



# Navigating School Reintegration During Teenage Motherhood: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Reintegrated Teenage Mothers in Mazowe District

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## **DECLARATION**

I declare that this dissertation entitled “The lived Experiences of Teenage Mothers Reintegrated into The Education System in Mazowe District”, is my own original work and has not been previously submitted, in whole and in part, for the award of any degree or qualification at any other institution of higher learning.

I further declare that all sources of information in this study have been duly acknowledged and referenced in accordance with accepted academic standards.

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Science Degree in Educational Psychology at Great Zimbabwe University.

### **DISSERTATION RELEASE FORM**

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## ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to explore the experiences of teenage mothers who have been reintegrated into the education system in Mazowe district, with the objectives of identifying support systems available for their academic progression, as well as assessing the effectiveness of these support systems in influencing the attainment of their academic goals. The study was guided by an interpretivist paradigm and adopted a phenomenological design to understand participants' personal experiences during reintegration. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis; and was analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that although reintegration policies were creating opportunities for continued education, teenage mothers in Mazowe District continued to face significant challenges, which include stigma and discrimination, financial constraints, emotional stress, childcare responsibilities and difficulties balancing academic work with parenting roles. However, participants demonstrated that resilience and determination is possible when the right kind of support is provided. The study concludes that there is need to strengthen support systems to improve teenage mothers' reintegration experiences.

*Keywords: Teenage Mothers, Reintegration, Lived Experiences, Education System.*

### ACRONYMS

CAMFED	:	Campaign for Female Education
FGD	:	Focus Group Discussion
G&C	:	GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING
MoPSE	:	Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education
NGO	:	Non-Governmental Organization
TMRSM	:	Teenage Mothers' Reintegration Support Model
UNESCO	:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	:	United Nations Children's Fund

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## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

### ➤ *Introduction*

The chapter covers the background to the study, statement of the problem, justification of the study, aims and objectives of the research, research questions, delimitations of the study and definition of key terms.

### ➤ *Background of the Study*

The right to education is recognized as a fundamental human right internationally, regionally, and locally. However, the upsurge of teenage pregnancies has been acting as a major drawback to achieving this right in many young girls worldwide (UNICEF, 2020). In an effort to address this challenge, global education actors like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) explicitly highlighted the need to protect girls' schooling after pregnancy, stating reintegration of teenage mothers as both a rights issue and a practical priority for achieving gender-equitable access to education (Mwikililo, 2025). In pursuit of this agenda, re-entry policies have been promoted internationally as a way to reduce school dropout, protect girls from long-term exclusion, and mitigate adverse social and economic consequences of adolescent childbirth.

Historically, teenage pregnancies were treated as a disciplinary matter in which pregnant girls were expected to leave school, with an option to further their studies through non-formal education. In a bid to address this irregularity, global efforts aligned with UNESCO advocated for inclusive education policies to allow pregnant learners to continue with their educational trajectories despite a change in their status. High income countries like the United States began to challenge formal expulsions of pregnant girls through the Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibits discrimination against pregnant and parenting students by ensuring that they have access to formal education (Mwakililo, 2025). Similarly, Britain enacted the policy to allow expectant teenage learners in school through its 1944 British Education Act. The Act promoted the right to education for all, including teenage mothers despite their motherhood status (Chiyota, 2020).

Regionally, several African countries adopted the same re-entry policies to facilitate the return of teenage mothers to formal schooling. However, Mwikililo (2025) highlights that although global advocacy efforts have been made to promote these inclusive education policies, implementation gaps persist, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, Zambia continues to face persistent challenges of young women marrying before the age of 18. Kenya also battles with the same challenge despite implementing the "return to school" policy in 1994. Kinya & Daniel (2025) postulate that, in Sub-Saharan Africa, approximately 15% of teenage girls between 15-19 have given birth, and 3% are expecting their first child. This shows that, while re-entry policies represent progressive shifts from punitive approaches, empirical studies reveal uneven enforcement at school level. Teachers' attitudes, peer perceptions, and community norms significantly shape reintegration experiences (Mwikililo, 2025).

While these policies represent progressive shifts from punitive approaches, empirical studies reveal uneven enforcement at school level. Teachers' attitudes, peer perceptions, and community norms significantly shape reintegration experiences (Mwikililo, 2025).

In Zimbabwe, teenage pregnancy has been identified as a factor contributing to school dropout among girls, particularly in rural areas (Mangwiro & Chinamasa, 2023). Policy reforms over the past decade reflect increasing recognition of girls' right to education. The Education amendment Act (2020) explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of pregnancy and affirms learners' right to remain in or return to school after childbirth. However, studies conducted by Muzingili, Muntanga & Zvada, (2024); Chidarikire & Saruchera (2025) & Hofisi & Hungwe (2025) have reported how a number of teenage girls are dropping out of school due to early pregnancies and marriages; and how they are struggling to navigate the challenges of balancing education and parenthood when reintegrated into the education system.

A report by Change Radio Zimbabwe of September 6, 2024 presented a report by Primary and Secondary Education Minister Hon. T. Moyo, indicating that a total of 4557 girls dropped out of school due to pregnancy. Out of these, 3 942 were from rural schools while 615 were reported in urban areas. In addition, the Herald of 30 July, 2025 reported that 1 154 girls aged 15 -19 in Muzarabani district booked for antenatal care in 2023, with some as young as 10 years. This alarming dropout rate is not just an educational issue, but a crisis that perpetuates a vicious cycle of poverty, especially in rural areas.

While official policy promotes re-entry, research suggests that stigma, exclusion and inconsistent administrative procedures continue to shape the educational experiences of teenage mothers. There is therefore need to inquire how these policies are being implemented at ground level, and what their impact is.

Reintegration extends beyond physical readmission. It encompasses academic adjustment, physical well-being, peer acceptance, and sustained participation. Muzingili et al (2024) argue that, meaningful reintegration requires supportive school climates, flexible policies, teacher sensitivity, and accessible counselling services.

Adolescent motherhood often results in dual identities, as learners and caregivers. Balancing childcare responsibilities with academic demands can lead to absenteeism, fatigue and reduced academic performance. However, some studies highlight some positive outcomes, including increased motivation, strengthened future orientation, and enhanced resilience as a result of motherhood.

Early childbearing poses a serious threat to young girls' healthy development, negatively impacting on their education and livelihoods. Studies have shown that early child bearing is a major setback to achieving the global agenda for ensuring inclusive equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 (Muzingili, Muntanga and Zvada, 2024). According to UNICEF (2024) many girls who become pregnant are pressured or forced to drop out of school, due to stigmatization and reduced status, impacting their educational and employment prospects.

Although teenage students now have the privilege to continue with their academic education in Zimbabwe, national assessments and studies point to persistent implementation gaps, highlighting that many eligible girls do not return to school, and those who do often face stigma, limited counselling and academic catch-up support (Chidarikire & Saruchera, 2025).

It is against this background that the researcher found it necessary to investigate the experiences of teenage mothers reintegrated into formal education system in Mazowe district, with the intention of designing intervention strategies to mitigate the barriers to effective implementation of the re-entry policy. The mere fact that a child of 15 years is expected to carry out multiple roles, calls for real support from others in the community.

#### ➤ *Statement of the Problem*

Despite the introduction of Zimbabwe's re-entry policy, which legally permits pregnant learners and teenage mothers to return to school after childbirth, the actual reintegration of these learners remains inconsistent and inadequately supported countrywide (Chidarikire & Saruchera, 2025). Research has revealed that teenage mothers continue to experience significant academic, psychosocial, and structural challenges during the reintegration period. Most reported challenges include stigma from peers and teachers, limited family and institutional support, economic hardships, childcare responsibilities, and inadequate counselling and follow-up at school level.

Although national policy frameworks emphasize gender equity and the right to education, implementation gaps result in varied experiences and outcomes for teenage mothers (Homela & Chinyoka, 2023). Existing studies on re-entry policy in Zimbabwe tend to focus on policy analysis, the prevalence of teenage pregnancy, or school-level attitudes; yet, there is limited empirical research that reveals the lived experiences, voices, and day-to-day realities of teenage mothers who have actually returned to school. This lack of context-specific evidence makes it difficult for educators, policymakers, and social support systems in Mazowe District to design interventions that effectively address the unique barriers faced by these learners.

Consequently, there is need to investigate how teenage mothers in Mazowe District experience reintegration, the forms of support available to them, and the challenges that continue to hinder their educational progression. Understanding these experiences is crucial for enhancing policy implementation, refining school-based support systems, and informing locally relevant strategies that promote equitable access to education for all learners.

#### ➤ *Justification of the Study*

Given the evolving policy landscape in Zimbabwe and the broader regional efforts to promote inclusive education, there is need to examine whether reintegration initiatives translate to meaningful participation and academic continuity for teenage mothers.

This study is grounded in the premise that educational inclusion must be evaluated not only through enrollment statistics, but through lived experiences. By assessing the voices of teenage mothers, the research seeks to analyze the complexities of teenage mothers' educational experiences. Such understanding is critical for developing supportive school environments, and enhancing gender-responsive educational strategies.

While various studies and reports focus on policy analysis, the prevalence of teenage pregnancies and the challenges faced by teenage mothers in completing secondary education, there is limited research that reveals actual voices and day-to-day realities of teenage mothers (Homela & Chinyoka, 2023; Mzingili et al, 2024).

By delving into this subject, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of complexities surrounding teenage motherhood and their education prospects, highlighting the urgent need for targeted support system that enables them to achieve their academic goals and improve their overall quality of life. Ultimately, documenting these experiences promote resilience in adolescent mothers.

➤ *Aims of the Research*

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of teenage mothers reintegrated into the formal education system.

➤ *Objectives of the Study*

- To identify the challenges faced by teenage mothers when pursuing their academic goals.
- To examine the copying strategies employed by teenage mothers when pursuing their academic goals.
- To identify support systems available to promote academic progression of teenage mothers.
- To assess the effectiveness of available support systems in influencing academic progression of teenage mothers.

➤ *Research Questions*

The research will be guided by the following research questions:

- What challenges are faced by teenage mothers when pursuing academic goals?
- Which copying strategies do teenage mothers employ when pursuing their academic goals?
- What support systems are available for teenage mothers to facilitate their academic progression?
- How effective are the available support systems in influencing academic progression of teenage mothers?

➤ *Delimitations*

This study is geographically limited to Mazowe District in Mashonaland Central Province, Zimbabwe. It focuses on pregnant teenage students and adolescent mothers between 13 and 18 years; who have been reintegrated into secondary formal education institutions, within the district. The study includes selected schools and educators directly involved in the reintegration process.

Conceptually, the study is limited to examining the interplay between individual, social and institutional factors influencing the successful reintegration of teenage mothers into the education system. It is grounded on Ecological Systems Theory and Resiliency Theory, focusing specifically on how these multi-level factors shape educational persistence and outcomes.

➤ *Definition of Key Terms*

The term lived experiences in this study will be used to refer to personal first-hand accounts and perceptions that teenage mothers have as they pursue their academic studies.

The term teenage mother is used to refer to a girl between 13 and 18 years of age, who is pregnant or has had a baby. This designation was made as it constitutes the legal age of majority in Zimbabwe.

The terms teen mother and adolescent mother are used synonymously with “teenage mother”, referring to pregnant teenage student or one who has had a baby.

The word reintegration is used to refer to the return of teenage girl into the formal education system after childbirth.

Education system in this research refers to formal institutionalized learning, at secondary level.

➤ *Chapter Summary*

The chapter covers the background to the study, statement of the problem, justification of the study, aims and objectives of the research, delimitations of the study and definition of key terms.

## CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Chapter Overview

This chapter provides the direct and indirect factors that impact teenage mothers' ability to realize their full potential in formal academic set-ups. These will be guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, and Resilience Theory, as they assume that the experiences of teenage mothers in the education systems are shaped by multiple interacting factors operating at macro, meso and micro-levels. These factors can either act as barriers or facilitators to successful re-integration and influence educational and psychosocial outcomes.

### B. Conceptual Framework

Teenage pregnancy remains a significant educational and social challenge, particularly in developing countries. Traditionally, pregnancy resulted in permanent school dropout for affected girls. However, the introduction of education re-entry policies has enabled teenage mothers to return to school after giving birth. However, many teenage mothers continue to face academic, psychosocial, economic, and institutional challenges that affect their successful reintegration and retention in the education system (Chiyota & Marishane, 2020). Understanding these setbacks helps to identify strategies to support their educational participation.

#### ➤ *Challenges Faced by Teenage Mothers in Pursuing Educational Goals*

Teenage motherhood remains a significant educational concern, particularly in marginalized areas where poverty limits educational access and support. Although policy frameworks in many countries increasingly recognize the right of teenage mothers to continue with formal education, this right is often characterized by complex and interrelated challenges (Chiyota & Marishane, 2020). These challenges are usually faced at individual and institutional levels and shape teenage mothers' educational outcomes.

- *Childcare Responsibilities and Role Conflict*

One of the most pervasive challenges faced by teenage mothers is the conflict between maternal responsibilities and academic demands (Chidarikire & Saruchera, 2025). Early motherhood introduces intensive caregiving obligations that compete directly with schooling requirements such as regular attendance, independent study, and assessment preparation. In agreement, Muzingili et al (2024) highlights that the absence of affordable and accessible childcare services exacerbates teenage reintegration challenges, often resulting in irregular school attendance and reduced academic engagement. Several studies highlight that teenage mothers are compelled to negotiate multiple, and sometimes incompatible, roles – student, mother, and in some cases income earner; leading to chronic stress and educational discontinuity.

- *Socio-Economic Constraint*

Socio-economic deprivation constitutes a critical barrier to the educational participation of teenage mothers. Many come from already disadvantaged households, and pregnancy often intensifies financial vulnerability (Chiyota & Marishane, 2020). Costs associated with education such as, uniforms, learning materials, and transportation, become increasingly difficult to meet, particularly when familial support diminishes following pregnancy. Muzingili (2024) points out that economic hardships may force teenage mothers into early informal employment, thereby reducing the time and energy available for academic pursuits. Structural poverty thus, intersects with early motherhood to perpetuate cycles of educational exclusion.

- *Stigma, Discrimination, and Social Exclusion*

Social stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy remains deeply entrenched in many communities and educational institutions. Several studies highlight that teenage mothers are frequently subjected to moral judgment, labeling, and discriminatory practices by peers, educators, and community members (Muzingili et al., 2024; Malatji et al., 2024; Issa & Temu, 2023., Chidarikire & Saruchera, 2025). Such stigma not only undermines their sense of belonging within the school environment but also negatively affects self-esteem and academic self-efficacy. In some cases, discriminatory attitudes translate into subtle institutional barriers, including lack of teacher support, exclusion from leadership roles and limited participation in extracurricular activities (Muzingili, 2024). These experiences of social exclusion significantly hinder sustained educational engagement.

- *Psychological and Emotional Challenges*

The psychological burden associated with teenage motherhood poses another significant challenge to educational attainment. Teenage mothers often experience heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression arising from unplanned pregnancy, disrupted life aspirations and social rejections (Chidarikire & Saruchera 2025). The emotional demands of parenting at a young age, combined with academic pressure, may impair concentration, motivation, cognitive functioning. Therefore, there is need for adequate psychosocial support mechanisms so that these mental health challenges may not lead to disengagement from schooling and increased risk of dropout.

- *Health-Related Challenges*

Kurevakwesu et al (2025) postulate that health concerns, particularly those related to pregnancy, childbirth, and postnatal recovery, can disrupt teenage mothers' educational continuity. Complications such as fatigue, post-partum illness, and reproductive

health challenges may necessitate prolonged absences from school. In addition, Chiyota & Marishane (2020) point out that the health needs of infants, including frequent illness and medical appointments, further interrupt learning routines. These health-related disruptions are often compounded by limited access to adolescent-friendly health services and inadequate coordination between health and education systems (Muzingili et al, 2024).

- *Institutional and Policy-Level Barriers*

Malajti et al (2023) note that despite the existence of re-entry policies in many education systems, institutional barriers continue to limit effective reintegration of teenage mothers into formal schooling. Schools may lack clear implementation guidelines, flexible learning arrangements, or staff trained to support young mothers. Rigid school schedules, inflexible assessment practices, and punitive disciplinary cultures often fail to accommodate the unique needs of teenage mothers (Chidarikire & Saruchera, 2025). Furthermore, inadequate coordination between education, social welfare, and health sectors weakens the support structures necessary for sustained educational participation.

- *Intersectionality and Structural Inequality*

According to Mmamore (2021) the challenges faced by teenage mothers are not uniform but are shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, socio-economic status, rural-urban location, and cultural norms. In addition, a study conducted by (Mangwiro & Chinamasa, 2023) points out that many rural students, including teenage mothers often face compounded disadvantages due to limited educational infrastructure and social services. An intersectional lens, therefore, highlights how early motherhood interacts with boarder structural inequalities to systematically restrict educational opportunities.

In summary, teenage mothers encounter multifaceted and interrelated challenges that significantly impaired their pursuit of educational goals. These challenges extend beyond individual circumstances to encompass structural, institutional, and socio-cultural dimensions. Addressing the educational needs of teenage mothers therefore requires holistic and context-sensitive interventions, including supportive school policies, accessible childcare, psychosocial services, and community level stigma reduction. Such comprehensive approaches are essential to promote educational equity and break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

- *Coping Strategies Employed by Teenage Mothers Pursuing Academic Goals*

Teenage motherhood presents complex challenges that intersects with educational attainment. However, despite the challenges, many teenage mothers demonstrate resilience, agency and coping strategies that facilitates their engagement with education. These include Time management and structured planning, Social Support Networks, and emotional wellbeing (Malatji et al, 2023).

- *Time Management and Structured Planning*

Resilience among teenage mothers is critical in navigating through the challenges of school reintegration. To this effect, teenage mothers commonly adopt rigorous time-management systems to balance caregiving and school responsibilities. A study by de Oliveira et al (2021) in Brazil, on a sample of 120 participants found that teenage mothers who develop strong management skills were 70% more likely to remain in school compared to their struggling counterparts. They were found to prioritize academic tasks based on deadlines and flexibility as well as negotiating for flexible deadlines with their educators, highlighting the need for developing strong negotiating skills.

However, not all teenagers possess resilient skills to develop coping strategies, as reflected on Zimbabwean studies by Marongedza et al (2023); Muzingili & Tarvinga (2024) and Mwinde & Muzingili (2020), who found that many teenage mothers lacked access to guidance or mentorship, leading to feelings of hopelessness and eventual dropout. This underscores the need for schools to develop effective life skills training and mentorship programs as part of their reintegration effort.

- *Emotional and Psychological Wellbeing*

Corcoran (2016) cited in Mmamore (2021) states that teenage mothers are likely to develop postpartum depression due to increased responsibilities. Emotional stability and increased mental health become crucial for teenage mothers to manage the dual pressures of education and motherhood. Studies show that positive emotional wellbeing increase resilience and academic engagement (Chigona and Chetty, 2008; Smithbattle, 2018). It is therefore imperative for teachers, family members and the entire community to promote the development of self-esteem and improved mental health state to promote resilience in teenage mothers. However, Muzingili et al (2024) in their study of how teenage mothers cope with academic goals found that, age has a bearing on resilience, with young mothers facing stigma and older ones balancing caregiving and schooling.

- *Familial Support*

Grant and Hallman (2008) highlight that lack of agency within family support systems hinders teenage mothers' long-term educational resilience, as they feel rejected and overwhelmed. The quality of interactions between family, peers and teachers also matters. For example, a study by Mutekwe (2023) in South Africa revealed that teacher attitudes significantly impact teenager's motivation, highlighting the need to reinforce sensitization programs to mitigate stigma in schools. McLeish & Redshaw (2017)

suggest that forgiving and empathetical parents reduce the impact of the horrible experiences that teenage mothers go through as in most cases the fathers of the children disappear due to increased responsibilities.

- *Support Systems Available to Teenage Mothers in Achieving Academic Goals*

Several studies highlight teenage motherhood as a significant factor influencing educational participation, retention and attainment (Marongedza et al; 2023, Muzingili et al; 2019; Chigona & Chetty; 2008). However, literature increasingly emphasizes that the presence of effective support systems for teenage mothers enhance their coping capacity and academic persistence. These systems are multidimensional, encompassing school-based, familial, community, governmental and psychosocial structures that collectively enhance their coping mechanisms.

- *School-Based Support Systems*

Educational institutions play a pivotal role in supporting teenage mothers' academic engagement. Studies indicate that schools that adopt inclusive and flexible policies are more successful in retaining young mothers (Malatji et al; 2023; Corcoran; 2020). Flexible learning arrangements, such as part time attendance, alternative education programs, distance learning and re-entry policies, allow teenage mothers to balance childcare responsibilities with academic demands. In addition, academic support services such as tutoring, remedial classes, guidance and counseling, and mentoring programs have been found to improve academic performance and self-efficacy among teenage mothers (Malatji et al; 2023).

The provision of school-based childcare services or partnerships with nearby early childhood centers increase school attendance. Access to childcare reduces absenteeism and psychological stress, thereby enhancing concentration and academic commitment. Furthermore, non-discriminatory school environments contribute positively to teenage mothers' sense of belonging and motivation to complete their education.

- *Family and Informal Support Systems*

Various studies have consistently shown that support from family is critical in shaping teenage mothers pursuing academic goals (Muzingili et al 2024; Marongedza et al: 2023; Malatji et al: 2023). Emotional encouragement, financial assistance, and practical childcare support from parents, guardians, and extended family members significantly influence teenage mothers' participation in their educational journey (Baird, 2023). Families that value education and actively assist with childcare enable teenage mothers to allocate time to academic tasks, attend classes, and prepare for assessments.

Informal support networks, including friends, peers, also play an important role in offering emotional resilience and shared experiences. Such support reduces feelings of isolation commonly associated with teenage motherhood. Mammore (2021) notes that the absence of familial support often perpetuates school dropout risks, underscoring the importance of strengthening familial engagement.

- *Community and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Support*

Community-based organizations and NGOs provide critical supplementary support, particularly in areas characterized by limited educational resources. Numerous NGOs implement initiatives targeted at enhancing girls' educational attainment and life skills development. These interventions aim to mitigate both academic and socio-economic obstacles faced by adolescent mothers (Baird; 2023).

Peer support groups facilitated by community organizations provide safe spaces for teenage mothers to share experiences, develop coping strategies, and build social capital. Muzingili (2024) suggests that participation in such groups enhances self-esteem, emotional wellbeing, and persistence in education. Community mentorship programs further expose teenage mothers to positive role models who demonstrate the compatibility of motherhood and educational success.

- *Government and Policy-Level Support*

Government interventions present a vital structural support system for teenage mothers. Policy frameworks that promote inclusive education, school re-entry after child birth, and protection from discrimination create enabling environments for academic progression. Social protection measures such as childcare subsidies, health services, and food assistance, indirectly support educational participation by alleviating teen mothers' economic pressures (Malatji et al, 2023).

Scholarship and bursaries that target vulnerable girls and young mothers increase enrolments and reduce dropout rates. Additionally, intersectoral collaboration between education, health, and social welfare departments enhances holistic support for teenage mothers, addressing both maternal and academic needs (Mmamore; 2021).

- *Psychosocial and Mental Health Support*

Muzingili et al (2024) highlights the importance of psychosocial support in assisting teenage mothers cope with academic pressures. Counseling services, whether school-based or community-provided, help teenage mothers manage stigma and anxiety,

while psychological support enhances coping skills, goal-setting abilities, and resilience, which are critical for sustained academic engagement.

Mental health interventions also contribute to improved concentration, motivation, and academic self-concept. Baird (2023) suggests that teenage mothers who access counseling and emotional support services are more likely to persist in their educational pathways than those without such support.

C. Theoretical Framework

➤ *Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979)*

According to Mmamore (2021), Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory posits that human development is influenced by a series of interconnected environmental systems, ranging from immediate environmental surroundings, to broader societal structures such as cultures. The theory places an individual at the center of the concentric circles comprising of family, school, neighborhood etc. This theory is relevant in understanding how teenage mothers’ reintegration is shaped by their surrounding social contexts. Bronfenbrenner divided the societal systems into: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, each representing different levels of environmental influences on an individual’s growth and behaviour (Mmamore; 2021).

➤ *Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory*

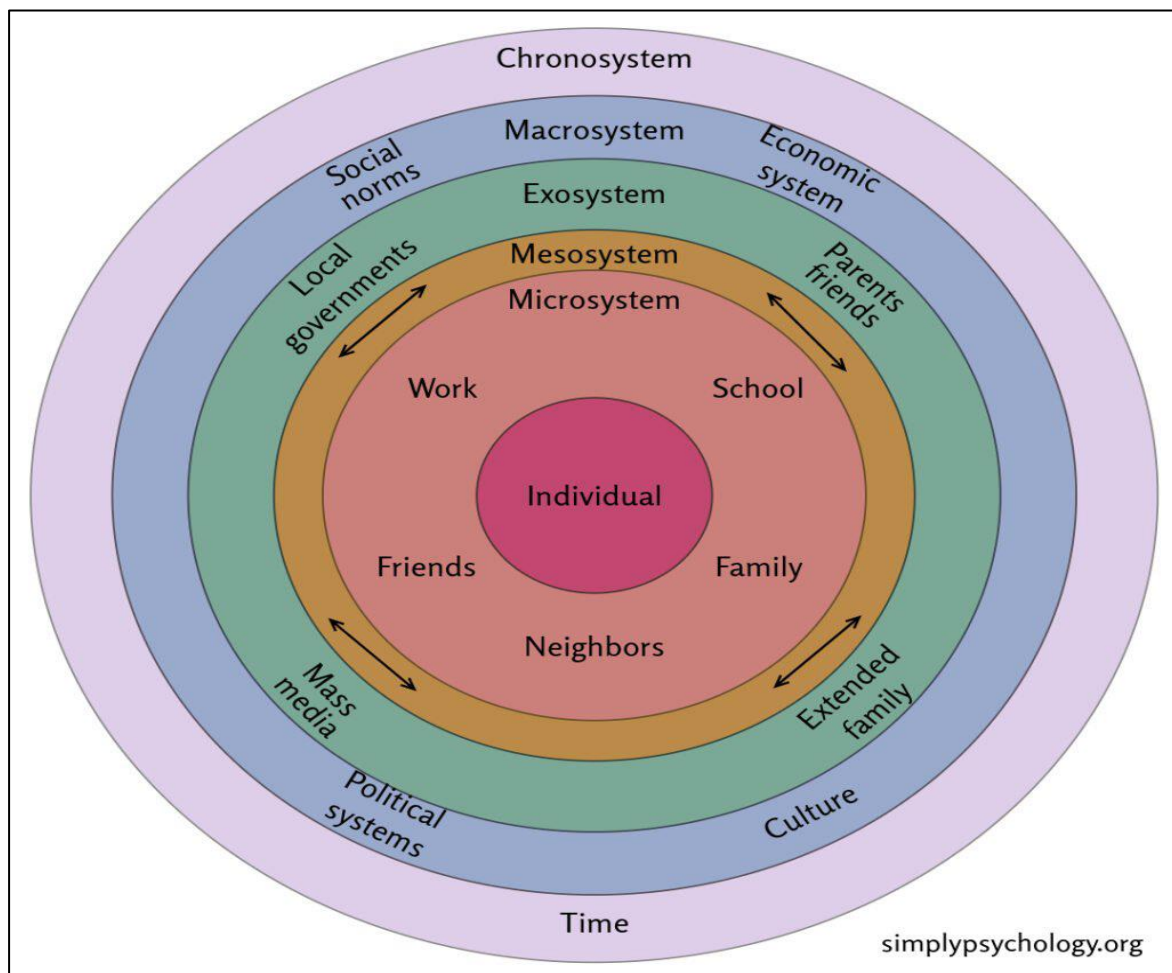


Fig 1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory  
Source: simplypsychology.org

• *Microsystem*

Bronfenbrenner, U (in Mmamore; 2021), describes the microsystem as the first and most influential level encompassing the individual’s immediate environment. Relationships in a microsystem are bi-directional, meaning other people can influence an individual to change their beliefs and actions. These include parents or partners, teachers, peers, and school administrators. This entails that supportive microsystems facilitate school attendance, emotional wellbeing and academic persistence, while unsupportive ones may lead to stigma, absenteeism and dropouts.

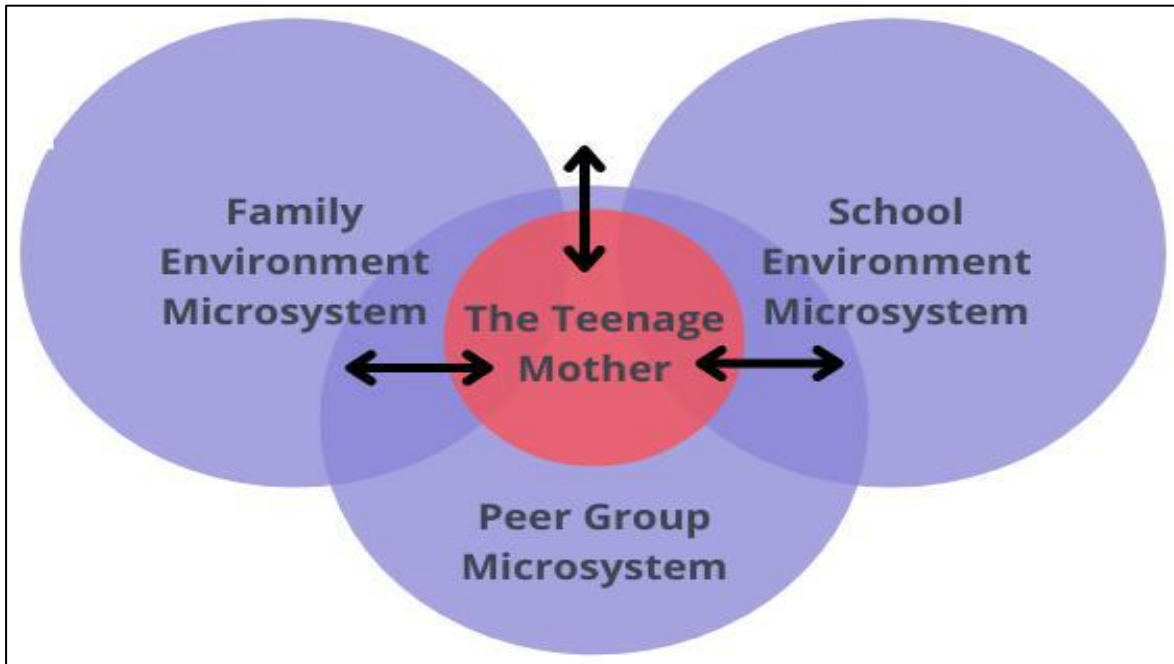


Fig 2 The Microsystem  
Source: Mmamore (2021)

- *Mesosystem*

This refers to the interactions between microsystems, such as the parent-school relationship, or coordination between school and health or social services (Crowford; 2020). These interactions do not directly affect the teenage mother; rather, they relate to the community level, impacting the reintegration of teenage mothers. Positive collaboration among these systems enhances their reintegration outcomes. The mesosystem is graphically depicted in Figure

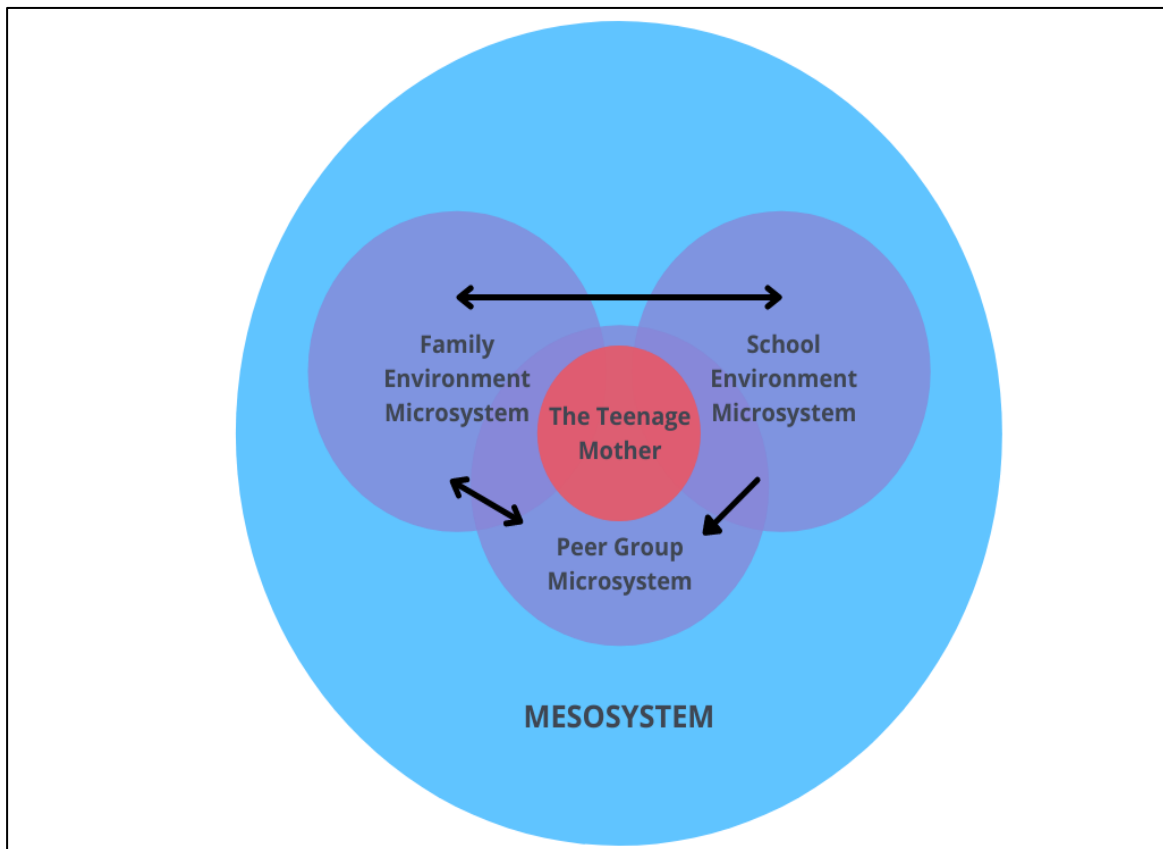


Fig 3 The Mesosystem  
Source: Mmamore (2021)

• *Exosystem*

According to Crowford (2020), exosystem includes external structures that directly affect the learner, such as; community attitudes towards teenage pregnancy and availability of social welfare services. Negative community perception may increase discrimination, while supportive services enhance retention.

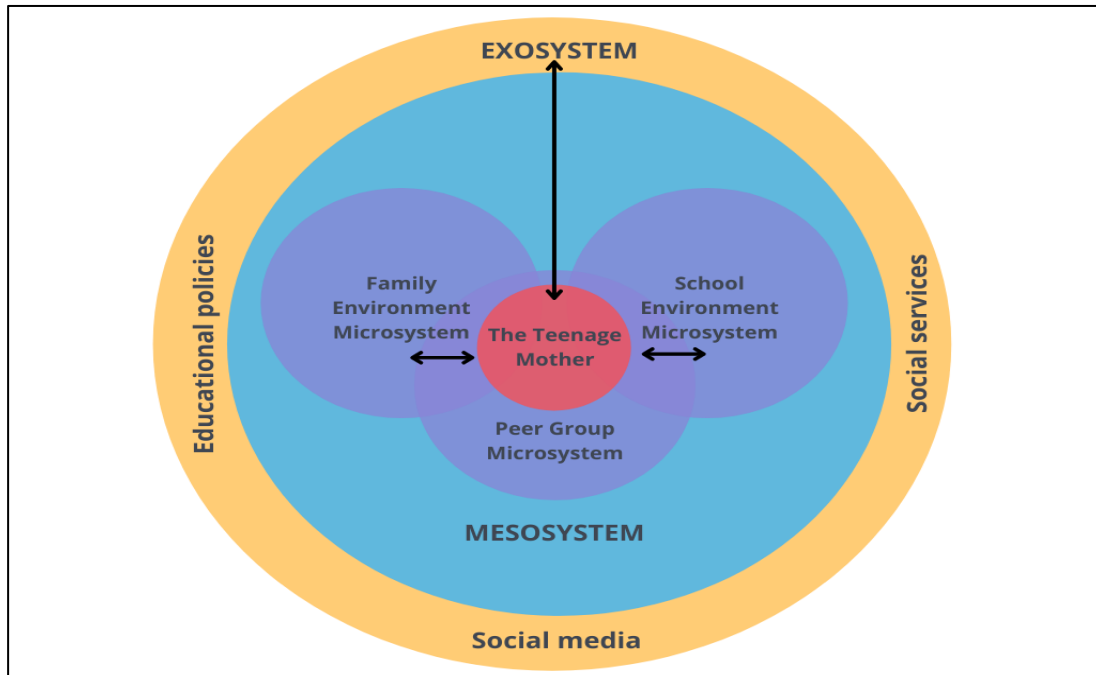


Fig 4 The Exosystem  
 Source: Mmamore (2021)

• *Macrosystem*

The macrosystem focuses on how cultural elements affect an individual’s development. It encompasses cultural norms regarding teenage pregnancies, like gender norms and education re-entry policies. In contexts where early motherhood is stigmatized, teenage mothers may face systemic barriers to education (Crowford; 2020).

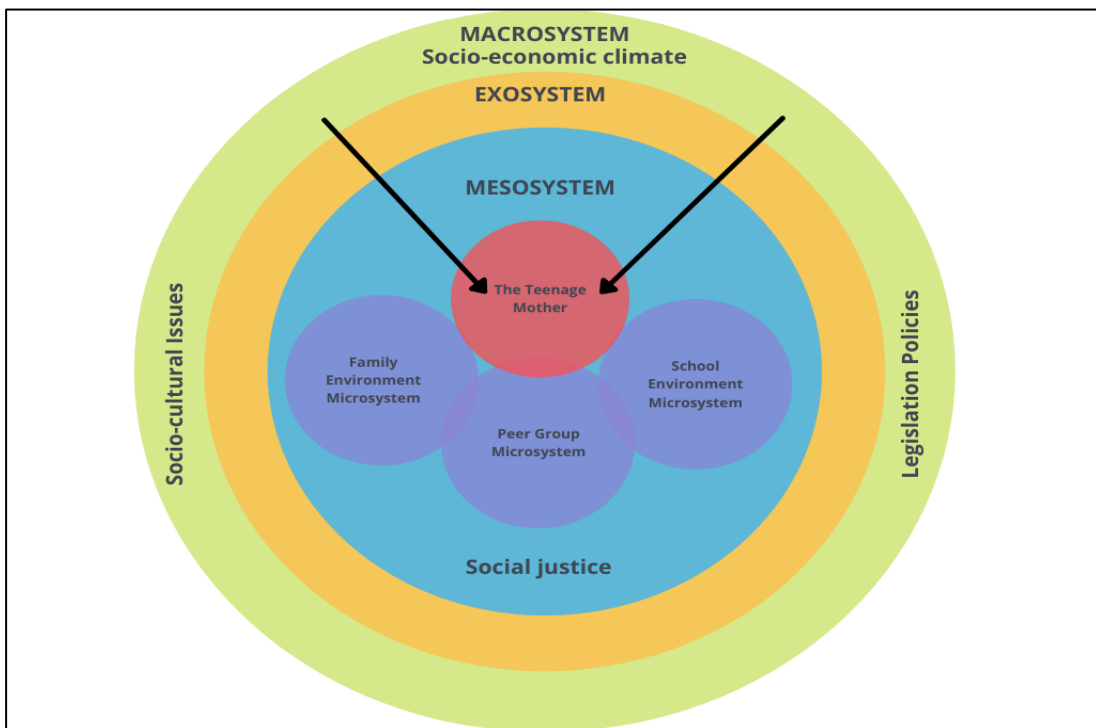


Fig 5 The Macrosystem  
 Source: Mmamore (2021)

- *Chronosystem*

This dimension considers life transitions and timing such as age and pregnancy, duration out of school, policy change over time. The timing of reintegration significantly influences academic and psychosocial adjustment.

➤ *Resilience Theory*

According to Masten (2011), resilience is the capability of an individual to deal with important threats that can undermine their expected progress and development. Resilience theory therefore, focuses on individual's capacity to adapt positively despite exposure to adversity. In the context of teenage motherhood, resilience is not conceptualized as an inherent personal trait but as a dynamic process that emerges through the interaction of risk and protective factors over time (Wiener, 2003). In that regard, teenage mothers often face multiple risk factors, such as school dropout, stigma, emotional stress, financial hardship and role conflict between motherhood and schooling. The resilience theory therefore provides a useful framework for understanding how these young mothers can overcome such difficulties in order to successfully reintegrate into the education system.

However, the theory also emphasizes the development of protective factors such as personal agency, motivation, self-efficacy and future orientation; as they assist teenage mothers to remain in school despite their adversities. These protective factors are described by Wiener (2003) as individual or environmental characteristics that evoke positive adjustment to an individual at risk. To that end, emotional regulation, problem-solving skills, and a sense of purpose have been shown to mediate the negative effects of adversity on educational outcomes.

Resilience theory also emphasizes the role of external support systems in fostering resilience. Whilst family, especially parents and guardian provide childcare assistance, emotional encouragement and financial assistance; support from teachers and peers promote an inclusive learning environment that reduces discrimination while promoting acceptance. Government policies and community programs that allow teenage mothers to return to school further strengthens their resilience (Wiener, 2003).

Furthermore, resilience theory helps to explain how teenage mothers develop coping strategies to manage stress and adversity. These include time management skills, seeking social support, problem-solving abilities, and positive self-perception. Through these strategies, teenage mothers are able to adapt to new roles while continuing their education.

In applying the resilience theory, the reintegration of teenage mothers into the education system is viewed not merely as a return to school, but as a dynamic process of growth, adaptation and empowerment. The theory shifts focus away from deficits and failure, and instead recognizes teenage mothers as capable individuals who can succeed academically when provided with appropriate support (Issa & Temu; 2023).

Overall, resilience theory provides a strong theoretical lens for understanding how teenage mothers navigate educational reintegration between personal strengths, social support, and institutional structures in shaping their educational experiences.

#### *D. Empirical Review of Related Literature*

➤ *Challenges Faced by Teenage Mothers Pursuing Academic Goals*

- *Time Management Pressure*

Teenage mothers continuing their education face complex mix of academic, social, economic, institutional and emotional challenges. These often overlap, making it difficult for them to stay in school and succeed, (Chauke, 2013). Balancing schoolwork with childcare is one of their greatest struggles reported by various researchers. A teen mother must attend classes, study, and do their homework while also feeding, caring for a baby. A study conducted in 2013 by Chauke on challenges faced by teenage mothers pursuing secondary education in Limpopo District, South Africa found that teenage mothers were struggling to take care of their babies and attending school at the same time because there were no specific people to look after the babies when they were attending school or taking the babies to the clinic when they were sick, (Chauke, 2013).

In agreement, a study carried out in Tanzania by Timothy & Juhudi (2023) on exploring the challenges faced by teenage mothers upon returning to public schools revealed that, teenage mothers often struggle with increased loads of responsibilities such as being a student and at the same time having responsibilities as a mother and daughter in the family. In addition, research conducted by Muzingili et al (2023), on pregnant and young mothers' experience of second-chance education in Zimbabwe found that being pregnant and delivering a baby entailed a significant change in duties and obligations. This results in many teenage mothers underperforming in school as they may be deprived of adequate time to study and rest.

- *Stigma and Discrimination*

Teenage mothers often face judgment from teachers, peers and community members. A study conducted by Chauke in (2013) reported that teenage mothers endured negative comments from their teachers who often reminded them that they were mothers, referring them to as "vabvana" (elderly women), making them feel inferior and not welcome in school, Chauke (2013: 64). Similar findings were reported by Muzingili et al (2024) when the conducted a study on teenage mothers' experiences on second-chance

education in Zimbabwe. The study found that teenage mothers were shunned by their schoolmates due to negativity associated with teenage pregnancies. They felt they would be judged negatively when they are paired with their pregnant friends. The study further revealed that teenage mothers endured derogatory remarks from their peers who saw them as failures and a bad influence to others, hence they did not want to be associated with them.

Similar findings were reported by (Chidarikire & Saruchera; 2025) who reported a pervasive sense of alienation and stigma associated the return of teenage mothers in Masvingo rural schools. The learners reported feelings of loneliness and fear, which resulted in reduced self-esteem and psychological wellbeing. Furthermore, a study by Chiyota (2020) on the implementation of re-entry policy for teenage mothers in Zambian secondary schools, reported that teenage mothers suffered shame and for getting pregnant and being mothers at a young age. This was alluded to by the participants as they expressed words such as “embarrassment”, “shyness” and “disgrace”, when bad examples seemed to directly refer to them and when issues of irresponsible behaviours were being discussed in class by the teachers or peers, Chiyota (2020: 150). This stigma can lead to isolation, low self-esteem, and reduced motivation to continue schooling.

- *Financial Constrains*

Teenage pregnancies are often associated with rejection from the responsible fathers due to fear of perceived responsibilities, resulting in the rejected girl facing all the responsibilities alone. Additionally, the expecting young girls also face rejection from their family members due to the shame associated with early pregnancies. A study conducted by Chiyota (2020) on the implementation of re-entry policy in Zambian schools revealed that, financial problems were a major obstacle on continuing education for pregnant girls and young mothers.

The plight of teenage mothers is exacerbated by societal attitude towards teenage pregnancies. Teenage mothers are often viewed as social misfits and a bad example to other children. This is in line with findings by Muzingili (2024) who conducted a phenomenological study on pregnant and young mothers' experiences on second-chance education in Zimbabwe. The study revealed that although parents provided teenage mothers with an opportunity to return back to school, they were concerned that providing such a privilege conveys a negative message to other children. They felt that teenage pregnancies and motherhood was indicative of disgrace and humiliation for their families, as well as the propagation of immorality, (Muzingili; 2024). Such concerns had a detrimental effect on teen mothers' self-esteem.

Another study conducted by Timothy & Juhudi (2023) in Tanzania on exploration of teenage mother students' challenges in secondary schools revealed that many teenage mothers were struggling financially and were getting minimal support from their parents and guardians. A discussion with the participants further revealed that their parents were only taking care of their babies and leaving them to fend for themselves. This leaves them with no option than to combat some casual business to raise money for their fees.

- *Coping Strategies Employed by Teenage Mothers Pursing their Academic Goals*

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and (as cited in Mususe, 2018; p.78), defines coping as a process of consistently changing our cognitions and behaviours by reinterpreting threatening situations that exhaust and wear us out. As stated earlier, young motherhood is often appraised as a shameful and stressful experience by teenage mothers. The stress arouses feelings of frustrations, emanating from the unexpected change in their lives. The ability to manage these unpleasant psychological constructs is critical to navigate the challenges of school reintegration.

- *Support Structures*

The ecological systems theory suggests that teenage mothers cope financially and emotionally from supportive structures such as parents, family members, teachers and friends. The quality of interactions between family, peers and teachers increases their confidence level. For example, a study by Mutekwe (2023) in South Africa revealed that teacher attitudes significantly impact teen mothers' motivation, highlighting the need to reinforce teacher sensitization programs to mitigate stigma. Another study conducted by Musese (2018) on the challenges and coping strategies employed by schooling teenage mothers in Kavango regions of Namibia revealed that, lack of agency within the family support system hinders teenage mother's long term educational resilience, while increased support lowers their depression levels.

- *Support Systems Available for Teenage Mothers*

- *Institutional Support*

Zimbabwe, like many other countries, officially introduced the re-entry policy as stated in the permanent secretary's policy circular number 18 of 2024, which allows pregnant girls and young mothers and father to continue with their education in the event of falling pregnant and after childbirth. This policy circular was available in all schools that participated in the research. This was synonymous with studies conducted by various researchers on reintegration of adolescent mothers. These studies confirmed the availability of reintegration policies in all the countries involved in the studies (Moore: 2014; Chauke: 2013; Chidarikire & Saruchera: 2025).

Psychosocial support emerged as another crucial aspect highly recommended by researchers who conduct studies on adolescent pregnancies. It encompasses a range of emotional, social and practical assistance provided to teenage mothers to enhance their psychological well-being. Psychosocial support relieves them from emotional burden; empowering them to cope with difficult situations that they may be going through. This kind of support is usually proffered through guidance and counseling sessions in schools. Teenage mothers often face the “blaming and shaming” attitudes from peers and community members, as revealed by various studies. If these attitudes are not addressed, they may result in withdrawal, self-isolation, or dropping out of school. In a study conducted by Chidarikire and Saruchera (2025), on the psychological ramifications in reintegrating pregnant learners in Masvingo District, psychosocial support was highlighted as an empowering tool for enhancing teenage mothers’ academic progression. This was also in line with recommendations provided by Musese (2014: 83) in a study conducted on mental health and coping strategies in the Kavango Regions in Namibia, suggesting that psychotherapy and counseling sessions were necessary to assist teenage mothers address and manage their emotional needs and setbacks.

- *Familial Support*

Studies conducted by various researchers reported that teenage mothers usually get financial support from their parents. However, these studies found that a considerable number of teenage mothers hailed from rural areas where socio-economic challenges are rampant. Hence supporting both the teenage mother and the child becomes a load and a half. These findings were reported by Muzingili et al (2014) in their phenomenological study of teenage mothers’ experience on second-chance education in Zimbabwe. One of respondents highlighted that meeting the financial demands of school and supporting the teen mother and her child was difficult for them because the majority of the parents are not gainfully employed. The situation was further exacerbated by the purported dads who also come from impoverished households.

However, studies conducted in developed countries reported a different story regarding financial support of teenage mothers. Financial support came from different angles as compared to studies conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, a study conducted by (Simpson:2010) on the return of teenage mothers into the formal education system in Jamaica, revealed that teenage mothers got financial support from their baby fathers when other side was struggling financially. The paternal side went as far as taking care of the baby whilst the teenage mothers were in school.

- *Community Support*

A study conducted by (Mwikililo, 2025) in Tanzania on reintegrating teenage mothers into secondary education reported that, teenage mothers were getting financial aid from community partners. However, they only paid for school fees and whilst leaving them to meet the other necessities like transport costs, stationery and uniforms. They would engage in small income generating ventures to complement the aid.

Due to economic hardships, community support programs were reported to be limited in most studies conducted on teenage mothers’ academic progression. The major support came from the family as the primary source and education institutions complemented the effort. The study conducted by Mwikililo (2025) in Tanzania further reported that teenage mothers were experiencing limited access to community-based support networks and culturally-sensitive interventions contributing to their vulnerability.

These findings concurred with findings from Kinya & Daniel (2025) when they reviewed literature on factors associated with adolescent mothers’ return to school in Sub-Saharan Africa. The study found that instead of providing emotional support to teenage mothers to improve their self-efficacy, they are often face ridiculed by community members who label them as ‘loose’ and not fit to attend school with other children. This experienced at community gatherings such as healthcare facilities and churches, leading to the development of unhealthy coping strategies. This concurs to findings from a study conducted by (Nelson, 2013) in South Africa in which a participant reported being shunned by church members for humiliating them.

Instead of providing social and emotional support, communities are labelled as a vehicle for conveying stigma and discrimination of teenage mothers, which is detrimental to their psychological wellbeing.

- *Perceptions on Available Support Systems*

Although education Ministries took the initiative to readmit teenage mothers into formal education systems, various studies highlighted some implementation gaps, which act as hurdles for teenage mothers’ academic progression. The issue of stigma and discrimination is reported in many studies conducted on teenage mothers’ reintegration into the education system.

A study conducted by Chidarikire and Saruchera (2025) on psychological ramifications in integrating pregnant learners in Masvingo revealed that stigma is experienced at all ecological levels around the teenage mother, which exposes them to mental health issues. This was further confirmed by Muzingili et al (2024) in their study pregnant and young mothers’ experiences on second chance education.in Zimbabwe. The study revealed that the available support systems for teenage mothers are not adequate enough.

Another study conducted by Kinya & Daniel (2025) when they reviewed factors associated with adolescent mothers' return to school. The study highlighted that while there are provisions of unconditional readmission, the policy lacks mechanisms to compensate for lost time, making it difficult for teenage mothers to catch-up. Teenage motherhood comes with a lot of responsibilities that are require a lot of understanding from those that deal with them, especially at school. The demands of the baby are inconsistent with the demands of the school, and often leads to absenteeism or dropping out.

Overall, studies have demonstrated that teenage mothers' academic success is strongly influenced by the availability, accessibility, and coordination of multiple support systems. No single support mechanism is sufficient in isolation; rather, a combination of school-based flexibility, family involvement, community and NGO assistance, government policy support and psychosocial services is required. These interconnected systems collectively enhance coping capacity, resilience, and educational attainment among teenage mothers.

#### ➤ *Knowledge Gap*

Despite growing research on teenage mothers' school reintegration, existing literature largely emphasizes barriers and support deficits, with limited attention to the lived experiences, and coping mechanisms of the mothers themselves (Muzingili et al: 2024; Kinya & Daniel: 2025; Chiyota 2020; Chauke 2013). Furthermore, there is a lack of longitudinal and context-specific studies evaluating effectiveness of integration policies, particularly within Zimbabwean districts such as Mazowe.

Much of the available literature focuses heavily on challenges such as stigma, lack of support and disrupted schooling (Issa & Temu., 2023; Musese: 2018; Timothy and Juhudi: 2023; Moonga: 2014), but there is insufficient in-depth exploration of teenage mothers' lived experiences. This gap was also highlighted by Muzingili et al (2024) who recommended future researches to evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of second-chance education in Zimbabwe. This study therefore aims to fill this gap by examining how teenage mothers are navigating through the challenges and suggesting recommendations to ensure effectiveness of the reintegration process.

#### *E. Chapter Summary*

The chapter provided a brief introduction of what was going to be discussed, outlining the conceptual and theoretical frameworks guiding the study. An empirical review of related literature was provided, and finally, the knowledge gap was identified.

## CHAPTER THREE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### *A. Chapter Overview*

The chapter covers the research approach, research design, population and sampling, data collection instruments, research procedure, standardization of instruments, data analysis and interpretation, and ethical considerations.

### *B. Research Approach*

A qualitative research approach was employed to collect data for this study. This approach was chosen because the phenomenon under investigation is deeply personal, context-bound and is best understood through the voices of the affected individuals (Muzingili et al, 2024). Firstly, reintegration experiences involve complex social, emotional, cultural, and institutional factors that cannot be adequately captured through numerical data. The qualitative method provided a holistic and in-depth analysis of the experiences of teenage mothers, by capturing the complexities that other methods may overlook. The approach allowed the researcher to explore the multidimensional experiences in depth, covering meanings, perceptions, and interpretations that teenage mothers attach to their schooling journey.

Secondly, teenage motherhood and school reintegration are sensitive issues that required methods that prompt empathy, rapport, and trust. Qualitative techniques, such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, enabled participants to share their experiences in their own words, allowing the researcher to gather rich and authentic narratives (Han et al, 2021). This was particularly important in the Mazowe context, where issues of stigma, discrimination, financial barriers, and policy awareness vary from one individual to another.

Additionally, the qualitative approach provided flexibility, by allowing the researcher to probe emerging issues, adjust questions based on participant responses, and explore unexpected themes. This was crucial because teenage mothers' experiences are not uniform. The ability to capture these variations was one of the strengths of qualitative research.

Lastly, the goal of the study was exploratory, and aimed to understand lived experiences rather than to measure predetermined variables. Qualitative research aligns with this purpose as it sought to understand the "how" and "why" of reintegration experiences rather than quantifying them (Muzingili et al, 2024). Therefore, qualitative inquiry provided the most suitable framework for revealing the realities, challenges, and coping strategies of teenage mothers reintegrated into the education system.

### *C. Research Design*

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design. Phenomenology was appropriate because the purpose of the study was to explore and interpret the lived experiences of teenage mothers who had been reintegrated into the education system in Mazowe District, appraising the description by (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen and Razavieh, 2010). The design enabled the researcher to understand how these young mothers made sense of their school experience, the meaning they attached to reintegration, and the challenges and successes they encountered in their daily schooling life.

The phenomenological design allowed for an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences, emotions, perceptions, and personal interpretations; which was crucial in examining phenomena such as stigma, teacher attitudes, policy awareness, motherhood responsibilities, peer relationships, and institutional support. All these variables were better captured through detailed narratives of individuals concerned. The design also allowed flexibility for the researcher to follow emerging themes and probe deeper into sensitive issues that may not be anticipated in structured research approaches (Best & Khan 2006).

### *D. Population and Sampling*

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who were information-rich and able to provide detailed insights into the integration experience. This method was selected based on the target population that comprises of pregnant teenagers and adolescent mothers who have returned to school after childbirth within Mazowe District. The choice of Mazowe District was made basing on the fact that it provides a socio-economically diverse rural-peri-urban context where teenage pregnancy, school dropout, and reintegration intersect; as highlighted by the Herald's article of 30 July (2025) and Mangwiro & Chinamasa (2023). In addition, there were also no academic journals that provided the real-world experiences of reintegrated teenage mothers in the district.

The study included adolescent girls aged 13-18 who became pregnant or delivered a child whilst attending school and currently reintegrated in Mazowe District; or those who recently completed school in 2025, after reintegration. It excluded adolescent mothers who moved into or out of Mazowe District such that their integration experiences were shaped elsewhere, and those who are medically and psychologically unable to participate. Guidance and Counseling teachers and school administrators were also included in the study.

Purposive sampling was used to identify teenage mothers meeting the inclusion criteria. This method was ideal because teenage mothers in school constitute a specific and hard-to-reach group, hence allowing the researcher to deliberately select participants who

possessed direct experiences with integration (Han et al., 2021 in Muzingili et al, 2024). It also facilitated the provision of credible, reflective accounts of the challenges and support systems available for teenage mothers. To reach additional participants, snowball sampling was combined, where initial participants referred other eligible teenage mothers in the district.

Since qualitative research values depth over numeric size, a sample of 12 participants was involved in the study. It was believed that these participants had adequate representation of the population under study. According to Merriam (2009), the qualitative research sample had to be kept minimal but large enough so that data saturation could be reached.

Table 1 Sample Size of Participants

Category of participants	Number of participants
Teenage mothers	8
Guidance and Counselling teachers	2
School administrators	2
Total number of participants	12

#### E. Data collection Instruments

The study adopted qualitative data collection methods in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and document analysis. Qualitative data collection methods were particularly chosen because the topic is deeply personal, context-dependent, and shaped by individual perceptions. These methods provide depth, flexibility, and a human-centered understanding of teenage mothers' reintegration into education system. Qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and focus groups allow participants to describe their personal journeys in their own words, something that cannot be fully understood through numerical data, (Best and Khan, 2006). These methods help uncover how teenage mothers feel, think and make meaning of their experiences. In addition, qualitative approaches enabled the researcher to explore complex interconnected factors like social relationships, family dynamics and institutional support in depth rather than reducing them to variables. Furthermore, methods like semi-structured interviews provide flexibility to probe further when participants raise unexpected but relevant issues such as discrimination from peers and teachers, resulting in the emergence of new themes.

##### ➤ Semi-Structured Interview Guides

Semi-structured interview guides were particularly chosen because they allow for depth and flexibility, (Ary et al, 2010). They gave teenage mothers the opportunity to share their personal, detailed narratives about their experiences in their own words, enabling the researcher to probe further into sensitive topics such as stigma, emotional challenges, or support systems. Since lived experiences are subjective, the method helped to capture individual meanings, feelings and perceptions, which structured tools would have missed. They created a more comfortable and confidential environment, encouraging openness on potentially stigmatized experiences, since the topic was sensitive.

##### ➤ Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Focus Group Discussion guide was used to complement interviews by capturing collective perspectives and social dynamics. They allowed participants to interact, share and reflect on each other's experiences while revealing common challenges and coping strategies. They helped to stimulate memories and insights that might not have emerged in one-on-one interviews. They also assisted to identify patterns and differences on teenage mothers' experiences.

##### ➤ Document Analysis

Document analysis was chosen to provide a contextual dimension to the study. It assisted to verify the extent to which policy guidelines were being implemented and to identify any discrepancies between policy and practice; by reviewing materials such as school policies, reintegration guidelines, attendance records and counseling reports. These documents helped the researcher to understand the institutional framework shaping the experiences of teenage mothers. It also enabled triangulation, where the researcher compared documented policies with actual experiences reported by participants. This was particularly important to reveal gaps between policy and practice, such as whether schools truly supported reintegration.

#### F. Research Procedure

The researcher firstly applied for ethical clearance from the university's Institutional Review Board, outlining the purpose, and ethical safeguards of the study. After receiving the ethical approval, the researcher sought for permission from Ministry's permanent secretary through MOPSE Mashonaland Central Provincial Education Offices, and Mazowe District Education Offices. Letters requesting access to schools included details of the study, sampling requirements and proposed data collection methods. Once permission was granted, the researcher scheduled meetings with school heads of selected secondary schools within Mazowe District. These meetings were meant to explain the study purpose, clarify sample criteria for teenage mothers, request assistance in identifying eligible participants and discussing logistical arrangements, such as venues and times.

The researcher collaborated with school administrators, guidance and counselling teachers and class teachers to systematically identify teenage mothers who met the inclusion criteria. Particularly, G&C teachers assisted in identifying learners who returned to

school after childbirth. School registers and G&C records were reviewed to confirm eligibility, while potential participants were be approached individually to avoid exposing their status and to protect confidentiality.

#### ➤ *Standardization of Instruments*

- *Trustworthiness*

To ensure rigor, the study applied criteria for qualitative trustworthiness, which are, credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformability (Cresswell, 2012).

- *Credibility*

Credibility is the accuracy with which the researcher interprets the data that is provided by the participants (Collins & Hussey, 2003). In this study, credibility was increased in numerous ways, such as prolonged engagement and building rapport with the participants to understand them better and gain insights into their experiences; also, by making use of triangulation of data sources, where more than one research instrument was used to collect data, as well as member checking whereby participants were offered summaries of findings or themes for confirmation and debriefing with the supervisor.

- *Dependability*

To enhance dependability, the researcher used audit trails. Apart from handwritten notes taken during the interview, the interviews were recorded to capture data more effectively. Additionally, the documents used in the research were retained for cross-checking by other researchers.

- *Transferability*

The study provided a detailed description of the context and methodology to assist other researchers in using the findings in other contexts with similar conditions and methodological procedures (Collis & Hussey, 2003). Additionally, transferability of findings was enhanced by using literature comparison during the reporting of findings, to compare if similarities existed between the current study and other studies being conducted.

- *Confirmability*

According to Ary et al (2010), confirmability is concerned with the extent to which a researcher's procedure for data collection and conclusions drawn conform to those of other researchers investigating the same situation. In this study, conformability was increased through the researcher's physical participation in data collection, as well as conducting audit trails where every procedure for data analysis and interpretation was well documented. Additionally, the researcher used reflexive journaling to acknowledge researcher's assumptions and biases. Furthermore, during the discussion and interpretation of findings, the researcher included a set of participants' evidence by taking notes from participants' responses and audio recordings.

#### ➤ *Data analysis and Interpretation*

Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. This was particularly well-suited for this study because it provided a systematic yet flexible framework for interpreting rich qualitative data from multiple sources. The data collected from interviews and FGDs are textual, detailed and narrative in nature, hence thematic analysis allows for identification of patterns (themes) across participants' accounts, while enabling the researcher to move beyond description to interpreting deeper meanings in participants' experiences.

The six-phase process ranging from data familiarization to theme development and reporting, ensures transparency, rigor and credibility in the analysis. Furthermore, the approach is well suited to handling multiple data sources, including semi-structured interviews, Focus Group Discussions and document analysis, facilitating the identification of patterns across diverse data sets. Its inductive participant-centered nature ensures that themes are grounded in the voices and experiences of teenage mothers, while also allowing for the exploration of both explicit and underlying meanings. Consequently, this method provides a coherent strategy for capturing the complexity, diversity, and social context of participants' experiences, thereby enhancing the validity and practical relevancy of the study's findings.

#### G. *Ethical Considerations*

Since the study involves a vulnerable group, ethical safeguards included:

##### ➤ *Ethical Approval*

A research clearance letter was obtained from Great Zimbabwe University, as suggested by Ary et al (2010). This letter signified approval of the research project.

##### ➤ *Informed Consent and Assent*

This is an agreement made by participants to take part in the study (Cohen et al, 2007). In this study, participants were informed of the purpose of the study, information being searched, how this information was to be used and the expected benefits of the study.

Therefore, the parents and guardians of teenage mothers were requested to sign a consent form, authorizing their children to participate in the study, and an assent was sought from the minors. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and they are allowed to withdraw at any time without penalty.

➤ *Confidentiality and Anonymity*

This refers to the deliberate act of hiding the identity of participants during data collection (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2009). In this study, participants were assured that everything that was going to be discussed will be treated with utmost confidence, and will not be revealed to anyone, and that their identity will not be revealed in any way in the research (Cohen et al; 2011). Participants were given enough time to speak their minds and to ask questions during and after the research was conducted. If one felt uncomfortable and wished to withdraw from participating, they were free to do so, without any further explanation. Only commonly used vocabulary in the research field was used; hence, technical jargon was avoided.

➤ *Minimizing Harm*

Since this was a sensitive topic in which interviews were likely to evoke emotional distress, the participants were provided with information on local counselling services and referrals if need arose. Additionally, the researcher paused or stopped the interviews whenever emotional distress occurred.

## CHAPTER FOUR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

### ➤ Introduction

This chapter presents findings of the study using specific research questions as follows: what challenges are faced by teenage mothers when pursuing academic goals? Which coping strategies do teenage mothers employ when pursuing their academic goals? What support systems are available for teenage mothers to facilitate their academic progression? How effective are available support systems in influencing the academic progression of teenage mothers?

Data presentation is organized into four sections, according to the research questions. The first section presents data on the challenges faced by teenage mothers when pursuing academic goals. The second section presents the coping strategies employed by teenage mothers when pursuing their academic goals. The next section presents the support systems available to promote teenage mothers' academic progression, while the final section outlines the effectiveness of these support systems in influencing the academic progression of teenage mothers.

### ➤ Findings on the Challenges Faced by Teenage Mother when Pursuing Academic Goals

#### • Challenges on the Reintegration Process

All the participants reported that they did not encounter any administrative challenges when they returned to school after giving birth. The doors were already open for them. The first participant reported:

*“My father brought me to school and told the head that I intend to continue with my education, and he simply accepted. I returned six months after delivery, (Participant 1; March 2026).”*

The fifth participant had this to say:

*“After discovering I was pregnant, I went to stay with my husband for a year and he started being violent, to an extent that I went back home. I then told my father I wanted to go back to school, and he talked to the school head and he agreed. That's how I re-enrolled into school. I never thought it was going to be that simple because I had spent a whole year out of school and i wasn't aware of the re-integration policy, (Participant 5; march 2026).”*

The heads of schools indicated that they were simply complying to the secretary's safeguarding circular No: 18 of 2024, which gives guidelines for the continuing of learning for pregnant girls and under-aged male and female parents when re-enrolling the young parents. This is unlike in the past when there were no clear-cut policies on dealing with pregnant girls and young parents. Pregnancy was treated as a disciplinary issue and pregnant girls were expelled from school, with no option to return. To this regard one school head commented:

*“Although it is a noble idea to give these young parents a second chance to education, the society is totally against it. It feels the other learners may see nothing wrong in it and may become victims as well, especially considering the way education partners are treating these teenage mothers, it's like motivating other girls to become parents before they come of age”.*

He felt the ministry was reluctant to introduce this re-integration policy which is why it took long to come up with this circular which allows these young parents to continue with their education. The advocacy began during COVID-19 induced lockdowns, but the circular was drafted in 2024.

#### • Challenges Encountered at School

Teenage motherhood is subjected to moral judgement in many societies. Many respondents in this study reported that they experienced stigma from their peers during their first days of re-integration, particularly those who returned to the same school after childbirth. However, the situation was a bit different from teenage mothers who were pursuing advanced level studies. They reported that their peers embraced them well and were quite eager to assist them whenever necessary. In this regard the second participant said:

*“I endured stigma from my classmates during my first days of re-integration and it was so bad. I had no one to turn to, since I was new at the school. The Guidance and Counselling teacher was new to me and I could not confide in her. I only got emotional support from home and this made my life very difficult at school, (Participant 2, March 2026).”* She said this whilst sobbing.

However, the student explained that as time passed, her peers started tolerating her, and right now she no longer has that challenge.

Contrary, participants 3 and 4 reported that their return to school was not associated with any form of stigma from their peers but instead, they got a lot of support and assistance from them. These young mothers were pursuing their advanced level. They were emotionally stable when they narrated their ordeal.

All the participants did not report any form of discrimination from their teachers and administration staff. They all reported that they get a lot of support from them instead. Participant 4 confessed that:

*“I receive a lot of support from my teachers, especially ladies. At times I feel they are over protective, because my peers do not get that kind of support that I receive from teachers.”*

All the heads of school as well as G&C teachers confessed that stigma used to prevail, especially from the students but due to guidance and counselling sessions and psychosocial support, it has since subsided. As more and more teen mothers were enrolled, stigma disappeared. However, there were growing concerns that this kind of acceptance and tolerance may have resulted in the dropout of more young girls due to teenage pregnancy.

*“We are now experiencing an increase on dropout rates due to early marriages, as some girls may lack the privilege to come back after childbirth. Currently I don’t have the statistics off head but the office has received such reports, (School Head 1; March 2026).”*

- *Challenges at Home*

Most of participants came from low-income households, limiting their ability to afford school fees, uniforms and childcare. Only one participant reported that she gets financial assistance from the baby father’s side whilst the rest suffered rejection, leaving them with no option but to fend for the babies on their own, with assistance from the mother’s side. To this end, many teen mothers reported great financial struggle.

*“Sometimes I miss school because there is no milk formular to give the baby whilst I am in school. I supplement breast milk with Nan milk formular; so at times it gets finished when there is no money at home. I do not get financial support from the baby’s father”, (Participant 3)*

Teenage mothers were expected to perform household chores alongside childcare, reducing time available for studying. One teenage mother resides with a blind grandmother and does all the chores before attending to school work. Her G&C teacher reported frequent absenteeism attributed to child care responsibilities.

*“Naomi (Pseudonym) always comes to school late. She stays with her grandmother who is blind and her sister who is also partially blind. She does household chores before coming to school and has to leave early to attend to the baby”, (G&C teacher 2; March 2026).”*

Concentrating on one’s studies under these circumstances becomes difficult. Schooling has certain demands that should be met if meaningful educational outcomes are to be achieved.

- *Academic Experiences*

Most teen mothers reported that their performance declined when they discovered that they were pregnant. The fear of rejection from partners and their families overwhelmed them. Some reported that they were usually sick hence their participation was compromised.

*“I dropped out of school when I was 4 months pregnant. I was always sick and I could not concentrate on my studies. I only returned after child birth, (Participant 2; March 2026).”*

Another challenge which was mainly reported by the school heads and G&C teachers is that of attendance and participation constraints. They reported that in many cases these teen mothers usually absent themselves or leave the school early to attend to their children’s healthcare needs. Attention is compromised when things are not well. There is need to strike a balance between motherhood and schooling, otherwise there is risk of losing both.

A closer look at the school records revealed the same. Absenteeism is highly recorded on teenage mothers and their academic performance is always fluctuating. However, the situation was not universal. Some young mothers reported that their outlook to life and academics had significantly changed. They confessed that they are now motivated to perform better in school, knowing that they have increased responsibilities.

*“I now take school seriously. Before I was never bothered by my performance”, (Participant 7, March 2026).”*

Participant 3 reported:

*“I got pregnant when I was in form 3 and continued with my education. I just went home for delivery and returned immediately after. The treatment I received from my peers motivated me to be more determined to outperform them. They humiliated me on several occasions and I told myself I must pass my exams to prove them wrong. I eventually performed well, and now I’m doing my lower sixth grade. I wish to become a lawyer and I won’t tire until I achieve my dreams,” (Participant 3, March 2026).*

An analysis of the teen mothers’ responses revealed that, those who had a lot of support from home were performing very well in school. The G&C teachers also confirmed that most teen mothers who performed well in their public examinations in previous years, were those who had enough support from home. Some were pursuing tertiary education while some were not fortunate enough to get financial support to further their studies.

- *Balancing School and Childcare*

Balancing academic work and childcare responsibilities was identified as one of the most significant challenges these young mothers were battling with. Even in cases where there were people to assist with childcare during school time, the input of the mother was also expected after school, and this often left them physically and emotionally drained. Juggling multiple roles requires endurance, which may not be a strength in many.

*Participant 8 confessed: “although my mother takes care of the baby when I’m studying, I reserve some time for breastfeeding and bonding with the child. Sometimes the baby would demand to play with me, rejecting everybody else at home. I would have to attend to him until he retires to sleep, that’s when I begin studying, but sometimes I would be tired”, (participant 8; March 2026).*

Findings from Focus Group Discussion 2, also revealed that participants often sacrifice leisure activities and peer interactions to focus on responsibilities. While some reported sacrificing sleep to create time for studying.

- *Findings on the Coping Strategies Employed by Teenage Mothers when Pursuing Academic Goals*

- *Reliance on Social Support*

All participants identified family members, particularly mothers, grandmothers and siblings as their primary source of support. Their assistance with childcare allowed teenage mothers to attend school regularly. They also offered emotional encouragement to sustain their motivation.

*“I get emotional support from home when I am down. I am still new at this school and can’t share my problems with anyone yet”, (Participant 2; March 2026).*

The family acts as the primary support structure as alluded to by the teenage mothers. They play a pivotal role in ensuring their psychological well-being. When there seems no hope, the family stands by. However, some reported that they get emotional support from trusted individuals like G&C teachers and friends when they are at school.

Acceptance of motherhood helped some participants to adjust psychologically and focus on their goals. They highlighted that denial only leads to emotional torture; while appraising religious and spiritual practices as advocates for strength and hope.

- *Development of Personal Resilience*

Teenage mothers demonstrated strong intrinsic motivation to complete their education. Findings from this study revealed strong determination from these young mothers as demonstrated by their willingness to continue coming to school even when they were being persecuted by their peers. One participant reported that her peers consistently reminded her that she is mother and should be attending to her husband’s needs, and not coming to school.

*“I told them I am not dropping out of school, I am here to learn. If at all they thought I would give in to their pressure, they were joking. All I want is a better future for me and my child”, (participant 1; March 2026).*

Participants adopted a mindset focused on overcoming challenges rather than succumbing to them. They set clear academic and life goals, which helped them remain focused despite difficulties.

- *Time Management Strategies*

Participants reported organizing their daily schedules to balance school work and childcare. They also allocate specific times for childcare and homework.

*“We usually do our homework at school so that we do not get overwhelmed with responsibilities at home”, (FGD 1; March 2026)*

The teen mothers also reported that they often prioritize academic work alongside essential childcare duties.

*“Multitasking is the order of the day, we engage in both, studying and childcare”, (FGD 2, March 2026)*

However, some reported that they study during the night or early morning hours when their babies are sleeping. This allows for maximum concentration on the studies.

The findings indicate that teenage mothers employ a combination of problem-focused and emotional-focused coping strategies. Social support and personal resilience emerged as the most critical factors enabling continued school attendance and academic persistence. However, coping strategies such as reduced social interaction and sleep deprivation may have long-term implications for health and well-being.

#### ➤ *Findings on the Support Systems Available to Promote Academic Progression of Teenage Mothers*

##### • *Institutional Support*

Findings from school administrators and Guidance and Counselling teachers revealed that there are clear guidelines and policy circulars for re-integration and handling of young parents in the school system. Secretary’s Circular number 18 of 2024 provides safeguarding guidelines for the continuing of learning for pregnant girls and under-aged male and female parents. It provides guidelines on how teen parents may continue to have access to quality education without being discriminated. This entails that no pregnant learner is denied access to education, including young mothers. In this regard, the return of teen mothers after child birth was reported as a smooth process.

However, some elements of stigma and discrimination during early days of re-entry were reported in all schools. The G&C teachers confirmed the same and reiterated that they were quick to act on any acts of discrimination.

*“My classmates used to humiliate me during my first days of re-entry. I reported them to the G&C teacher. Since then, I do not have that challenge. They now accept me just like any other student,” (Participant 8; March 2026).*

None of the respondents reported receiving any act of stigma and discrimination from teachers and all staff members, revealing strong compliance with re-entry policy.

The G&C teachers reported that the ministry is partnering with a non-governmental organization - CAMFED, in funding for projects that cater for the welfare of vulnerable girls. Teen mothers are included in that category. Most schools were embarking on poultry projects, whilst some in piggery. The profit from the project is shared amongst the girls.

In response to issues of stigma and discrimination in schools, one of the school heads commented:

*“Teenage mothers used to complain of stigma and discrimination during the initial days of the policy’s inception, but it has since subsided due to enhanced guidance and counselling sessions and psychosocial support services,” (Head teacher 1; March 2026).*

Guidance and counselling teachers and educational psychologists assist teenage mothers with emotional support, career guidance and academic planning. This helps them to cope with stress and maintain academic focus.

A review of school documents revealed that all schools have flexible time table for teenage mothers. They are allocated feeding timetable which they claim when necessary. Some teen mothers reported that they are not reprimanded for coming to school late, in the event that they do so.

##### • *Support from Home*

All teenage mothers reported getting assistance from home in several ways; including financial assistance, assistance with childcare responsibilities and emotional support. One teen mother reported:

*“I almost dropped out of school due to stigma, but the emotional support I received from family and friends kept me going,” (Participant 7; March 2026).*

Feedback from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) also pointed to the family as the primary support structure, highlighting that it was through family support that they are in school right now. They also highlighted that they when things get tougher, they are the first pillars of strength.

- *Community Support*

While most respondents did not report receiving any significant support from members of the community, one teen mother was grateful for receiving such. She pointed out that when she finally decided to return to school after being subjected to an abusive marriage, quite a number of community members applauded her for her courage.

*“I got two pairs of uniforms, stationery and shoes from some community members when they learnt that I had re-enrolled in school. They applauded me for being courageous,” (Participant 5; March 2026).*

- *Findings on the Effectiveness of Available Support Systems in Influencing Academic Progression of Teenage Mothers*

The findings indicate that teenage mothers perceived support systems as critical but their effectiveness is uneven. They acknowledged that while institutional, home and community support structures exist, their impact on academic progression depends largely on accessibility, quality and consistency.

- *Perceptions of Teenage Mothers on Institutional Support*

Participants generally acknowledged the existence of institutional support like the re-entry policy and guidance and counselling services, but perceived these as inadequately implemented. Some teenage mothers reported that rigid timetables made sustained attendance difficult. They also highlighted that the absence of school-based child-care services was perceived as a major limitation affecting attendance and concentration.

- *Perceived Attitudes of Teachers*

While all the teen mothers did not report being subjected to stigma, findings from FGDs revealed some mixed attitudes from some class teachers who had low expectations on them.

*Some teachers feel we are not performing well in class because of the extra burden that we have, yet we will be trying our best, (FGD 2; March 2026).*

This resulted in reduced class participation, lower academic confidence and increased likelihood of absenteeism. However, supportive teachers were viewed as key enablers, providing encouragement and academic assistance.

- *Effectiveness of Counselling and Academic Support*

While counseling services were recognized, their effectiveness was limited due to irregular availability, lack of confidentiality, insufficient focus on academic reintegration. One teen mother reported:

*“When I miss school, I struggle to catch-up with my peers. There is no designated catch-up strategy for us,” (Participant 4; March 2026).*

Teenage mothers emphasized the need for holistic institutional support, combining emotional, academic and practical assistance.

These findings indicate that teenage mothers perceive institutional support as potentially impactful but structurally weak, with effectiveness undermined by implementation gaps and stigma within schools.

- *Perception of Support from Home*

Participants consistently identified family support as the most significant determinant of academic progression. They highlighted that emotional encouragement from parents increased their motivation to continue schooling, while childcare support increased their attendance. Financial assistance reduced their risk of dropping out.

Their responses revealed that parental support influences academic progression and promotes resilience in teen mothers. This includes the assistance they give in caring for the child as well as the child’s healthcare needs. However, the parents’ initial reaction to pregnancy were poses as a major drawback as most of the teen mothers were threatened with rejection, resulting in reduced concentration in class. Some reported that they even dropped out of school because of that pressure and only to return after childbirth.

- *Perception on Community Attitudes and Stigma*

Findings from FGDs revealed negative societal attitudes towards teenage mothers, resulting in feelings of shame, embarrassment, and exclusion. Some community members felt that teen mothers do not deserve a second chance, pointing out that they will negatively influence their young girls into becoming mothers at an early age. Some teenage mothers reported being “frowned upon” by their wider communities and this affected their engagement with education. However, findings from this research revealed that some positives can also emerge through early motherhood, especially when young mothers receive adequate support from family, schools and communities. It actually increases their sense of responsibility, through emotional growth and their sense of purpose is renewed. Therefore, a non-judgmental environment helps them to rise through their problems. This is reinforced by

findings from Chidarikire and Saruchera (2025) who reinforced the notion that collective community support is vital for the success of teenage mothers in their educational journeys.

➤ *Chapter Summary*

The chapter reported the findings from the semi-structured interviews, FGDs and document analysis. The main issues reported were the challenges that teenage mothers encounter during their academic journey, such as stigma and discrimination and the challenges of balancing childcare and schooling. Findings on the coping strategies employed by teenage mothers were also reported and the support systems available were identified. Lastly, the perceptions of teenage mothers on the effectiveness of the support systems were explored.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

#### ➤ *Chapter Overview*

This chapter presents a discussion of the study findings in relation to the research objectives and existing literature on the lived experiences of teenage mothers reintegrated into the education system. It further outlines the conclusions drawn from the study and provides recommendations for policy, practice and future research.

#### ➤ *Discussion of Findings*

##### • *Challenges Faced by Teenage Mothers Pursuing Academic Goals*

The study revealed that teenage mothers faced a lot of challenges that hindered their academic progression. The challenges identified were largely socio-economic, psychological, institutional and relational in nature, and they can best be understood through the ecological systems framework.

At microsystem level, teenage mothers experienced direct challenges within their immediate environments. These challenges included childcare responsibilities, strained interpersonal relationships and financial constraints. Most of the participants reported that they sometimes missed school to attend to childcare needs, especially when their babies were not feeling well, or when they were taking them for periodic checks at the hospital. These findings were similar to findings by Kinya & Daniel (2024), on the study they conducted on factors associated with teenage mother's return to school. The study revealed that teenage mothers faced challenges of stigma and discrimination, financial challenges and taking care of the child while the baby fathers continued with school.

In addition, reports from schools' counselling sessions conducted indicated that some teenage mothers had developed a tendency of bunking lessons and were not participating in extra curriculum activities so that they can have extra time to attend their babies at home. Information from attendance registers also revealed inconsistent school attendance on the majority of the teenage mothers. These findings were consistent to findings from research conducted by Musese (2018) in the Kavango Regions of Namibia, which highlighted that teenage mothers had low school attendance rate because they had no reliable people to take care of their babies, and also due to their children's ill health. These challenges highlighted the need to strengthen support mechanisms both at school and home, so that their attention remain focused on their studies.

All participants from junior levels reported experiencing negative attitude from their peers, and some teachers and community members. Their peers felt that teenage mothers were different from them hence should not be attending the same school. This same sentiment was echoed by the school heads who felt that including teenage mothers into the same school with their non-parenting peers had detrimental effects on their behaviour as they were seen as heroes. They felt that other learners can be motivated to become like them. This was consistent to findings from a study conducted by Kinya & Daniel (2025). The study reported that teenage mothers encountered social disapproval, prejudice and seclusion inside the educational settings. However, findings from this study established that the stigma from school did not last long, probably because of the counselling sessions they got from school guidance and counselling departments or may be a result of the internal protective factors at play.

Balancing academic responsibilities with childcare duties also emerged as a critical challenge faced by teenage mothers. The dual roles of motherhood and being a student at the same time often resulted in fatigue, absenteeism and reduced concentration in class. They were compelled to embark on adulthood roles, yet according to the constitution of Zimbabwe, they were regarded as minors. This role conflict resulted in emotional drain, and learning under such circumstances may affect interpersonal relationships at school, and reduced performance in class. It also affects the entire psychological wellbeing of the student mothers. This was in line with findings by (Moonga; 2014) in a study conducted in the Copperbelt of Zambia, on the challenges faced by teenage mothers who reintegrated into schooling system. The study established that the conflicting roles from home and the demands of school reduced the academic performance in school. Similarly, Timothy and Jahudi (2023) alluded that teenage mothers were faced with increased load of responsibilities which hindered their academic progression. The study highlighted that they were expected to attend classes per timetable, abide by school rules and regulations whilst taking responsibilities as a daughter to her family, and a mother to her child.

Additionally, teenage mothers reported that they were facing significant financial constraints, particularly in meeting school-related costs such as fees, uniforms, learning materials and caring for the baby. These findings align with findings by Mwikililo (2025) on a study conducted to investigate the effectiveness of support systems for reintegrated adolescent mothers in Mbeya Region, Tanzania. The study revealed that, despite having a free education policy, teenage mothers continued to face considerable financial hurdles beyond just school fees. These challenges included transportation costs, expenses for school supplies, childcare, uniforms and other costs that are crucial for consistent school attendance and engagement.

Similarly, a study conducted by Muzingili et al (2024) established that there was a correlation between teenage motherhood and increased expenses for both education and parenting; further highlighting that the purported fathers also came from impoverished backgrounds. This suggests that teenage motherhood often exacerbates poverty and limits access to educational resources.

At the mesosystem level, the interaction between home and school environments was found conflictual. While the school has its expectations, the home had its fair share. For instance, when a teenage mother returns from school, the parents expect her to prioritize childcare responsibilities, while the school expects full attendance, maximum participation, and completed assignments. These conflicting expectations were also revealed in several studies including the one that was conducted by Chiyota (2020), in Zambia. The study revealed that teenage mothers had concentration difficulties because their attention was always divided between their parental and student roles. Similarly, research conducted by Muzingili et al (2024) in Zimbabwe found that school authorities had low expectations on academic performance of teenage mothers due to increased responsibilities they deal with daily. It is therefore important that these mesolevel systems collaborate for successful academic progression of the teen mothers.

Institutional limitations such as inflexible school policies, inadequate guidance and counseling services and lack of school-based childcare facilities further compounded these difficulties, at exosystem level. This aligns with findings from a study conducted by Mwikililo (2025), which sought to investigate the availability and effectiveness of support systems available for teenage mothers in Mbeya Regions, Tanzania. The study found that although some teenage mothers acknowledged receiving some emotional support from peers and compassionate teachers, many revealed that this support was insufficient and not readily available; revealing the scarcity of structured psychosocial support services like school-based counselling.

These findings concur with findings from Chauke (2013) on a study she conducted with teenage mothers on challenges they faced in secondary schools in Hlanganani South Circuit, South Africa. The study revealed that teenage mothers did not get psychosocial support when they faced challenges at school. The study further highlighted that there were even no catch-up mechanisms in place for teenage mothers when they miss school. They were left to figure out how they would catch-up with others. These findings suggest that while registration policies exist, their implementation remains inconsistent and insufficiently supportive.

From the Resilience Theory perspective, all these challenges represent significant risk factors that threaten academic persistence. Low self-esteem, reduced motivation, anxiety and isolation become risk factors impacting on teenage mothers' academic journey. However, the presence of protective factors determines the extent to which these risks affect individual outcomes.

- *Coping Strategies Used by Teenage Mothers*

Despite facing challenges, teenage mothers acquired resilience through various coping mechanisms. The Resilience Theory provides emotion-focused coping strategies which most teenage mothers relied on. Intrinsically, this study established that some teenage mothers relied on the emotional support they got from faith-based organizations. This was supported by findings from a study conducted by Mavhundu-Mudzusi (2014) on a psychosocial support framework for teenage mothers' reintegration into the school system. This study highlighted that churches played a vital role in addressing emotional distress, reducing isolation and reinforcing motivation to return to school. This was further complemented by a study conducted by Chirinda et al (2025) on factors predicting the resilience of school re-integrated teenage mothers in Zimbabwe, which underscored the importance of community-based systems, including religious institutions, in strengthening emotional wellbeing and persistence in education.

Additionally, teenage mothers got support they got from their family members, peers and significant others served as external protective factors. A study by Musese (2018) on mental health and coping strategies used by teenage mothers in Kavango Regions of Namibia reflected that teenage mothers were relying on their family members, especially grandmothers and life skills teachers whenever they had challenges.

Another study by (Moonga 2014) on challenges faced by teenage mothers who were readmitted in schools in the Copperbelt of Zambia revealed that, school-based counselling was provided but these teachers were not skilled enough as they did not receive proper training, serve for a few days' workshops that they attended. This means that some challenges remained unsolved and teenage mothers had to figure their way out.

At individual level, protective factors such as strong motivation, self-efficacy, and goal orientation helped teenage mothers persist in school despite challenges. Goal-orientation was reported as the major driving force for teenage mothers' return to school. This determination has an impact on how they perceive their educational journey. When a learner believes she can succeed academically, and value education as a pathway to a better future, she is more likely to attend classes regularly, complete assignments and participates well in class. This is supported by

Therefore, resilience skills such as emotional regulation enables them to balance motherhood and school demands.

Within the ecological framework, these coping strategies were shaped by the interactions across systems. For instance, at the microsystems level, teenage mothers who hailed from supportive family and school environments, demonstrated enhanced resilience

skills, while negative societal attitudes destroyed their morale (Muzingili et al, 2024). Kinya & Daniel (2025) further stated that families that provided childcare, financial assistance, and encouragement created an enabling environment for continued schooling. Therefore, the study revealed that positive family attitudes towards education reinforce the academic progression of teenage mothers.

In addition, the study found that teenage mothers employed problem-focused coping strategies, such as effective time management, prioritization of tasks and engagement in income generating as other motivating factors towards their educational journeys. These findings were consistent to findings by (Muzingili et al, 2024; Mwikililo, 2025; Chiyota, 2020).

The study further revealed that some participants reported employing maladaptive coping mechanisms such as withdrawal and self-isolation. Such coping mechanisms threaten one's effective academic engagement. This was consistent to findings by (Musese, 2018., & Muzingili et al, 2024) which identified avoidance behaviour, self-blame and negative self-perception as coping strategies used by teenage mothers. However, such negative copying mechanisms makes it difficult for teenage mothers to persist in school.

- *Available Support Systems for Academic Progression*

The study identified several support systems available to teenage mothers, categorized as institutional, familial and community-based.

At mesosystems level, familial support emerged as one of the most reliable forms of assistance available for teenage mothers, particularly in providing childcare, financial aid, and emotional encouragement. Participants who reported strong familial support were more likely to remain in school and perform better academically. This was also confirmed by several studies conducted on teenage mothers' reintegration into secondary schools, such as studies by (Moonga, 2014; Kinya & Daniel, 2018., Nyariro, 2018., & Muzingili et al 2024)

Institutional support, including school-based guidance and counselling services, flexible learning arrangements and policies allowed re-entry into the education system after childbirth. The participants revealed that they also got material and financial assistance from a non-governmental organization that were partnering with the ministry, to alleviate their plight. These findings aligned with findings by Musese (2018) which identified several support mechanisms provided in schools systems including availability and accessibility of school counsellors, teen mothers' clubs and government financial aid.

At the exosystem level, community organizations like churches and individual members of the community offered material assistance, and mentorship programs, although access was inconsistent. This was consistent to findings by Chirinda et al (2025) & Mavhundu-Mudzusi (2014) which highlighted the importance of bridging family, school and community contexts by providing emotional scaffolding necessary for teenage mothers' successful integration and academic progression.

At macro systems level, national policies of reintegration reflected broader societal values and legal frameworks, supporting education rights of teenage mothers. All these systems functioned as protective mechanisms, aimed at assisting educational progression of teen mothers, from a resilience perspective. However, their effectiveness, accessibility, consistency and quality varied from significantly, across schools. This aligned with findings by Muzingili et al (2024) and Chidarikire and Saruchera (2025).

- *Effectiveness of Support Systems*

While support systems were present, their effectiveness in promoting academic progression was mixed. Familial support, which was found to be the most effective because of direct operations within the microlevel systems, had conflicting interests as teen mothers were expected to play dual roles at home as the babies needed their attention when they returned from school. Muzingili et al (2024) also confirms these findings through their study on pregnant and young mothers' experiences on second chance education in Zimbabwe. However, despite these challenges close relationships were found to be critical protective factors that motivated teenage mothers to pursue their educational goals.

Institutional support, located within the mesosystem and exosystems level, revealed some implementation gaps due to limited resources and negative attitudes from some teachers and peers. A study by Chidarikire and Saruchera (2025) found that this breakdown in system linkages, was reducing the overall ecological support systems available to teenage mothers.

Although policies exist to support reintegration at macrosystems level, their limited enforcement weakens their impact. This highlights the importance of aligning policy with practice. These findings suggests that resilience among teenage mothers is not solely an individual trait, but is significantly influenced by the strength and coherence of ecological support systems.

Overall, the findings suggest a gap between policy provisions and practical implementation, limiting the effectiveness of support systems in facilitating the academic success of teenage mothers.

### ➤ *Conclusions*

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Resilience Theory, the study concludes that:

The experiences of teenage mothers in Mazowe District are shaped by complex, interacting environmental systems, with challenges rising at multiple ecological levels. Teenage mothers demonstrated resilience through both internal coping mechanisms and external support systems. Strong microsystem support, particularly from parents and guardians is critical in promoting academic persistence. Weak linkages between ecological systems, especially between home and school, limit the effectiveness of support. There is a gap between policy provisions and their implementation both at school and community level, reducing their potential impact. Enhancing resilience requires strengthening both individual capacities and environmental support structures.

### ➤ *Recommendations*

#### • *Ecological Systems Recommendations:*

Based on the Ecological systems theory, it is important for the ministry to strengthen collaboration between families and schools to provide coordinated support. Schools should create inclusive environments that address the immediate needs of teenage mothers.

Community and NGO involvement should be expanded to ensure consistent support services and policy enforcement should be strengthened to ensure practical implementation at school level.

#### • *Resilience-Based Recommendation*

The ministry should enhance school-based programs that build psychological resilience, including life skills and coping strategies. Mentorship programs that incorporate role models enhances emotional support and promotes resilience on teenage mothers. Communities should develop peer support groups to foster shared experiences and collective resilience.

#### • *Recommendations for Future Research*

- ✓ Future studies should explore the long-term educational and socio-economic outcomes of teenage mothers' post-reintegration.
- ✓ Comparative studies between rural and urban districts could provide deeper insights into contextual differences.
- ✓ Quantitative studies could be conducted to measure the impact of specific support interventions on academic performance.

### ➤ *Limitations of the Study*

While the study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of teenage mothers reintegrated into the education system in Mazowe District, the following limitations should be acknowledged:

Firstly, the study employed a qualitative design, which, by its nature, involved a relatively small and purposively selected sample. Although this approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, the findings may not be generalizable to all teenage mothers in other districts or contexts. Instead, the results are context-specific and should be interpreted within the socio-cultural setting of Mazowe District.

Secondly, teenage motherhood is often associated with stigma, and some participants may have been reluctant to fully disclose their experiences, particularly those related to negative school interactions or personal struggles. This could have resulted in partial or underreported data. Furthermore, the study relied heavily on reported data from teenage mothers. Such data are subject to recall and social desirability bias, where participants may have selectively remembered experiences or provided responses, they perceived as socially acceptable. This may have influenced the authenticity of the data collected.

Additionally, the study was geographically confined to Mazowe District. Differences in infrastructure, cultural norms and institutional support across other districts in Zimbabwe mean that the findings may not reflect the experiences of teenage mothers in urban or more remote rural settings.

Lastly, although efforts were made to ensure rigor through strategies such as triangulation and member checking, qualitative analysis remains interpretive. The researcher's perspectives and biases may have influenced data presentation, despite conscious efforts to maintain objectivity.

### ➤ *Chapter Summary*

This chapter interpreted the study findings through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Resilience Theory, while discussing key findings in relation to research objectives and existing literature. It highlighted the challenges, coping strategies, and support systems influencing the academic progression of teenage mothers in Mazowe District. The chapter suggested the need for stronger policy implementation and collaborative support systems to enhance academic progression of teenage mothers. Finally, it highlighted the limitations of the study.

## MODEL

### A. Introduction

This chapter presents a model to promote successful reintegration of teenage mothers. It highlights the model overview.

### B. Model Overview

The Teenage Mothers' Reintegration Support Model (TMRS), is a holistic, multi-level intervention framework designed to address the complex and interrelated challenges faced by teenage mothers returning to the education system. It supports teenage mothers' successful return, retention, and progression in the education system. The model is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes the interaction between individuals and their environments, and Resilience Theory, which focuses on the capacity of individuals to overcome adversity.

The model recognizes that reintegration outcomes are shaped by individual strength and vulnerabilities, with the interplay of the immediate relationships such as family and school, Institutional and community support, as well as the broader socio-cultural and policy environments. The model conceptualizes reintegration support across five interrelated levels: individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, with psychosocial support serving as a cross-cutting pillar across all levels.

### C. The Teenage Mothers' Reintegration Support Model (TMRS)

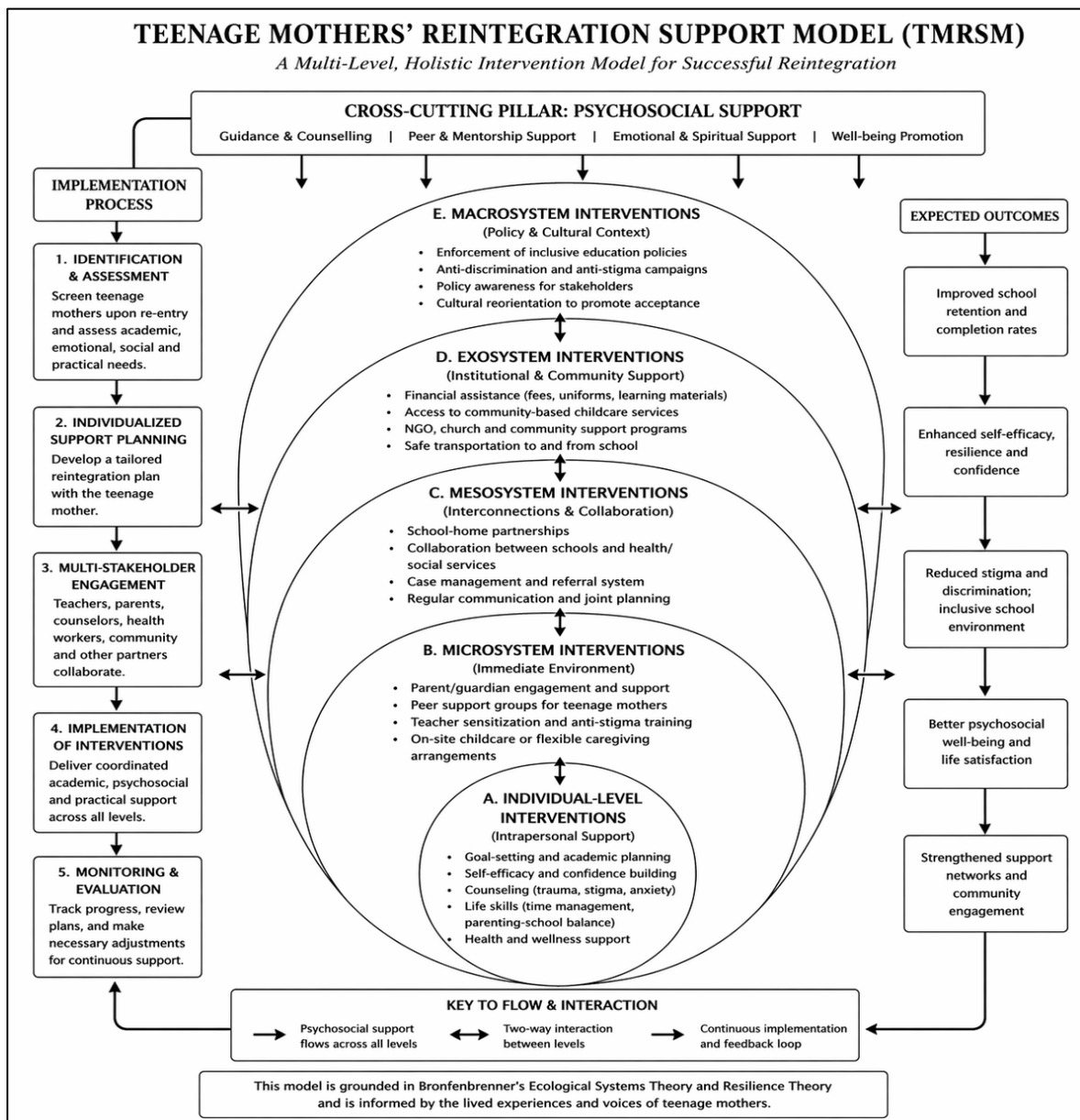


Fig 6 The Core Components of the Teenage Mothers' Reintegration Model  
 Source: Author

#### *D. Core Components of the Model Outlined*

##### ➤ *Individual-Level Interventions*

At the core of the model is the teenage mother as an individual learner with unique psychological, emotional, and academic needs. Intrapersonal support is emphasized on this level. The individuals' ability to withstand external pressures creates an internal driving force to overcome the challenges that comes their way. Interventions at this level are aimed at strengthening internal capacities that promote resilience and build academic persistence.

Support strategies at this level include goal-setting and academic planning, self-efficacy enhancement, counseling services that addresses trauma, stigma, and anxiety; as well as life skills training such as time management and balancing parenting with schooling. Health and wellness support is also critical at this level. When a teen mother is armed with these skills, they increase their chances of winning their academic race, as these interventions respond directly to their lived experiences.

##### ➤ *Microsystem Interventions*

The microsystem level focuses on the immediate environments in which teenage mothers interact, including family, peers and teachers. Interaction between these support levels directly influence the learners' daily experiences in school. What happens in the immediate environment impacts the learner's educational outcome.

Interventions include strengthening parental or guardian support, establishing peer support groups specifically for teenage mothers, and promoting teacher sensitization to reduce stigma and discrimination within the school environment. Also, provision of on-site childcare or flexible caregiving arrangements can assist the teenage mother to balance motherhood and education.

In this study, participants emphasized that supportive relationships within the microsystem act as critical enablers of successful integration.

##### ➤ *Mesosystem Intervention (Interconnections and Collaboration)*

The mesosystem level addresses interactions between different components of the microsystem, such as the relationship between home and school. Collaboration of support systems enhance the consistency and effectiveness of support provided to teenage mothers.

Strengthening school-home partnerships, facilitating collaboration between schools and health or social services, and implementing case management approaches to coordinate support are the targeted interventions at this level. Effective collaboration among stakeholders ensure that the needs of the teenage mothers are comprehensively addressed.

This level recognizes that fragmented support systems can undermine reintegration efforts, while coordinated approaches promote continuity of care.

##### ➤ *Exosystems Interventions (Institutional and Community Support)*

The exosystem comprises of broader institutional structures that indirectly influence the teenage mothers' educational experience. These include community organizations, non-governmental organizations, and social services. Interventions at this level aim to reduce structural barriers by providing financial assistance for school-related expenses, improving access to community-based childcare services, and engaging NGOs and faith-based organizations in offering emotional and material support.

In this study, participants highlighted that poverty and lack of childcare were the major obstacles influencing academic progression of teenage mothers, hence the need to address these systematic challenges.

##### ➤ *Macrosystems Interventions (Policy and Cultural Context)*

The macrosystem presents the broader socio-cultural and policy environment that shapes the attitudes and opportunities for teenage mothers.

Enforcing inclusive education policies that support the re-entry becomes an important intervention to promote reintegration of teenage mothers. This entails implementing anti-discrimination and anti-stigma campaigns, and promoting awareness of policies among educators and communities. Cultural orientation efforts are also necessary to curb negative societal perceptions and foster acceptance.

This level underscores that sustainable integration requires systemic change beyond the individual and school levels.

##### ➤ *Cross-Cutting Pillar: Psychosocial Support*

Psychosocial support is embedded across all levels of the model, and is central to its effectiveness. Providing guidance and counselling services, peer mentorship programs, emotional and spiritual support promotes the overall well-being of the teenage mother.

The pillar ensures that teenage mothers are supported not only academically but also emotionally and socially, enabling them to cope with stigma and the demands of motherhood.

➤ *Implementation and Feedback*

The mode of operation for this model includes identification and assessment of needs, individualized support planning, multi-stakeholder engagement, implementation of interventions, and continuous monitoring and evaluation.

Most importantly, the model incorporates a feedback loop that allows for ongoing adjustment of interventions based on the evolving needs to teenage mothers. This dynamic process insures responsiveness and sustainability.

The model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing various challenges faced by teenage mothers in the education system. By integrating individual resilience-building strategies with systemic and structural support mechanisms, the model offers a practical and contextually relevant approach to improving reintegration outcomes.

➤ *Chapter Summary*

The chapter provided an overview of the Teenage Mothers' Reintegration Support Model and the core components of the model were presented diagrammatically. Finally, detailed explanation of the model was provided.

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## APPENDICES

### A. Data Collection Instruments

Research Topic: A Study on the Lived Experiences of Teenage Mothers Reintegrated into the Education System in Mazowe District.

#### ➤ *In-Depth Semi-Structured Interview Guide*

##### • *Section A: Background Information*

- ✓ Can you tell me about yourself and your educational journey before pregnancy?
- ✓ How old were you when you became pregnant?
- ✓ How long were you out of school?

##### • *Section B: Experiences of Leaving and Returning to School*

- ✓ Can you describe your experience when you left school due to pregnancy?
- ✓ What influenced your decision to return to school?
- ✓ How did you feel on your first day back at school?
- ✓ What challenges did you experience during reintegration?

(probe for: emotional reactions, school policies and administrative procedures)

##### • *Section C: Academic Experiences*

- ✓ How has motherhood affected your academic performance?
- ✓ How do you manage your time between schoolwork and childcare?
- ✓ What academic difficulties have you encountered since returning to school?

(probe for: attendance, concentration, homework completion and examinations)

##### • *Section D: Social Experiences*

- ✓ How do teachers treat you compared to other learners?
- ✓ How do your classmates relate to you?
- ✓ Have you experienced stigma or discrimination at the school? If yes, can you describe it?

##### • *Section E: Support Systems*

- ✓ What kind of support do you receive from:
  - Family?
  - Partner?
  - Peers?
  - School administration?
  - Community?
- ✓ What type of support do you wish you had?
- ✓ How effective are available support systems in influencing your academic progression?

##### • *Section F: Coping and Resilience*

- ✓ What strategies do you use to cope with stress?
- ✓ What motivated you to pursue your education?
- ✓ What personal strengths have helped you persist?

##### • *Section G: Identity and Personal Growth*

- ✓ How has becoming a mother changed how you see yourself as a student?
- ✓ What does education mean to you now?

- *Section H: Recommendations*

- ✓ What changes would improve the integration process?
- ✓ What advice would you give other teenage mothers?

- *Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guide*

- *Theme 1: Reintegration Process*

- ✓ What has been your overall experience of returning to school after childbirth?
- ✓ How welcoming were schools when you returned?
- ✓ What barriers did you encounter?

- *Theme 2: School Environment*

- ✓ How do teachers respond to teenage mothers?
- ✓ How do peers treat teenage mothers?
- ✓ Are school policies supportive?

- *Theme 3: Balancing Roles*

- ✓ How do you manage being both a student and a mother?
- ✓ What challenges are most difficult?

- *Theme 4: Support Systems*

- ✓ Who supports you the most?
- ✓ What support is lacking?

- *Theme 5: Coping and Motivation*

- ✓ What helps you remain resilient?
- ✓ What motivates you to stay in school?

- *Closing Question:*

- ✓ If you could change one thing in the education system for teenage mothers, what would it be?

- *Interview Guide for School administrators and Guidance and Counselling teachers.*

- What is your experience with reintegrating teenage mothers into school?
- Which policies guide reintegration?
- What challenges do teenage mothers face in the school system?
- How does the school support them?
- What gaps exist in the current system?
- What improvements would you recommend?

- *Document Analysis*

- *Review of the Following Documents:*

- ✓ School reintegration policies
- ✓ Ministry circulars
- ✓ Attendance records
- ✓ Academic performance
- ✓ Counselling reports

## CONSENT LETTER

Dear Participant

You are being invited to participate in a research study that seeks to understand the **experiences of teenage mothers** who have returned to school after childbirth.

The study aims to explore the challenges faced during reintegration, support systems available, coping strategies used and recommendations for improved support.

Your experiences are important in helping schools and policymakers improve educational support for teenage mothers. You have been invited because you are a teenage mother, and have returned to school after childbirth.

If you agree to participate, you will take part in an individual interview lasting approximately 30-40 minutes and you may also be invited to participate in focus group discussion. The interview will be audio-recorded and you may be asked open-ended questions about your experiences in school.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question or withdraw at any time without penalty. Your name will not appear in the study, a pseudonym will be used instead. Data will be stored securely and accessed only by the researcher and the supervisor. If you feel distressed you may pause or stop the interview.

While there is no direct financial benefit, your participation may contribute to improving policies and support for teenage mothers.

If you have questions, please contact

Researcher: Fortunate Chiremba (0773198402)

Or

Supervisor: Zivanai Samson

### ASSENT FOR STUDENTS

Study Title: A Study on the Lived Experiences of Teenage Mothers Reintegrated into the Education System in Mazowe District.

Please tick the appropriate box:

Statement	Yes	No
I have read and understood the information sheet	[ ]	[ ]
I understand the purpose of the study	[ ]	[ ]
I understand participation is voluntary	[ ]	[ ]
I understand I can withdraw any time	[ ]	[ ]
I agree to be audio-recorded	[ ]	[ ]
I agree to participate in this study	[ ]	[ ]

Participant Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Parental/Gurdian Consent

I, \_\_\_\_\_, parent/guardian of \_\_\_\_\_, give permission for her to participate in this study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

