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From policy to practice: inclusion, exclusion, and the gendered realities of school re-entry programme for teenage mothers in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This study explored teenage mothers' narratives on challenges and resilience in alternative secondary education pathways (ASEP). ASEP refers to flexible secondary-level education arrangements delivered through dedicated centres that offer modular and non-formal pathways for learners who are unable to attend mainstream schools, including teenage mothers. The study employed a qualitative perspective, integrating attachment, identity, self-efficacy, and critical race theory. It involved seventy (70) teenage mothers from purposively selected ASEP centers in Morogoro, Mwanza, Mara, and Singida, using interviews, questionnaires and documentary reviews. The study revealed that most teenage mothers felt that parenthood strengthened their schooling commitment but faced stigma and self-doubt due to parenting duties. Some legal and systemic barriers limit educational participation, predicting further exclusion from sustainable economic growth. Recommendations push for flexible schedules, modular curricula, and alternative learning pathways to accommodate teenage mothers' parenting responsibilities, and data-driven frameworks for monitoring ASEP's.

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Background

The intersection of teenage pregnancy, education and human rights is a critical issue, particularly in regions where girls' access to education is compromised, Tanzania being one of them. Despite the approaching SDGs deadline, some trends indicate that teenage mothers continue to be denied educational opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and violating their fundamental rights to participate in the labour force and society (Breda & Mokoena, 2022; Chanda, 2024; Mutua, Miriti & Mogeni, 2019). Although there is widespread recognition of the right to education for teenage mothers, disparities remain stark, particularly between high- and low-income countries (Tetteh et al., 2020). Globally, nearly 16 million girls aged 15–19, and 2 million under 15 give birth each year, with Sub-Saharan Africa recording the highest teenage pregnancy rates (WHO, 2021).

Global trends show that regions such as North America, Europe, and East Asia have seen substantial declines in teenage pregnancies, attributed to comprehensive sex education, access to contraception, and strong cultural norms that promote education. In contrast, Sub-Saharan Africa faces significant challenges. Countries like Niger, Mali, Chad, Tanzania, and Kenya continue to report high teenage pregnancy rates, exacerbated by sociocultural factors such as child marriage, sexual violence, and limited access to reproductive health services (Breda & Mokoena, 2022).

In Tanzania, teenage pregnancy remains a critical issue, with substantial implications for girls' education (WHO, 2016). The prevalence of teenage pregnancies in Tanzania ranged between 22% and 24% by 2022, with girls who had no or lower education being most at risk of early pregnancy (Tanzania National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022; Ministry of Health [MoH], 2022). However, this data includes both those in and outside school (Stephano et al., 2025). The government has made strides in addressing these challenges through policies aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4). Such efforts,

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which focus on ensuring inclusive and equitable education, and SDG 5, aiming to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls (MoEST, 2022). Despite this progress, barriers to education for teenage mothers persist, often stemming from entrenched societal norms and inconsistent policy implementation (Morgan et al., 2022; Tetteh et al., 2020).

Historically, Tanzania enforced a strict ban on the re-admission of teenage mothers to school after giving birth. The country has undergone significant policy shifts regarding the education of teenage mothers, particularly since 2021. However, in 2022, the government introduced new guidelines permitting teenage mothers to re-enrol in Alternative Secondary Education Pathways (ASEP) centres, a policy shift aimed at integrating teenage mothers back into the education system (MoEST & Institute of Adult Education, 2022). Some evidence suggests that the launch of the re-entry policy for teenage mothers in 2022 brought over 22,844 girls back to school by 2024 through the ASEP and other strategies (Msichana Initiative, 2024). Although these numbers offer evidence demonstrating some progress made, there remains limited understanding of the lived experiences, challenges, and resilience of teenage mothers enrolled through ASEPs, and thus a gap to bridge.

Some practical evidence suggest that teenage mothers continue to face challenges in accessing and participating in formal education, particularly in ASEP centres due to inadequate support systems (Issa & Temu, 2023). Besides the policy reforms, Tanzania has implemented stringent penalties for men who impregnate schoolgirls, including a 30-year prison sentence for offenders. These measures are intended to deter sexual exploitation of minors and reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancies in schools. Such actions are expected not only to lower the rates of schoolgirl pregnancies but also to create a safer, more supportive environment for teenage mothers who return to school. Yet, the accompanying punitive measures of a 30-year jail sentence, for the impregnating boys/men, has raised concerns, discouraging the reporting of cases due to fear, community backlash, or economic dependency on the offenders, thereby undermining community support for the strategy (The Citizen 2024a, 2024b; Human Right Watch, 2025; Richard et al., 2023). Therefore, questions remain regarding the effectiveness of these policies in areas where early marriage, poverty, and limited educational opportunities remain commonplace (Albert et al., 2014).

Despite the cited policy efforts and legal protections (MoEST & Institute of Adult Education, 2022), teenage mothers' actual experiences within the education system remain underexplored. The quest to deeply understand the existing reforms and their corresponding implementation strategies necessitate insight into both the progress made and the challenges that remain. Current research and publications have predominantly focused on systemic challenges, which have to a large extent neglected personal experiences of teenage mothers who navigate the complexities of re-admission to ASEP. Existing literature offers limited insights into the operationalization of the new policy, quality of education, support services, and the pedagogical approaches available to teenage mothers in both formal and alternative education settings. Furthermore, there is lack of documented success stories that could motivate others to re-enrol, as well as limited understanding of the unique challenges teenage mothers face in balancing motherhood and schooling (Issa & Temu, 2023; Richard et al., 2023).

In the light of this background, the current study sought to explore the practical implementation of the new policy directives adding to the understanding of inclusion, exclusion, and the gendered realities of re-entry programmes for teenage mothers in Tanzania as promulgated by the 6th government. Specifically, the study sought to elicit teenage mothers' narratives and resilience; and identify the challenges faced in participating in ASEP. By focusing on their resilience stories, challenges, and recommendations for improvement, this research provides an understanding of how teenage mothers engage with the education opportunities at their disposal and what can be done to sustain their participation and success in ASEPs. The findings offer valuable insights into the progress made towards achieving SDG 4 and SDG 5, particularly in relation to gender equality in education and protection of vulnerable populations.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study integrates attachment theory, identity theory, self-efficacy theory and critical race theory (CRT) to explore teenage mothers' educational experiences, following Naidoo, Muthukrishna, and Nkabinde (2019), in South Africa. The Attachment theory emphasizes the

importance of supportive relationships for school engagement (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1971). The incorporation of attachment theory into the study of teenage mothers' narratives is theoretically relevant and aligns with emerging perspectives in education policy and psychosocial support. Originally conceptualized by John Bowlby, it emphasized the importance of secure and enduring emotional bonds for the development of self-esteem, emotional regulation, and resilience. For teenage mothers at risk of social exclusion, stigma, and interruption in their own educational journeys, secure attachment relationships with teachers, mentors, or supportive adults within alternative education settings provide the psychological 'safe haven' necessary for re-engaging in learning and building resilience despite adversity.

Identity theory focuses on how positive self-concepts foster academic motivation (Erikson, 1968; Josselson, 1994). In the context of Tanzanian educational policy, identity theory provides a useful lens for understanding how teenage mothers in ASEPs construct their sense of self and resilience. The Tanzanian education system, particularly shaped by Nyerere's post-independence vision of national unity and development, has long used education as a vehicle for forging a collective national identity, sidelining tribal, gender, and other divisive markers in favour of inclusivity and empowerment (Haugen, 2022). Recent policy developments, like the School Re-entry Guideline, reflect a shift towards more inclusive approaches that recognize the unique circumstances and rights of teenage mothers, aiming to facilitate their academic reintegration and reconstruction of their identities within school and society. The application of identity theory in this study clarifies how these young women negotiate personal and social identities as both learners and mothers amid lingering stigma, gendered expectations, and evolving policy support.

Self-efficacy theory discusses how encouragement impacts belief in one's capabilities (Bandura, 1977, 1995, 1997), while Critical Race Theory examines systemic barriers faced by marginalized groups (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Crenshaw, 1991). Integrating self-efficacy theory into the study on teenage mothers' narratives in Tanzania's ASEP provides insight into the psychological processes that characterize their resilience and learning. Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their capacity to execute the actions required to achieve personal goals and handle challenges. In line with the current study's focus, fostering self-efficacy among teenage mothers is pertinent given their experiences with stigma, interrupted schooling, and socio-economic adversity. While the Education and Training Policy of 2014 and subsequent re-entry guidelines emphasize access, flexibility, and psychosocial support for adolescent mothers, explicit attention to self-efficacy such as interventions that build confidence in academic abilities, encourage personal agency, and model successful reintegration has remained under-explored aspect of ASEP.

Borrowing from Tsang (2022), the use of multiple theories elicits the multifaced and exhaustive experience of related policy imperatives for inclusive, learner-centred education. The theories intersect by offering complementary perspectives: the attachment and self-efficacy perspectives address the interpersonal and intrapersonal resources for teenage mothers' resilience. The identity theory connects the personal and social identity formation, whereas critical race theory adds context to these personal experiences within broader structural inequities. Additionally, the multiple theoretical perspectives facilitate a deeper understanding of individual and collective resilience in participants' stories position policy-makers to bridge the gap between structural access and actual learner transformation within Tanzania's evolving ASEP landscape. This study draws from narrative enquiry (Riessman & Polkinghorne) applied by Ohene & Garcia (2020) in the U.S. context. Reviewing these theories provides a rich framework for understanding the complexities of teenage motherhood in ASEP centres in Tanzania.

Review of related literature

Moshi and Tilisho (2023) examined the magnitude of teenage pregnancy in Dodoma, Tanzania, and identified social, economic, and cultural factors contributing to a 29% pregnancy rate. Their study highlighted poor reproductive health knowledge, low family income, and sexual abuse as significant influences. While robust in its quantitative analysis, it lacks qualitative insights into teenage mothers' personal experiences, highlighting the need for narrative-based research to explore educational barriers and resilience. Additionally, the study emphasizes the necessity for targeted interventions to address knowledge gaps and support teenage mothers' reintegration into education. Similarly, the Tanzania Education Network (TEN/MET, 2021) reports on the systemic exclusion of pregnant girls from school due to legal frameworks and a lack of accessible alternative secondary education programmes (ASEPs), particularly in

rural areas. Despite policy reforms allowing re-enrolment in alternative education centres, significant gaps in accessibility and affordability persist. This context of stigmatization and legal ambiguity calls for deeper investigation into policy implementation.

In contrast, Ohene and Garcia (2020) and Naidoo et al. (2019) utilized narrative enquiry to explore the lived experiences of pregnant and parenting teens in foster care in South Africa, respectively. Both studies highlight resilience amid societal stigma and limited support, demonstrating how attachment, identity, self-efficacy, and critical race theories inform educational strategies for teenage mothers. Collectively, these works underscore the importance of understanding personal narratives to inform interventions that support educational engagement for teenage mothers across diverse contexts.

Morgan et al. (2022) investigated the impact of teenage motherhood on educational attainment in Ghana's Volta Region. Using a descriptive case study design with a mixed-method approach, they found that poverty is a primary factor leading to a 79% school dropout rate among teenage mothers due to stigmatization and financial constraints. While the study identifies these challenges, it lacks qualitative insights into the personal experiences of these young mothers, highlighting the need for narrative-based research to explore educational barriers and resilience, which the current study aims to address.

Amod et al. (2019) explored the challenges faced by teenage mothers in South Africa, particularly in under-resourced communities where unintended pregnancies were prevalent. The rationale behind this qualitative research is the high rates of teenage pregnancies and the limited understanding of the support systems available to these young mothers. The primary objective was to investigate the lived experiences and perceptions of support among school-going teenage mothers, utilizing an ecosystemic perspective to analyze how their family, school, and community contexts influence their experiences. Methodologically, the study employed semi-structured interviews with eight purposively sampled participants, followed by thematic content analysis to identify key themes regarding their support networks. Similar to Issa & Temu (2023), whose findings (in Tnaznaia) revealed significant gaps in awareness of educational policies and highlighted the stigma faced by these young mothers, suggesting a need for further research on support systems that can effectively address the unique challenges encountered by teenage mothers, especially in marginalized areas.

Romo and Nadeem (2007) examined the mental health outcomes and educational experiences of adolescent mothers, particularly those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. The rationale for this study emerge from the recognition that adolescent mothers often face unique challenges, including lack of social support, caregiver stress, and low self-efficacy, which can adversely affect their adjustment to motherhood and educational pursuits. The main objective is to identify these risk factors and propose strategies for schools to enhance the well-being of adolescent mothers. The authors adopt a theoretical perspective that emphasizes the importance of school connectedness in promoting mental health and resilience among young mothers. Methodologically, the article reviews existing literature and synthesizes findings related to the mental health outcomes of ethnic minority adolescent mothers. In line with Richard et al. (2023) highlighting the Tanzanian perspective, the study presents gaps in understanding how schools effectively address the specific needs of teenage mothers, particularly in creating supportive environments that foster both academic success and emotional well-being.

Jochim et al. (2022) investigated the factors affecting teenage mothers' return to school in South Africa's Eastern Cape, where high adolescent pregnancy rates challenged educational outcomes. Grounded in resilience and social support theories, the research sought to understand how family, childcare access, and socioeconomic factors enable postpartum school return. Using a cross-sectional design with over 1000 young mothers, the study highlights gaps in institutional support and advocates for interventions to support young mothers' school re-engagement. This aligns with broader research needs on educational resilience and access for teenage mothers, especially in high-incidence regions.

Tanzania legal framework and context

The regulatory framework for Alternative Secondary Education Pathways (ASEP) in Tanzania for teenage mothers is shaped by a combination of statutory laws, sectoral policies, and implementation guidelines. While the right to education is constitutionally recognized, specific accommodations for teenage mothers particularly those who experienced pregnancy-related exclusion from mainstream schools are rooted in

education sector policies and supporting administrative directives. These various instruments interact to determine access, provision, and the support structure available to young mothers seeking to reengage with formal education.

In Tanzania, the right to education is ensured by the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania. In Article 11 (2) state that; *'Every person has the right to access education, and every citizen shall be free to pursue education in a field of his choice up to the highest level according to his merits and ability'*. Adding to this, in Article 11 (3). ...*'The Government shall make efforts to ensure that all persons are afforded equal and sufficient opportunity to pursue education and vocational training in all levels of schools and other institutions of learning'* (Ibid). Both articles guarantee the right to education for all, a vision of equitable educational access to all including teenage mothers marking the focus of the current study.

Additional to the Constitution, the right to education is also protected under the National Education Act of 1978 which was revised in 1995, 2002 and 2016, which provides the legal foundation for the establishment, management, and supervision of all forms of basic and secondary education in Tanzania. The Act mandates compulsory basic education and underscores the right of every child to access formal learning, but does not explicitly address re-entry for teenage mothers excluded due to pregnancy. This legislative silence historically contributed to inflexible school policies, with most pregnant girls required to withdraw from conventional secondary schools. The act, however, empowers the Minister responsible for education to make regulations and policies that facilitate inclusiveness and special arrangements for vulnerable learners, providing an opening for targeted policy reform. Section 35(3) of the Education Act stated that, ...*'Every child should be enrolled and attend school until the complete prescribed period of instruction'*. In addition, the same Act in section 56(2) addressed non-discrimination in education by stating that, *'.....No one would be refused the chance to achieve any category or stage of national education due to his race, religion or any other ideological or political beliefs'*.

The Education and Training Policy of 2014 represent a significant policy shift. The ETP 2014 acknowledges the educational marginalization of teenage mothers and explicitly commits to safeguarding re-entry opportunities. The policy outlines the development of alternative education programmes, including Complementary Basic Education in Tanzania (COBET) and the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) model to provide flexible learning schedules, modular curricula, and psychosocial support tailored to diverse learner needs, notably girls who dropped out due to pregnancy. It also calls for coordination with community structures, local governments, and civil society to support retention and reintegration efforts, emphasizing that no child should be denied education based on parental status, gender, or life circumstances.

Implementation guidelines have since been shaped by ministerial directives, National Re-Entry Guidelines (2022), and evolving sectoral strategies. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) issued circulars and the *'Guideline for Re-Entry of Pregnant School Girls after Childbirth'* (2022), which operationalizes the ETP's vision. These guidelines establish the formal pathway for teenage mothers to return to either conventional secondary schools or to transition into ASEP institutions. They outline timelines for re-entry, support obligations for school administrators (such as counselling and the prevention of stigmatization), and call for multi-stakeholder collaboration, including health and social welfare services, to ensure holistic support for young mothers. The guidelines also clarify procedures for recordkeeping, confidentiality, and engagement with families, signifying a rights-based and child-friendly approach.

The cross-sectoral plans such as the National Plan of Action to End Violence Against Women and Children (2017–2022), and Tanzania's commitments under the Education 2030 Agenda reinforce the imperative of inclusive education, gender equity, and the removal of barriers faced by vulnerable learners. These frameworks, while broader, lend policy legitimacy and momentum to targeted guidelines for ASEP. Jointly, they mandate that alternative and re-entry education pathways are not isolated interventions but part of an integrated national strategy aligned with international human rights standards.

The landscape for teenage mothers' access to alternative secondary education in Tanzania is governed by the Education Act, operationalised through the ETP 2014 and detailed in specific ministerial guidelines and directives. These instruments work in concert to enshrine teenage mothers' educational rights, framing ASEP as both a legal obligation and a policy commitment to equity, resilience, and social inclusion in the Tanzanian education system.

Research methodology

Study design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, using questionnaires and in-depth one-on-one interviews. The study selected a total of 70 teenage mothers from selected alternative education pathways in four regions with high rates of teenage pregnancy in Tanzania. This design allows for capturing rich, personal experiences, including socio-cultural household attributes, while addressing sensitive topics by using neutral language to present taboo information. Complementing the interviews, a questionnaire gathered background data such as age, stage of educational level and ASEP experience and resilience. The study employed thematic analysis to identify key patterns and themes from the narratives, providing an in-depth understanding of the teenage mothers' resilience and challenges in their educational journeys. This design enabled a holistic view of their lived experiences, shaped by socio-economic and cultural factors. The authors utilized Artificial Intelligence tools (Grok, ChatGPT, and Perplexity) for data analysis and in proof-reading the manuscript. Consistent with APA (2023) guidelines on the use of AI, however, the paper's content is an original product of the fieldwork, not generated by AI (Chetwynd, 2024).

Population sampling and sample size

This study used purposive and convenience sampling to recruit seventy (70) teenage mothers from ASEP centres across four regions, namely, Morogoro, Mwanza, Mara, and Singida. These regions and their ASEP centres were part of a larger initiative, making them accessible and contextually relevant for this paper. Initially, purposive sampling targeted teenage mothers; however, due to unknown population sizes at each centre, convenience sampling was applied, and the data collection continued until the saturation point. Collaboration with school staff helped identify eligible participants, and all available teenage mothers who consented were recruited within each centre's timeframe. Without a fixed sample size, the researcher maximized participation based on availability and willingness.

The current study visited 5 Folk Development Colleges, offering ASEP for the re-admitted teenage mothers, in Morogoro, Mwanza, Mara, and Singida. The ASEP centres selected for the current study were under a different mission with the Ministry of Education, in which the researchers had some roles. [Table 1](#) presents the demographic information of the respondents.

Study findings

Teenage mothers' experience and resilience in ASEPs

Teenage mothers were asked to indicate their perspective ('Disagree', 'Not sure', and 'Agree') with regards to experience and resilience in learning in ASEP centres in line with the theory-based statements provided in [Table 2](#).

For *Attachment, Connections, and Support*, 53% of teenage mothers feel their current relationship with caregivers positively influences their learning, but 29% disagree and 19% are unsure, indicating that caregiver support varies. When asked if caregivers support and encourage their school attendance, 47% agree, but 29% are unsure and 24% disagree, highlighting mixed experiences and a need for clearer encouragement. Nearly half (49%) find it difficult to discuss learning challenges with caregivers, but only 27% able to do so.

Table 1. Demographic information of teenage mothers ($N = 70$).

Characteristic	Category	Frequency ($n = 70$)	Percentage (%)
Age	15 years and below	17	24
	16–18 years	35	50
	19 years and above	18	26
	Total	70	100
Education level	Form I	17	24
	Form II	44	63
	Form III	9	13
	Total	70	100

Table 2. Teenage mothers' experience and resilience in ASEP ($n = 70$).

Thematic area based on theories	Theory-based statements	Disagree (F, %)	Not sure (F, %)	Agree (F, %)
Attachment, Connections, and Support	My relationship with my child's care-givers positively influences my learning presence.	20 (29%)	13 (19%)	37 (53%)
	My care-giver is supportive of my education and encourages me to attend school.	17(24%)	20(29%)	33(47%)
	I find it easy to discuss my learning challenges and needs with my care-givers.	34(49%)	7(10%)	19(27%)
Identity development and determination	Being a parent has strengthened my commitment to succeed as a student.	11 (16.5%)	0 (0%)	56 (83.5%)
	ASEP has improved my confidence and self-image as a student.	8(11%)	6(9%)	56(80%)
	I prefer studying under ASEP over mainstream secondary schools	15 (21%)	9 (13%)	43 (61%)
	Challenges, like balancing school and parenting, sometimes make it difficult to engage fully in my education	2(3%)	7(10%)	61(88%)
Self-efficacy	I feel capable of succeeding academically despite my responsibilities as a young mother.	12 (17%)	44 (63%)	14 (20%)
	I feel that my teachers and school staff are supportive and help me participate fully in school activities.	21 (30%)	18(25%)	31 (44%)
	Being a young mother sometimes made me doubt my ability to do well in school.	10(14%)	10(14%)	50(71%)
	I am motivated to attend school regularly because I believe it is important for my future.	10 (14%)	19 (27%)	41 (59%)
Critical race theory and social disregard and institutional discrimination	I believe that the educational support systems available to me effectively help me overcome challenges as a teenage mother, considering my socio-economic and racial background	31 (44%)	18(25%)	21 (30%)
	I feel that I have successfully navigated experiences of stigma or discrimination in my educational environment due to my status as a teenage mother	61(88%)	2(3%)	7(10%)
	I believe that, being a teenage mother has significantly hindered my ability to access educational resources and opportunities compared to my peers	15 (21%)	9 (13%)	43 (61%)

During an interview, R1 expresses a cautious relationship with her aunt, suggesting that her ability to share concerns is limited, which can hinder emotional support and attachment:

This is not my biological mother but rather my aunt (younger mother). My relationship with my aunt (the child's grandmother) is neither too bad nor too good. I am not very comfortable sharing my problems with her; I can only tell her very ordinary things because I am afraid of burdening her (R1 interviewee)

On the contrary, two other interviewees (R3 and R7) confirm strong familial support, which fosters a sense of belonging and stability for academic engagement:

When I decided to return to school, my aunt understood it and agreed to support and cooperate with me. Currently, my relationship with my aunt is very good. She helps me with various matters related to school and home, including transport fare, taking care of my child, and school uniforms (R7 Interviewee).

The study finds that, despite a significant portion of teenage mothers reporting positive influences from caregiver relationships on their learning, there is considerable variability in these experiences. The majority experience feelings of isolation and stigma, making them unable to discuss educational challenges. The findings indicate the need for consistent supportive dialogue spaces to cultivate effective family support systems for educational engagement and resilience.

For Identity development and determination, 83.5% of respondents feel parenthood strengthens their commitment to education, while 16.5% disagree, suggesting that, while many young mothers are motivated, a minority may need additional support to balance parenting and schooling. On ASEP's impact on confidence, 80% feel the programme improves their self-image as students, but 11% disagree, showing ASEP's positive role in identity formation, though a minority still may require more support.

In addition, regarding preference for ASEP, 61% favour it over mainstream schools, but 21% disagree and 13% are unsure. This preference highlights ASEP's suitability for many teenage mothers, though some do not perceive it as different, suggesting room for further programme differentiation. Balancing school and parenting is challenging, with 88% saying it hinders full engagement, a majority response suggesting that flexibility or added resources could help manage these dual responsibilities.

The narratives from interviews with teenage mothers indicate a complex interplay between motherhood and identity formation. Teenage mothers (like R4 and R7) demonstrate a shift in self-perception, recognizing their responsibilities as parents while striving to maintain their educational aspirations: *'I feel very different now compared to before I became a mother. Now I feel responsible for my own matters'* (R4 interviewee). The quote implies, the dual identity fosters a more robust sense of self as they navigate societal expectations and personal goals. However, the stigma associated with teenage motherhood complicates this process, as seen in negative perceptions from peers:

I know that there are people who look at me negatively as a parent and have a poor opinion of me. But I don't care, and I'm not bothered about trying to explain anything to them. I choose to stay busy with my own matters (R7 interviewee).

Based on the responses, the study finds a significant shift in self-perception and personal responsibility associated with motherhood, indicating growth and maturity in the teenage mothers' identity. The development of a positive identity amid challenges is essential for their overall development and future success.

For self-efficacy, 63% are uncertain about their ability to succeed academically with parenting duties, while 20% agree, and 17% disagree, pointing to a need for confidence-building and targeted support for young mothers. With respect to teacher and school support, 44% feel adequately supported, but 30% disagree and 25% are unsure, indicating that support levels may be inconsistent, with room for more inclusive staff involvement.

Regarding self-doubt, 71% say that motherhood has made them question their academic abilities. This prevalent self-doubt suggests ASEP would benefit from initiatives to build resilience and reduce uncertainty. On motivation to attend school for future success, 59% agree, 27% are unsure, and 14% disagree. While future aspirations seem to motivate many, some may need more immediate encouragement to stay engaged.

The narratives based on in-depth interviews similarly show respondents' capacity to manage studies alongside parenting responsibilities, and their determination to succeed academically despite challenges, confirming their strong sense of self-efficacy. For instance, R 8 stated that: *'At times, we should mingle with regular students to exchange ideas and compete in studies and exams'*. In addition, R9 stated that *'I have no fear about my studies. I find time to study and I am confident of doing well in my subjects'*. Similarly, R10 remarked that, *'parenting has disrupted my studies but not too much. I am already organized, so being a parent no longer affects my studies'*. The narratives suggest that when teenage mothers receive adequate support from families and educational institutions, their self-efficacy is strengthened, leading to higher engagement and resilience in their educational pursuits.

For social disregard and institutional discrimination, 44% feel unsupported in overcoming challenges tied to socio-economic, and racial backgrounds, while only 30% feel supported. This suggests the need for more targeted support to address these unique challenges. With respect to stigma, 88% reported experiencing it, with only 10% feeling able to manage it. This highlights the significant stigma teenage mothers encounter, underlining the importance of anti-stigmatization measures within ASEPs. Finally, 61% feel their status as teenage mothers limits their access to educational resources, indicating a perception of inequality. This response suggests the potential impact of policies aimed at equalizing access for young mothers.

The respondents' narrative from in depth interviews reveal pervasive stigma associated with teenage pregnancy, impacting their educational experiences and personal development. For instance, R10 stated that;

My family felt embarrassed about what happened but they decided to wait for me to graduate before moving somewhere else where nobody knows about me having a baby. My family are not ready to discuss the matter because they believe it brings shame to the family. They have even forbidden me from sharing my story due to fear of bullying and community disrespect.

Using a *Critical Race Theory* lens, the study finds that, stigma is not merely a personal issue but is intertwined with systemic inequalities. Teenage mothers, particularly those from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds, may face diverse challenges, including bullying and discrimination within their communities. These experiences can hinder their educational pursuits and reinforce barriers to resources.

Challenges encountered by teenage mother students in ASEPs

The narratives of teenage mothers provide valuable insights into the challenges they face while pursuing education during their early parenthood. The challenges arise from the existing legal and institutional framework, guidelines and the existing socio-cultural set up. For clarity the next section offers a discussion on the challenges in the legal framework followed by the non-legal challenges.

Legal challenges

While the legal framework and recent government guidelines in Tanzania mark progress in enhancing educational right to teenage mothers in the country, several critical challenges still exist for teenage mothers pursuing education via the ASEPs as discussed below:

Ambiguous and weak legal backing: Although the 2021 circular and subsequent 2022 School Re-entry Guideline permit teenage mothers to return to school, many teachers and administrators feel unsupported due to the lack of a clear, binding legal mandates. The guidelines are often treated as recommendations rather than enforceable obligations, which affects consistent implementation at the local level.

Unreformed expulsion provisions in Law: Some old legal provisions continue to justify expulsion for 'offences against morality' or entering wedlock, which allows continued discrimination at the discretion of local school authorities, keeping barriers high for pregnant girls and young mothers.

Administrative barriers: The 2022 guidelines stipulate complex administrative requirements for re-enrolment, such as documentation and the tight timeframe (up to two years post-birth) for teenage mothers to re-enter school. Girls who become pregnant a second time are barred from formal education, which can be unduly punitive and does not sufficiently address their long-term educational needs.

Lack of awareness and support systems: Both the public and educators are often unaware of the guidelines' details. There is insufficient dissemination and training, leading to inconsistent application and confusion among stakeholders. The absence of robust support systems including counselling and school-based childcare makes reintegration very challenging for young mothers, who must balance learning with childcare and societal stigma.

Persistent stigma and social barriers: Legal reforms have not kept pace with societal attitudes. Teenage mothers continue to face discrimination and stigma from peers, teachers, and communities, resulting in reduced motivation, isolation, and low rates of successful re-enrolment and retention.

Economic and practical hurdles: The legal framework and guidelines lack provisions for addressing the economic hardships of teenage mothers. Many face financial barriers, lack of transportation, and are burdened by additional responsibilities, making continued attendance at school extremely difficult. There is little government budget earmarked to support these needs or to provide welfare and alternative income through the ASEPs.

Gaps in Interministerial cooperation: Implementation of the re-entry guideline is not coordinated across essential ministries (Finance, Health, Social Development), leading to fragmented responsibilities and undermining holistic support. These gaps may compromise the effective implementation of the ASEPs, by limiting the mobilization of critical resources like healthcare, financial support and social-welfare services, ultimately hindering teenage mothers' ability to productively re-integrate into and achieve the intended education goals.

Non-legal challenges

Inadequate support from educational institutions: The responses based on interviews have shown that, teenage mother students often feel that educational institutions do not provide sufficient support to help them reintegrate into academic life. R1 expressed a sense of isolation and lack of support when she said, 'I am not free to state my challenges to my caretaker: I can only tell her the normal experiences of my schooling because I would not be comfortable making myself a burden to her' This indicates her struggle to seek help due to fear of burdening others.

Lack of readiness among teenage mothers: Lack of readiness among teenage mothers is one of the barriers noted in this study. Majority of respondents seem unprepared emotionally, socially and financially to re-engage with formal learning after child birth: One of such view is confirmed via R5 quotes:

My struggles are really tough; I'm actually losing hope! I refused to name the person who got me pregnant, hoping he would support me in taking care of the child. At first, he used to communicate with my sister, but now I don't know where he is and his phone is out of reach!

The challenge is made even more intense by the punitive measures on the men or boys who impregnated the teenage school girls. The laws in place, though set to protect, but often discourage reporting due to economic dependency and fear of community backlash. This consequently weakens the community support initiatives that are a requisite for successful uptake of ASEP programme.

Insufficient counselling services: The narratives based on interview demonstrate insufficient counselling services available to teenage mother students in the visited ASEPs. The responses present an impression that, despite the material and psychosocial support provided by relatives and teachers on key school practices, teenage mothers experience serious emotional challenges specifically because of absence of professional guidance and counselling. This suggests limitations for both school and home environment that surround the teenage mothers. For instance, *R8 stated that;*

I live with my mother and a sister. Both of them do their best to help me excel in this life experience. However, I feel some guidance is missing. I need someone who is learned and experienced to guide me on the best path to success.

The narratives connect to the descriptive responses on the missing institutional support for identity development, despite some family support in place.

Societal Stigma and peer pressure: The respondents' narratives based on in-depth interviews demonstrate continued societal Stigma and peer pressure on teenage mothers in ASEPs: The study noted a community's negative perceptions on teenage mothers and that teenage mothers frequently encountered stigma from their peers and community members, leading to social isolation. For instance, *R6 shared that, 'I understand that some people in my community perceive me negatively as a parent'* This feeling indicates the interviewee's awareness of negative perceptions of the community around and the impact it has on her deep-rooted self-esteem.

Bullying and harassment: In addition, some respondents declared experiencing bullying and harassment: For instance, the experience by *R6* interviewee reflects the bullying she faced upon returning to school, making her and her family feel embarrassed: *'The community has negative feeling on me. And that make my parents unhappy'* This demonstrates the societal judgement that contributes to her struggles.

Balancing responsibilities: Motherhood comes with increased responsibilities, making time management a critical determinant of the managing the parenting with academic responsibilities. For instance, *R1* expressed a deep concern about tension in managing her child's education alongside her own, when she said; *'Given my status, am foreseeing challenges to taking care of my daughter and do the schooling altogether'*. This reflects the difficulties in balancing these multiple roles after the addition of the parenting roles.

The dual roles of caring for a child while pursuing education seems to pose pressure and consequently lead to emotional instability of the teenage mothers. *R3* noted, *'Am not as calm/settled now as before I started the parenting roles'*. The quote indicates how motherhood has changed teenage mothers' sense of self and responsibility.

Family dynamics: The study observed dynamics of family support among teenage mother students, whereas some teenagers benefit from supportive family members, while others may not receive adequate assistance. *R7* shared; *'When I decided to return to school, my aunt understood me and agreed to give me cooperation and support'* highlighting the importance of having supportive family structures. In contrast, *R1* expressed uncertainty with her future, because of the unpredictable terms with her care taker, grandmother:

I will do my best. However, I can imagine several challenges ahead. My son has started school, and I foresee difficulties in taking care of him. I am compelled to consider starting a business so that I can be more resourceful for my son, cover his school fees, and manage my own educational expenses.

Some respondents' narratives indicate that, some teenage mothers' families demonstrated the feeling of isolation/alienation from their community due to shame or misunderstanding surrounding their daughter's situation. For example, the interviewee (*R10*) family has decided to wait until she graduates before moving

away due to embarrassment about her pregnancy. For instance, R10 confirmed her parents' plan to wait for her to graduate before moving somewhere else;

My family felt embarrassed about what happened, but they decided to wait for me to graduate before moving somewhere else where nobody knows about me having a baby.... They have even forbidden me from sharing my story due to fear of bullying and community disrespect.

Discussion of findings

The findings on experiences of teenage mothers in Tanzania's ASEP demonstrate both the significant challenges faced and resilience in the course of their schooling. The study observed a complex relationship between teenage mothers and their caregivers. While majority acknowledge a positive impact of relationship with caregivers on their education process, as significant segment feels unsupported by their caregivers. This disparity is reflected by the majority of teenage mothers' response on how caregivers encourage them to attend school, lack of open communication, uncomfortable feeling over discussion about learning challenges, highlighting emotional and psychological distance between teenage mothers and their caregivers. The findings link back to the *attachment theory* perspective that secure, supportive relationships are typical psychological pillar for resilience. Indeed, the lack of open discussion with caregivers among some teenage mother students reflects a faded attachment bonds that can consequently frustrate emotional state and academic engagement. This aligns with Romo and Nadeem, on the importance of fostering a supportive school environment. Similarly, Ohene and Garcia (2020), noted the role of familial support in the resilience of adolescent mothers.

The findings present identity development and determination of teenage motherhood as double-edged sword. On one hand, majority of respondents report that parenthood strengthens their motivation to learning, suggesting a shift in priorities and a growing sense of responsibility. The findings echo Morgan et al. (2022) view that teenage mothers often experience growth and maturity through their experience. On the other hand, the stigma experienced by some respondents makes the process a complicated one, consequently making it cumbersome for some to fully embrace their new identities as a mother and student altogether (Ruzibiza, 2020). Borrowing from *identity theory*, this dual experience of empowerment and stigma justifies the dynamic reconstruction of self among teenage mothers, where self-concept is shaped by the existing tension between societal labelling and personal agency in reclaiming a learner–mother identity. Empirically, the current findings add to Mutua et al. (2019) tone that reinforces multi-sectoral coordination to create supportive, stigma-free learning environment and community engagement initiatives as requisites for self-efficacy and identity reconstruction.

Majority of teenage mother respondents prefer ASEPs over the mainstream schools. Such preference suggests the need to create educational programmes that are adaptable to the unique challenges of teenage mothers. This view aligns with the perspective of Naidoo et al. (2019), that alternative educational programmes can offer a more friendly learning environment for parenting adolescents (Breda & Mokoena, 2022). In contrast, some respondents had reservation and others are uncertain about their preference on ASEPs, suggesting the need for some improvement to make all teenage mothers feel adequately supported and engaged (Issa & Temu, 2023).

The findings highlight self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to succeed, as a critical factor influencing educational outcomes. While majority of teenage mother students in ASEPs remain motivated to attend school despite their challenges, they indicate self-doubt on what their academic abilities would be. The view is consistent with Moshi and Tilisho (2023), who cited the psychological barriers of adolescent mothers, including a lack of confidence on their academic capabilities. Additionally, the study finds that, teenage mothers students perceive an inconsistent institutional support as less than half of the respondents felt adequately supported by the ASEP centres/schools, further magnifying the tension. These findings align with *Self-Efficacy Theory*, where inconsistent institutional support and persistent self-doubt challenge the mothers' trust or belief in their capacity to succeed. This implies that, more work is needed to provide tailored, empathetic support for teenage mothers, helping them build confidence in their academic abilities and manage the dual responsibilities of parenting and schooling (TEN/MET, 2021; Tetteh et al., 2020). Alternatively, Mutua et al. (2019) suggest the need to strengthening verbal persuasion and mastery experiences among the teenage mothers as a strategy to enhance their academic persistence.

The findings noted a prevalence of social disregard and institutional discrimination to quality education. Majority of respondents demonstrated feeling unsupported in overcoming these challenges, while others reported experiencing stigma. These findings echo those of Romo and Nadeem and Ruzibiza (2020), reiterating the critical role of addressing stigma to improve the mental health and well-being of adolescent mothers. Stigma, as described by majority of respondents, can lead to isolation and prevent full educational engagement (Mutua et al., 2019). This necessitates proactive community outreach and awareness campaigns aimed at reducing stigma and mobilizing familial and community support (Jochim et al., 2022). Moreover, the systemic nature of these barriers suggests that interventions should be multi-faceted (Breda & Mokoena, 2022; Chanda, 2024). According to Amod et al. (2019), such interventions should address both individual and indeed wider social and institutional structures that perpetuate inequality. Using the lens of *Critical Race Theory*, the persistent stigma and exclusion as presented by teenage mother respondents indicate systemic discrimination embedded in community and school systems. This demonstrates how intersecting demographics, namely; gender, age, and socio-economic status perpetuate educational inequity (TEN/MET, 2021).

Implications for policy and practices

The findings imply that teenage mothers' resilience is often undermined by inconsistent caregiver support, stigma, and limited psychosocial services within ASEPs. Policy frameworks must therefore move beyond guaranteeing access to explicitly mandate family-engagement and psychosocial-support components within the re-entry guidelines. This may include ensuring minimum standards on counselling provision, structured caregiver–school meetings, and referral pathways for social welfare and mental-health services. Programme designers are challenged to institutionalize regular dialogues including support groups, and mentorship circles where teenage mothers can safely discuss learning and caregiving challenges with trusted adults. This practise would strengthen attachment relationships and educational engagement.

It has also been established that teenage mother's participation in ASEP comes with significant benefits including strengthened learner identities and aspirations save for rigid timetables, inflexible curricula, and persistent stigma which in turn constrain their full participation. This implies that, policy makers are compelled to develop and refine ASEP regulations to address flexible scheduling, modular and competency-based curricula, adding to explicit anti-discrimination provisions to protect pregnant and parenting learners from exclusionary practices. At programme level, ASEP centres should pilot context-responsive practices such as on-site or linked childcare, catch-up classes, and peer-mentoring schemes that recognize teenage mothers as both learners and caregivers.

The findings imply that many teenage mothers remain uncertain about their academic capabilities despite strong motivation and supportive school practices. This calls for policies which integrate structured academic support for remedial teaching, workshops, and continuous assessment feedback into ASEP standards. This approach will ensure that school re-entry is accompanied by meaningful learning and not mere enrolment. Practically the offered programmes should deliberately design success experiences in terms of milestones recognition and leadership roles for teenage mothers so as to reinforce confidence rather than solely examination outcomes.

Finally, the study raises an implication that socio-economic marginalization and stigma, including limited access to resources and discrimination within educational spaces, continue to shape teenage mothers' experiences. Sanctions aimed at perpetrators of sexual abuse need to be complemented with protective social-protection measures for teenage mothers and their families, such as bursaries, transport subsidies, and links to cash-transfer schemes, to reduce economic dependence on offenders and facilitate sustained schooling. Future research should track ASEP cohorts longitudinally to examine completion, transition to further education or work, and intergenerational outcomes in order to inform a meaningful refinement of Tanzania's re-entry and ASEP policies.

Strengths and limitations of the study

The strength of this paper lies in its in-depth qualitative insights into teenage mothers' context-specific experience and resilience in Tanzania, drawing on multiple relevant theoretical perspectives. Additionally,

the paper attempts to bridge gaps between policy and practice, highlighting the legal ambiguities and insufficient support, as key challenges that policy makers must address. However, study's weakness is its limited generalizability, particularly due to small sample of ASEPs and absence of quantitative data that could have strengthened the qualitative claims presented.

Conclusions and recommendations

The point of view of this study is that, despite recent government actions to improve access, significant legal, administrative, economic, and social barriers persist, which inhibit educational rights and learning for teenage mothers via ASEP in Tanzania. Stronger binding legal mandates and more robust support systems are paramount to resolve the systemic hurdles and the stigma inhibiting the right to education for teenage mothers in the country. The findings have shown that, ASEPs programme presents a potential route for access to education. However, in practice, teenage mother students are striving to develop certain forms of flexibility to endure the challenges that could affect their academic goals and successes. In that view, this paper recommends incorporating flexible schedules, modular curricula, and alternative learning pathways to accommodate teenage mothers' parenting responsibilities. The narratives present both, deficiencies and positive facets of the ASEP programme. Based on that, this study recommends for data-driven systems for monitoring the reintegration outcomes.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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