps that fail to accommodate the dual roles

of motherhood and schooling (Stephen et al., 2025). Maluli and Bali (2014) content that teenage motherhood goes with a double responsibility both as a mother and as a learner, thereby making it a challenge to fully meet academic requirements. These disruptions often lead to academic backlogs and stress, further jeopardizing school completion prospects. Addressing such structural constraints requires coordinated interventions that provide childcare support, flexible scheduling, and school-based maternal resources to sustain teenage mothers' participation in education.

The study further found that economic burdens and lack of material support as another challenge faced by teenage mothers at school. The economic strain was a recurrent theme, with teenage mothers frequently citing costs associated with transportation, school supplies, and infant care as deterrents to regular attendance and full participation. In contexts of pervasive poverty, the additional financial demands of motherhood exacerbated existing educational inequities, often forcing families to prioritize scarce resources away from schooling. This finding correspond with previous studies in sub-Saharan Africa which highlighted that lack of financial support not only hinders attendance but also limits access to learning resources that are foundational for academic success (Chavula et al., 2025; Stephen et al., 2025). Similarly, Msiko et al (2025) found that adolescent mothers often shoulder financial responsibilities for childcare, school fees, uniforms, and learning materials, exacerbating socioeconomic challenges. As a result, the financial strain results in irregular attendance, school dropouts, or compromises in basic needs such as nutrition and transportation. The observed economic burden underscores the importance of financial assistance programs such as targeted scholarships, conditional cash transfers, and supply subsidies to alleviate the double pressure of education and parenting. Without such supports, teenage mothers are likely to remain disproportionately excluded from educational attainment.

Academic Performance of Teenage Mothers

In terms of academic performance, the results showed that teenage mothers have experienced declining academic performance due to divided attention. Many participants reported that balancing childcare and schooling divided their attention, resulting in reduced focus, fatigue, and declining academic performance. This finding parallels previous research by Moganedi & Mudau (2024) which showed that teenage mothers often struggle academically when navigating parenting and learning concurrently, as the cognitive and emotional load of caregiving competes with academic demands. Studies of adolescent learners in sub-Saharan Africa note that the dual demands of motherhood and schooling correlate with lower grades and incomplete coursework relative to peers without caregiving burdens (Stephen et al., 2025). These findings are consistent with broader qualitative evidence indicating that mothers frequently miss lessons due to childcare needs, which creates gaps in learning and heightens anxiety about falling behind academically (Msiko et al., 2025). This divided attention can also impair participation in class, group work, and examinations, amplifying academic inequalities. Absenteeism linked to caregiving further compounds this issue, leading to gaps in learning that bear directly on classroom achievement and examination outcomes. The psychosocial stress associated with parenting also redirects cognitive and emotional energy away from academic tasks, highlighting the interdependence of wellbeing and scholastic engagement. Hence, educational interventions should address not only academic remediation but also psychosocial support to enhance teenage mothers' capacity to engage effectively with their coursework.

Despite initial academic setbacks, some young mothers described a gradual improvement in academic performance over time as they developed coping strategies and established new routines that balanced schooling and caregiving. This resilience trajectory reflects the dynamic nature of adolescent adaptation, wherein consistent engagement, social support, and personal determination facilitated academic stabilization. This finding concurs with Groves et al. (2022) previous study from Southern African contexts which corroborates this pattern, showing that adolescent mothers who receive sustained support and create effective time-management strategies can improve educational outcomes over time. Longitudinal evidence suggests that as young mothers establish routines and access support networks; academic performance may stabilize or improve over time (Haipinge & Namakula, 2025). Such trajectories indicate that early struggles do not irrevocably determine academic failure; rather, targeted support mechanisms can facilitate academic recovery. These improvement narratives challenge deficit framings and emphasize adaptability and strength within this population. Educational stakeholders should leverage this resilience by providing structured supports that encourage persistence and celebrate incremental academic gains.

The study also found that the quality of the home environment emerged as a critical determinant of academic success, with supportive households promoting study routines and emotional wellbeing, while unstable or unsupportive homes contributed to distraction and school disengagement. This resonates with previous study by Stephen et al (2025) which found that familial attitudes, availability of a quiet study space, and emotional encouragement are central to learners' academic resilience. Where families actively engaged in homework, offered childcare assistance, or provided constructive affirmation, teenage mothers were more likely to maintain academic focus and perform better. Conversely, homes marked by conflict, economic hardship, or low educational expectations impeded school progress. Therefore, family-centered interventions that foster positive home learning environments and parental involvement are vital for improving teenage mothers' academic trajectories.

Support Systems in Schools

The study found that although some teenage mothers experienced supportive teachers or administrators, many reported limited formal support mechanisms in their schools. This gap left learners to navigate the challenges of motherhood largely independently, contributing to feelings of isolation and academic struggle. This finding is supported by the previous study from Ghana and South Africa by Dorsah et al (2024) which highlighted inadequate institutional supports such as counseling services, flexible timelines, or academic catch-up programs that could mitigate these challenges. In the absence of structured supports, teenage mothers often rely on informal networks rather than systematic school resources. Similarly, in Zambia, stakeholders confirm that while guidance offices exist, there are few structured resources specifically designed to facilitate teenage mothers' school participation and academic success (Ndabala, 2025). This gap in school-based support contributes to feelings of isolation and neglect, where adolescent mothers struggle to balance academic expectations with their caregiving responsibilities without institutional accommodation. These findings suggest that without intentional policy and programmatic action within schools, teenage mothers remain marginalized within educational systems that are not fully designed to meet their needs.

Participants also noted the absence of structured educational programs tailored to the unique needs of teenage mothers, such as alternative class schedules or integrated parenting and academic curricula. Unlike general student support frameworks, there were few programs recognizing the dual role of learner and caregiver. This omission is consistent with previous study by Dorsah et al (2024) which calls for differentiated pedagogical and programmatic designs that accommodate parenting responsibilities without penalizing academic progress. Evidence from comparative studies in sub-Saharan Africa highlights that while some schools attempt informal support; there is a lack of standardized programs that integrate academic flexibility, childcare services, and psychosocial reinforcement (Mwakililo, 2025). Qualitative accounts also reveal that teenage mothers are often excluded from extracurricular activities, catch-up classes, or mentorship opportunities, thereby reinforcing their marginalization (Munkoyo et al., 2024). The lack of structured supports not only impedes retention but also signals a systemic undervaluation of teenage mothers within the education sector. Schools and ministries of education should consider developing targeted programs that explicitly support teenage mothers' educational journeys.

Furthermore, the study found that there is lack of teacher training on handling teenage mothers at school. Many teachers were described as ill-prepared to address the specific needs of pregnant and parenting learners, sometimes reacting with judgment rather than empathy. Similar evidence from Eswatini and other African settings reveals a widespread lack of teacher awareness of re-entry policies and supportive pedagogies, limiting their capacity to foster inclusive classrooms (Thwala et al., 2021). Similarly, Guardian Report (2024) indicates that educators frequently lack training in adolescent motherhood issues, leading to insensitive responses, punitive attitudes, or failure to provide needed accommodations. For example, in Tanzania, gaps in teacher training have been identified as barriers to inclusive implementation of re-entry policies, resulting in persistent stigma and inadequate emotional support for young mothers (Guardian Report, 2024). Such training deficits contribute to hostile school climates and undermine adolescent mothers' confidence and academic performance. Without specialized training, teachers may unintentionally perpetuate stigma or fail to provide essential academic support, further disadvantaging teenage mothers. Educators need professional development focused on inclusive practices, sensitivity training, and strategies for supporting learners balancing parenthood and education. Such

teacher training is fundamental to transforming school climates into nurturing spaces that affirm all learners' dignity and potential.

Participants highlighted significant gaps in guidance and counseling services, with few schools offering reliable psychosocial support critical for navigating the emotional complexities of teenage motherhood. Guidance counselors, when available, were often overstretched or not trained in adolescent parent-specific issues, limiting their effectiveness. This deficiency mirrors previous study by Nkwemu et al (2019) who in their study found that schools frequently lack comprehensive counseling frameworks for parenting adolescents. Adequate counseling is essential not just for academic support but for mental health, decision-making, and resilience building. These findings are consistent with Mwalongo's (2023) analysis, which highlighted policy-practice gaps in Tanzanian secondary schools, and UNICEF's (2022) broader concerns regarding limited institutional preparedness to accommodate re-entering student mothers. Similar results were obtained by Grant and Hallman's (2008) study in South Africa, which underscored the importance of institutional provisions such as flexible timetables, counselling services, and non-discriminatory environments for the retention and success of adolescent mothers. The lack of these provisions in Zambian schools, as revealed in this study, points to a broader systemic failure to accommodate the unique needs of young mothers re-entering the education system. Strengthening school counseling systems, including targeted training and resource allocation, is therefore paramount to supporting teenage mothers holistically.

Family and Community Support

In terms of family and community support, many teenage mothers identified strong emotional and practical support from their mothers and siblings as a key factor enabling school continuation. Such familial backing included childcare assistance, encouragement to persevere, and help with domestic duties, facilitating better school engagement. This finding is consistent with previous literature by Stephen et al (2025) which showed that positive family relationships serve as protective factors that buffer against academic disengagement and psychological stress among adolescent mothers. When close family members actively participate in childcare and education support, young mothers are better positioned to manage dual roles without overwhelming stress. Referencing a similar program in Australia, Subban et al. (2022) tell a success story of teen parents having been taken care of through a non-judgmental education system with add on activities which creates and encourages the young parents to become involved in life outside the classroom. These findings underscore the importance of family inclusion in interventions aimed at supporting teenage mothers' educational persistence.

A pervasive theme was the lack of involvement or financial support from the child's father, which intensified economic pressures and emotional strain on teenage mothers. This aligns with previous research by Stephen et al (2025) which documented absent paternal support as a contributor to socioeconomic vulnerability for adolescent mothers, often forcing them to rely solely on maternal kin for sustenance and childcare. This finding concur with Oloo (2025) study from Kenya which reveals that among families caring for adolescent mothers and their babies, supportive male figures are markedly rare, placing disproportionate responsibility on female family members and the young mothers themselves. This lack of paternal involvement contributes to financial insecurity and intensifies childcare challenges, often resulting in compromised school attendance and reduced academic achievement. A similar study in Cape Town, South Africa by Mukuna (2020) found that while teenage boys might accept the idea of having a child at a tender age, they also fear the responsibilities that come with parenthood. They fear losing financial support from their parents or caregivers because they would now be considered old enough to be able to support their own families. As a result of these fears, upon discovery of pregnancy, some boys elect to end their relationship with their young partners. The absence of paternal involvement not only limits resources but also places disproportionate caregiving responsibilities on young mothers, affecting their schooling and wellbeing. Recognizing the multi-actor nature of support systems, interventions should consider strategies that engage fathers and wider family networks in shared responsibility for childcare and education support.

Furthermore, faith communities emerged as significant sources of emotional and social support for some teenage mothers, offering a sense of belonging, spiritual encouragement, and sometimes practical assistance. This form of social capital has been documented in a study across sub-Saharan Africa by Stephen et al (2025) where

religious institutions often act as informal support networks for vulnerable learners. Religious support can reinforce positive self-identity, instil hope, and provide contextually meaningful narratives around resilience and purpose. This finding concur with Mukwato et al (2017) who found that teen mothers regarded prayer as the assurance of the strongest motivation and possibility of remaining in or returning to school. If young mothers consider prayer a useful coping strategy, policymakers should consider its inclusion to devise strategies for changing traditional perspectives. Teenage motherhood and schooling responsibilities cannot be met by the individual on their own but must be shared by all those with, or without, a voice to bring about change in society. However, the influence of religion can be ambivalent: while some faith communities promote acceptance and support, others may reinforce moral judgments about teenage pregnancy. Engaging faith leaders in sensitization and supportive programming could thus enhance community-based support for teenage mothers.

Treatment by Family and Community Members

Regarding the treatment of teenage mothers by family and community members, the study revealed that teenage mothers had received positive encouragement from some family members. Beyond immediate caregivers, some extended family members provided encouragement and advocacy, reinforcing young mothers' educational goals. This aligns with previous studies by Stephen et al (2025) which showed that broader familial encouragement contributes substantially to adolescents' educational resilience and persistence. Positive family narratives can counterbalance community stigma and create micro-environments where childbearing does not signal social exclusion. As noted by Mutua and Wambiya (2023) in the Kenyan context, it is not merely the existence of support that matters, but how it is perceived. In this study, informal gestures of empathy, such as a teacher offering encouragement or a peer checking in, often had a greater positive impact than more formal assistance delivered without sensitivity or compassion. These supportive dynamics highlight the importance of mobilizing family networks as allies in educational retention efforts for teenage mothers. Expanding family engagement through structured programs can institutionalize these positive influences.

The study also found that many teenage mothers internalized community and family judgment, experiencing feelings of shame that dampened their academic motivation and sense of self-efficacy. Internalized stigma is widely recognized in adolescent motherhood literature as a debilitating psychological effect that obstructs educational engagement and future aspirations. This internal conflict often leads to self-silencing, reduced participation in class, and in some cases, premature withdrawal from school. Previous studies focusing on stigma and mental well-being show that repeated experiences of humiliation and rejection produce feelings of unworthiness that correlate with disengagement from educational pursuits (Moganedi & Mudau, 2024). These internalized negative identities often lead teenage mothers to question their academic capabilities, withdraw from classroom participation, or even consider dropping out. The psychological impact of shame thus represents a silent but potent barrier to educational success. Interventions must therefore address not only external support but also psycho-emotional healing to rebuild confidence and academic motivation among young mothers. School counseling services and community sensitization could play key roles in mitigating internalized stigma.

Additionally, participants frequently identified male parents and community elders as particularly judgmental, often reinforcing normative discourses that link motherhood with moral failure. Such attitudes further entrench gendered expectations and blame narratives that disadvantage young mothers more harshly than their male counterparts. This dynamic is consistently reported in sub-Saharan research by Moganedi and Mudau (2024) where male figures often underscore disciplinary approaches rather than supportive engagement with adolescent mothers. The findings concur with that of Vaca (2020), who reveals that stereotypes could contribute to social isolation and have an impact on the teen mother's emotional well-being and family support. In another part of South Africa, Tembisa, Gauteng, Nkosi and Pretorius (2019) report similar cases of lack of support and discrimination of teenage mothers by their parents and teachers. Similarly, this study found self-efficacy, self-confidence, and aspirations for the future to be highly impacted, as some participants felt discouraged about continuing schooling. A study by Gatsinzi (2022) in Rwanda reveals that teenage mothers experienced psychological effects, which included feelings of shame, loneliness, lack of parental support, and hurtful words. Addressing entrenched gender norms and fostering empathy through dialogue with male community members could shift harmful perceptions and support gender-equitable educational outcomes.

Mockery and ridicule from peers and even siblings were reported as recurrent challenges that exacerbated feelings of humiliation and social isolation. Adangabe et al. (2021, p. 690) contend that "stigma is a sign of social unacceptability…The stigma attached to being a teenage mother is real and present." Peer teasing mirrors previous findings by Moganedi and Mudau (2024) who in their study found that adolescent mothers often face teasing, derogatory labeling from classmates, which fosters feelings of isolation, disruption of peer relationships, and ultimately impacts academic involvement. The school environment thus becomes not only a site of learning but also a space where social hierarchies and stigma are reproduced, affecting teenage mothers' school engagement. This ridicule can occur both within the school setting and at home, compounding psychological stress and impeding academic focus. Interventions aimed at fostering inclusive peer cultures and anti-bullying initiatives are critical for improving the schooling experience of adolescent mothers.

The study found mixed reactions from the community members towards teenage mothers. Community responses toward teenage mothers ranged from supportive acknowledgments of their educational pursuits to overt stigmatization and exclusion. This reflects the complex sociocultural terrain in which adolescent motherhood is interpreted through both moral and pragmatic lenses. While some community members rallied behind young mothers' educational aspirations, others reinforced social judgments that undermined their school participation. This finding correspond with Stephen et al (2025) reports across sub-Saharan Africa which demonstrate that community attitudes significantly shape young mothers' opportunities to remain in school inclusive communities facilitate re-engagement, while hostile environments hinder it. These mixed responses echo the broader sociological understanding that community norms and values are not static but contested, influencing how teenage mothers negotiate identity, agency, and educational participation. Similarly, Moganedi and Mudau (2024) argues that these mixed reactions highlight the need for broader community sensitization campaigns that reframe adolescent motherhood from a deficit to a context-specific challenge that education can ameliorate. Building community alliances and leveraging local leaders' influence could foster more supportive environments for teenage mothers.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the educational trajectories of teenage mothers in Lusaka District are shaped by the interaction of individual motivation, institutional capacity, and broader socio-cultural forces. While many teenage mothers return to school driven by aspirations for self-correction, financial independence, and future security, their persistence is constrained by stigma, economic hardship, childcare responsibilities, and limited institutional support. The findings show that academic performance initially declines as young mothers negotiate competing roles, but gradual improvement is possible where family encouragement, stable home environments, and supportive schooling conditions exist. However, these enabling conditions remain uneven and largely informal. Although Zambia's school re-entry policy provides a critical pathway back into education, its impact is weakened by its non-binding status and the absence of structured school-based interventions. Schools lack formal programmes, trained teachers, and adequately resourced guidance and counselling services to respond to the specific needs of teenage mothers. Consequently, responsibility for support is displaced onto families, predominantly female caregivers while fathers of children and male authority figures are frequently absent or judgmental. This institutional silence reinforces internalised shame among teenage mothers and undermines their educational motivation. Aligning with SDG 4 and SDG 5, this study underscores that educational equity for teenage mothers requires moving beyond access to sustained institutional support, legal reinforcement of re-entry policies, and coordinated action among schools, families, communities, NGOs, and the state. Without such systemic commitment, the promise of inclusive and gender-responsive education will remain unrealised.

Limitations of the study

This study has presented very important insights, but it also has several limitations. Firstly, the sample is relatively small and geographically confined to selected schools in Lusaka Districts, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions, particularly rural areas where cultural norms and educational resources differ significantly. Secondly, the study relies heavily on self-reported data from interviews which may be influenced by social desirability bias or selective recall, as participants might withhold sensitive information due to stigma and family relations. Lastly, the interviews were conducted in the English language, and this might

have impacted how the participants understood and responded to the questions as English is not their mother tongue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Strengthening the Legal and Policy Framework:** It is recommended that the school re-entry policy be transformed from a guideline into a legally binding framework, accompanied by clear implementation standards and accountability mechanisms. Such legal reinforcement would compel schools to actively accommodate teenage mothers and prevent discretionary or inconsistent enforcement.

2. **Development of Structured School-Based Support Programs:** Schools should establish structured and institutionalized support programs specifically designed for teenage mothers. These programs may include flexible timetabling, academic catch-up initiatives, on-site or linked childcare services, and psychosocial support structures.

3. **Capacity Building for Teachers and Guidance Counsellors:** There is a need for systematic training of teachers and guidance counsellors on gender-sensitive, inclusive, and trauma-informed approaches to supporting teenage mothers. Professional development programs should equip educators with skills to address stigma, manage classroom dynamics, and provide appropriate academic and emotional support.

4. **Enhanced Family and Community Engagement:** Community sensitization initiatives should be implemented to address stigma and judgment directed at teenage mothers. These initiatives should target parents, guardians, religious leaders, and community stakeholders, with particular emphasis on engaging male parents and partners.

5. **Multi-Sectoral Collaboration and Resource Mobilization:** Effective support for teenage mothers requires coordinated action among government ministries, non-governmental organizations, faith-based institutions, and local communities. It is recommended that formal partnerships be established to mobilize financial, material, and technical resources for teenage mothers' education.

6. **Direction for future Research:** Future research should expand the scope of the study to include rural and peri-urban settings in order to capture diverse sociocultural experiences of teenage mothers across Zambia. Employing mixed methods could strengthen the findings by combining rich qualitative insights with quantitative measures of academic performance and retention.

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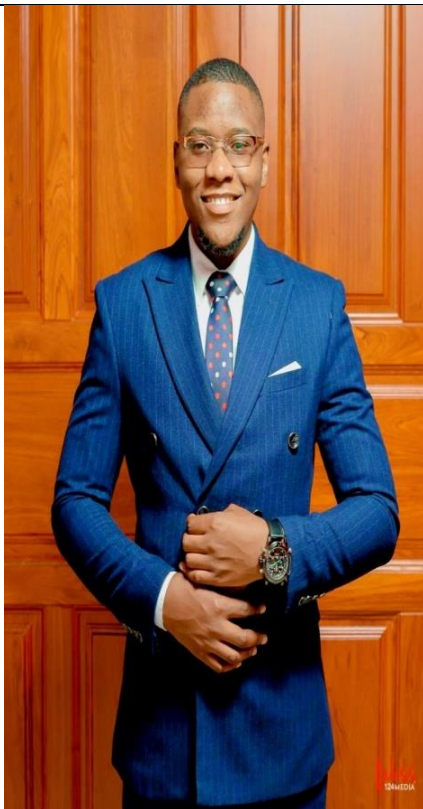
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