

Coping with pregnancy in an academic environment: The case of pregnant student-teachers in Enchi College of Education, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Pregnancy in an academic environment poses exclusive challenges for student expectant mothers, requiring them to balance academic responsibilities with the demands of the pregnancy. Guided by Lazarus and Folkman's stress and coping theory as well as Cohen and Wills's social support theory, this study explored the coping experiences of pregnant student teachers in the academic environment, their causes, and their effects on educational attainment. A qualitative research approach was used for the study. The study employed an explorative research design, which helped the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. The target population for the study was all pregnant student-teachers in the college who were at least eight weeks pregnant at the time of the research. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 15 pregnant student-teachers for data collection through a semi-structured interview guide, and the data were analyzed thematically. The study found that student-teachers used suppression and self-motivation, as well as family support and encouragement, as coping strategies. College did not expel pregnant student-teachers as previously done because of requests from mothers to have at least a child before completing college and the desire to have a child since younger generations in society were giving birth; to secure a relationship with partners was identified as a cause of pregnancy on campus. The study found effects including re-sitting examinations, poor concentration, difficulty in studying, and difficulty in attending lectures and Supported Teaching in School (STS) activities. The study recommended that society should be sensitized to stop putting pressure on women in school to avoid most of them sacrificing education for childbirth. A further study could also be conducted to examine the effectiveness of the coping strategies employed by student-teachers on their academic attainment.

Keywords: Coping, College of Education, Enchi, Female, Pregnancy

I. INTRODUCTION

Pregnancy is a unique experience and a primary social expectation of most women; however, the demand and changes associated with this social expectation and the context within which it occurs can produce high levels of stress and anxiety for expectant mothers. In the African traditional society, most women are prudently prepared and trained to crave motherhood, while others are occasionally hard-pressed to have babies even against their wishes (Lori et al., 2024). Ghanaian society views childbirth as a significant event in a woman's life. As a result, women of the reproductive age are expected to reproduce with or without a legally married husband, making Pregnancy an acceptable occurrence in most tertiary institutions in Ghana (Etuah et al., 2018). Despite this cultural acceptance, pregnant students-teachers in tertiary institutions are required to meet academic standards and requirements. The academic environment can be exceptionally unnerving for young women who become pregnant while in school. When pregnancy-related complications tend to be more enormous (Sedgh et al., 2014), coping with them in an academic environment is demanding and necessitates cautious planning, self-care, as well as support to ensure a successful transition.

Globally, tertiary institutions have become spaces where students engage in several sexual activities (Bryant, 2023). Learners' attempts to fit into campus sexual ethos lead them into unplanned and unexpected Pregnancy. This condition can subsequently lead to emotional and psychological stress, potentially hindering the academic progress of learners due to their inability to cope with academic activities on campus. Women disproportionately balance college activities and parenthood, many without the support of a spouse or partner (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2014). Pregnancy and school attendance do not go well together, as the former has a detrimental effect on their Education and plans.

According to United Nation Population Fund (UNFPA) Ghana (2020), adolescent Pregnancy in Ghana has been a worrying trend amid the high rate of HIV contraction. They posit that between 2016 and 2020, Ghana recorded 542,131 pregnancies amongst middle and late adolescent young women. Not only are these numbers disquieting, but they are also a crucial concern with lifetime implications for the health, educational attainment, and general well-being of adolescents and society (Gyan, 2013). Most students in higher education institutions in Ghana fall within this age

category. In communities in Ghana, the experience of resource constraints, Pregnancy among students jeopardizes their Education. The prevalence of Pregnancy and its effects on the academic attainment of young students are of particular interest to the gender equality agenda. Globally, studies have focused mainly on Pregnancy among primary and secondary school students who drop out of school and the prevalence of teenage Pregnancy in Ghana (Morgan et al., 2023; Awuah & Awuku, 2021; Govender et al., 2019). However, little attention has been given to the phenomenon among students' teachers in colleges of Education and the coping mechanisms employed by student-teachers to manage academic environment activities.

With the increasing number of female students in colleges, this study aims to explore the coping strategies of pregnant student-teachers in colleges of Education and to investigate the causes and effects of Pregnancy on academic attainment. Research questions to guide the study are: What are the causes of Pregnancy among student-teachers in the Colleges of Education? What are the effects of Pregnancy on the academic attainment of pregnant student-teachers in college? What are some of the coping strategies employed by pregnant student-teachers in the Colleges of Education?

1.1 Research Objectives

This study was guided by the following objectives:

- (i) To find out the causes of pregnancy among student-teachers in the Colleges of Education.
- (ii) To examine the effects of pregnancy on the academic attainment of pregnant student-teachers in college.
- (iii) To determine the coping strategies employed by pregnant student-teachers in the college of Education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study was guided by the stress and coping theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Cohen and Wills, (1985) social support theory.

2.1.1 Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

Lazarus and Folkman's model emphasised the interplay of an individual's perceived psychological stress, coping and cognitive appraisal. The theory acknowledges that personal and situational factors as well as availability of social supports influence how people appraise and cope. This probably explains why individuals respond differently to similar situations. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), stress occurs when the person or environment relationship is appraised "taxing or exceeding their resources and endangering their well-being" (p. 19). This insinuates that stress is a personal and dynamic process, and the effectiveness of coping is dependent on a person's subjective interpretation and availability of resources.

Lazarus and Folkman identified two types of coping: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping involves doing something about the existing problem. This implies that pregnant student-teachers who employs this type of coping strategies are more likely to gather resources about their pregnancy and talk to others to help manage all pregnancy related stressors. Conversely, emotion-focused coping is concerned with one's ability to recognise that if the situation is uncontrollable, then it should be left alone with more focus placed on managing their emotions which can be controlled. The model as employed by the researchers served as a guide to understand the well-being of pregnant student-teachers at the college of education focusing on how they cognitively appraise their conditions and cope with pregnancy related stressors as well as its influence on their academic attainment.

2.1.2 Social support theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985)

The social support theory by Cohen and Wills (1985) suggests that emotional and tangible resources received from one's social network significantly impacts their well-being by aiding assistance during times of stress and promoting good health. This theory categorises social support measures as structural; the extent to which individual participates in relationships and functional; the degree to which such relationships provide identified functions for them. Thus, social supports can improve self-esteem and provide psychosocial support. Adding to this, Feeney, and Collins (2015) indicate that social support is essential in stress alleviation as well as self-management. In their main effect model, Cohen and Wills specifies that social support has a direct effect on well-being and coping. This implies that having a good social support during pregnancy could help individual lead a less stressful life in their academic environment since close and caring relationships are undoubtedly linked to good health and well-being in all spheres of life (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Although, Hughes (2025), affirms that the level and length of exposure to stressors influence anxiety and in turn affect coping, academic performance, and retention; the social support theory reiterates that individuals with strong social relationships tend to have positive impact on well-being regardless of stress level. Draggett (2021) found social support as a predictor of physical and mental health and a buffer that protects people from negative effects of stressful life event. Agreeing to this, the researchers also reiterate that when proper social support is

given, pregnant student-teachers could find the academic environment less traumatic hence aiding them in their academic attainment.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Causes of Pregnancy among Students-Teachers

Pregnancy among women differs from person to person due to varied personal, psychological, and socio-cultural reasons. Ameyaw (2018) studied the commonness and correlates of unintended Pregnancy among 4294 women in Ghana. The study recorded 29.8% overall incidence of unintended Pregnancy, and unintended Pregnancy was high among the 15-19 age cohort. Unlike older women, these young ones are more likely to engage in unplanned sexual activities, hence without any protection, possibly due to peer influence and material gains (Rahman, 2012). This suggests that most pregnancies among female students in higher Education are intended.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, students who received thorough sex education had a 50% lower risk of becoming pregnant early than those who did not. This insinuates that thorough sex education programs should be provided to the youth to equip them with adequate information and skills to make mature decisions concerning their sexual and reproductive life. According to Muneer (2023), media portrayals of early sexual relationships can romanticize early parenthood, which inadvertently normalizes early pregnancies. In addition, Muneer indicates that a lack of parental involvement in adolescent lives can contribute to early pregnancies. When parents are not actively engaged in their ward's life, they tend to seek emotional connection outside the home, which often leads to early sexual activities. Johnson (2023) indicated that most girls, out of youthful exuberance and curiosity, land themselves in an unwanted pregnancy. In addition, the poor financial condition and socioeconomic background of parents compels young girls to engage in immoral acts in their quest to cater for their basic needs in school. PLAN International June (2024) annual review report found that family and social demand for childbirth, discrimination, violence, and early marriage also increase the chances of female students becoming pregnant.

2.2.2 Effects of Pregnancy on Academic Attainment

Pregnancy, regardless of one's age and level, may have a worrying impact on learners' education. Ezenwuba (2015) investigated the perceived effects of Pregnancy on the academic performance of female nursing students in Imo state. It was revealed that physical discomforts emanating from Pregnancy tend to affect their academic performance negatively. Students miss lectures, experience challenges in their study patterns, and struggle with adjusting to motherhood as pregnant students. This suggests that academic progress is hindered as coping strategies and attention span decrease. Thabethe et al. (2020) studied the psychological experiences of pregnant students at the University of Venda in Limpopo Province. They found that many pregnant students are unable to complete their coursework and graduate on time successfully. Pregnant students experienced maternal stress, poor concentration, and anxiety, suggesting that the psycho-social issues that mothering learners must deal with make it undesirable for girls to become pregnant when studying. The fact remains that balancing Pregnancy and academic work is difficult, particularly due to the extra demands of prenatal and antenatal care and its expenses. Huddleston-Casas et al. (2009) studied the challenges and coping experiences of pregnant and parenting students in higher Education and found that pregnant students faced challenges navigating policies around maternity leave. They also faced unique challenges in accommodation, stress, and time management as well as blending personal responsibilities with academic work.

National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) of the United States of America study found that in 2013, female college students who experienced childbirth were 65% less likely to complete their degree programmes. Ayornoo and Bonsu (2022) reiterates that Pregnancy has been listed as the primary factor responsible for school dropouts of female students. Pregnant students drop out due to low self-esteem, isolation, and psychological effects, which make them skip classes, miss assignments, and exams, resulting in poor academic performance. Some college tutors maltreat and embarrass pregnant student teachers (Ayornoo & Bonsu, 2022). The effects of pregnant female students led the Zimbabwe community to expect female learners to complete high school and tertiary Education before starting a family (The Saturday Herald cited in Ezenwuba, 2015). It is more difficult for expectant mothers due to the higher rates of postpartum depression and emotional distress owing to early parenthood.

Pregnancy can negatively affect female students' academic performance. It is evidenced that pregnant students experience social stigma and other psycho-social issues, such as maternal stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem, leading to poor academic outcomes.

2.2.3 Coping Strategies of Pregnant Student-Teachers in Colleges of Education

Dabone et al. (2022) evaluated the stress-coping mechanisms used by pregnant women. They discovered that talking to a friend or family member was the most common coping mechanism employed by expectant mothers in the educational institutions. Nordzi et al. (2022) explored the challenges faced by pregnant students at the University of Education, Winneba, and strategies for supporting them. They found that pregnant students used avoidance coping mechanisms. To determine Pregnancy coping styles in healthy pregnant women, Borcharding (2015) identified prayer

and task as the most frequently used coping strategies. Phiri et al (2021) also found emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies as coping strategies employed by pregnant women to deal with stressors confronting them during and after their pregnancy.

Esia-Donkor et al. (2014) investigated the challenges faced by pregnant students at the University of Cape Coast. They found that emotion-based coping strategies were the most adopted to deal with these challenges. Guardino and Schetter (2013) conducted a study on coping behaviours and coping styles during Pregnancy. They found that most pregnant women resorted to an avoidant coping style due to postpartum depression. Generally, stress is a common experience during Pregnancy, particularly when combined with academic work; however, it can be reduced by adopting effective coping strategies, seeking support, and practicing self-care.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Approach

The explorative design was used for the study due to its flexible and adaptable nature. This design helped the researchers to gain deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. A qualitative research approach, supported by the interpretive model, was also employed in the study. The target population for the study was all pregnant student-teachers of Enchi college of education in the eighth week and beyond of pregnancy as at the time of data collection. Since this was the time, most pregnant student-teachers begin antenatal care.

3.2 Sampling Strategy

A sample size of fifteen (15) participants were selected based on the criteria outlined by Cohen, et al (2017) which stipulates that it takes 12 to 25 responses to reach saturation in qualitative interview. The purposive sampling technique was employed, as the research focused on pregnant student-teachers only. Although it is often criticized for its lack of generalizability and susceptibility to researcher bias, purposive sampling offers advantages like cost efficiency, flexibility and the ability to target information rich cases.

3.3 Data Collection

A semi-structured interview guide was used as the data collection instrument for the study. Each interview lasted for 20-35 minutes and was recorded and documented. To ensure consistency during the interview, the researcher developed an interview protocol (Durdella, 2019), which included informed consent and a sequence of questions. The protocol began with easier-to-answer questions and progressed to in-depth questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their responses and confirm their answers.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data was analysed thematically based on the stated objectives and in response to the research questions formulated for the study.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, dummy names were used throughout the reporting. Data gathered was protected from unauthorised access, disclosure and misuse. Participants were also fully informed about the research's purpose and as well had the right to withdraw from the study at any given time. Participation in the study was voluntary and free from coercion and undue influence.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussions of the study based on the objectives stated for the study. The study explored the prevalence of pregnancy among student-teachers in Enchi college of Education, how pregnancy status of students-teachers affects their academic attainment in the college, and also to determine the coping strategies employed by these students.

4.1 Causes of Pregnancy among Students-Teachers in Enchi College of Education

The study findings indicated that the causes of Pregnancy among student-teachers in the College are that pregnant student-teachers are not expelled from the College; a request from their mothers; and the long duration of the study. It was pleasing to have a child(ren) since even younger children in society were giving birth. Finally, the study found that female student-teachers used Pregnancy as a means of securing a relationship with their partners while in school. Most respondents echoed that they had planned their pregnancies, although they were not married. This contradicts the findings by Sekgobela (2008) that most expectant mothers in academic environments do not plan their pregnancies. Some participants mentioned that they wanted to have a child (or children) before completing their studies

at the College. They added that at least their mothers are strong enough to take care of their new born as they schooled. This presumed that pregnant student-teachers had social support from families providing care and comfort to aid them cope with pregnancy stressors and maintain good health. This supported Lazarus and Folkman's model that indicated that stress occurs when the environment is appraised as strenuous and endangering the individual's well-being. The findings also espoused PLAN International (2024) that the prevalence of Pregnancy among adolescents includes family, community, and social pressure and the desire to compensate for the loss of a child. The majority further indicated that they were mature enough to give birth. While others mentioned they got pregnant to trap their "boyfriends" for marriage. Though some respondents reported that their Pregnancy took them by surprise, occurred due to miscalculation of menstrual cycle and due to contraceptive failure, which buttresses the assertion by Ameyaw (2018), it can be concluded that Pregnancy among college student teachers is properly planned.

4.1.1 Planned and intentional Pregnancy

Under this theme, some respondents had this to say.

I felt like getting pregnant because anytime I see my mates giving birth, I admire it and desire to have at least one child while in school (Student 9)

A participant narrated that:

Hmmm! I do not have any planned motive for getting pregnant. I realized I had missed my period and did not want to abort, so I had no option but to keep the Pregnancy and give birth. (Student 8)

Another student teacher said:

I feel that I am ageing, so I must give birth even though I am not married. After all, when I start working after school, I will be able to take care of myself and the child, even if my baby's father fails to do so. (Student 10)

4.1.2 Society and Family Pressure

Another student-teacher also narrated that:

I do not want to be like my big sister, who waited for so many years and later could not give birth even after getting married. (Student 12)

One respondent also mentioned that:

My mother told me that she wants her grandchildren, and that once I have a serious boyfriend, I can have a baby, so she can take care of it while I am still in school, because I cannot spend all my years in school without thinking about having a child. (Student 2)

Another respondent said:

At first, I learnt that when you get pregnant while in college, you will be sacked, so I did not want to, but now that you can get pregnant and continue your studies, I want to give birth so my mum can take care of them while I am in school. (Student 15)

4.2 Effects of Pregnancy on the Academic Attainment and Performance of Student Teachers in Enchi College of Education.

The majority of the respondents indicated some level of difficulty in combining Pregnancy with studies. Respondents admitted that some colleagues had been referred or given supplementary papers to write after Pregnancy, and respondents admitted that they could have gotten better grades had it not been for Pregnancy. This suggests that, although hectic, pregnant students-teachers in colleges try to meet the demands of the academic environment, thereby maximizing learning. Most respondents mentioned that frequent antenatal care visits and ailments also led to missing some academic activities, such as lectures and Supported Teaching in School (STS). Although respondents received peer teaching at times, the explanations are not exhaustive, as they are not as detailed as those of the lecturer. This compelled them to do extra work to meet the academic requirements of the College. Again, pregnant student-teachers mentioned a reduction in the duration of personal studies due to frequent tiredness. Below are some of the responses from the participants.

I am unable to attend Antenatal care regularly because that is also the time we go for a Supported Teaching in School (STS) visit, and I do not want to miss it. (Student 3)

Schooling and Pregnancy, 'de3, saaaa' - it is not easy, but I have gone for it, so I must bear it. Most of the time I feel very uncomfortable being around even my friends, and I talk less about going to study with them. (Students 5)

I have been missing some of my lectures because I have been getting sick regularly and will have to go to the hospital. Also, I used to have group discussions with my friends, but now I can't because when I sit down for long, I begin to have swollen feet and experience severe abdominal pains. So, I am most of the time in the room lying on the bed. (Students 11)

Hmmmm! Combining Pregnancy with academic work has not been easy for me at all. I mostly feel depressed and stressed up, especially in this environment where you cannot even get a good sleep because of the nature of the bed in the dormitory. Sometimes I feel like I should defer my program and reapply after birth. It is not easy, madam. (Student 4)

4.3 Coping Strategies of Pregnant Student-Teachers

Analysis of data on the coping strategies employed by pregnant students-teachers in the academic environment emerged that, they pretend they do not care regardless of the derogatory words and comments used by colleagues and tutors. They also employed suppression to focus on their academic work. It was established that student-teachers develop self-motivation and remain focused on their academics since there was nothing, they could do about their condition but to endure. Some respondents reported receiving support from their mothers. These findings aligned with Phiri et al (2021) who found emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies as coping strategies employed by pregnant women to deal with stressors confronting them during and after their pregnancy.

One of the pregnant student-teachers said that:

Madam, I snub what they say, laugh over it, and take it as a joke even though when I go to the dormitory, I think about it. Sometimes I must act as if nothing is wrong with me to be able to focus on my studies. (Student 1)

Another student also said that:

Oh! I usually ignore some of the things they say, even though it mostly hurts. I only encourage myself that perhaps they have no idea of what I am going through with my Pregnancy. (Student 13)

One respondent narrated that:

At times, I feel embarrassed by comments like "you do not sleep at night, look at what you have brought to yourself" made by some of the tutors, which make it difficult for me to concentrate during lectures for the whole day. However, I have to let go and behave as if all is well. (Student 7)

Well! My mother told me that it is a normal experience for every pregnant woman to go through some form of pain and stress, and that after 9 months everything will be over. (Student 6)

The findings suggest that pregnant student-teachers in Colleges of Education use suppression as their coping strategy to help them remain focused in their academic environment. In line with Sincero's (2012) and Kotoh et al.'s (2022) assertion, individuals who tend to suppress challenges often cope with stress by denying or minimizing its existence. It was also established that pregnant student-teachers use silence as a coping strategy since they prefer not to share their challenges with others. This strategy, they indicated, has been one of the most effective coping strategies, thereby confirming the assertion by Nordzi et al. (2022) that concealment is often beneficial for individuals under stress. Agreeing with Lazarus and Folkman (1984) emotion-focused coping, student who recognizes to have little or no control over their pregnancy related stressors tend to leave it as it and endure the consequences. Additionally, the researchers believe that ignoring specific derogatory comments from individuals and society in general can often help minimize stress in school. Some of them had this to say:

Sometimes, even when I am not well, I keep it to myself and pretend to be okay. It is better to keep your problem to yourself than to share it with someone, and then go and tell somebody. (Student 5)

Hmmm! I do not feel comfortable telling people about my problem; I would rather keep it to myself. Because I do not know what the person also has in mind, I will not reveal it to the person. They may sometimes pretend to share your sentiment, but in your absence, they will speak negatively about you. (Student 14)

There was some reported evidence of a few situations in the current study, as some respondents indicated that the attitudes of their colleagues and tutors towards them were generally positive, while others described it as usual. And that these positive attitudes helped them in performing their academic responsibilities. This could be due to the effective GESI Committee at the College, which often sensitizes students to the need to create a positive learning environment for all learners, regardless of their condition. This finding affirmed Cohen and Wills (1985) social support theory that emotional and tangible resources received from one's social network significantly impacts their well-being by aiding assistance during times of stress and promoting good health. More so, Feeney and Collins (2015) assertion that social support is essential in stress alleviation as well as self-management was supported. One student said that:

Oooh! My roommates are very nice to me. Sometimes they get me food to eat when I find it difficult to go out for dining. There is one lady in my room who even washes my things for me, mostly when she is washing hers. (Student 7)

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Pregnancy is a primary social expectation of most women; however, coping with it in an academic environment necessitates cautious planning, self-care, and support to ensure a successful transition since pregnant students are required to meet academic standards and requirements while in school. It is evidence that student teachers in colleges of education plan and intend their Pregnancy. Also, student teachers opine that the stress of Pregnancy affects academic performance negatively and can also extend study duration. Finally, they use I do not care, avoidance, and suppression as coping strategies.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommended that this study be replicated at other colleges of Education, and future studies could also highlight the importance of supportive policies and resources for pregnant students in colleges of Education in Ghana. And, to examine the effectiveness of the coping strategies employed by student-teachers on their academic attainment. Society should also be sensitized to stop putting pressure on women in school to avoid most of them prioritizing childbirth over academic attainment. It is further recommended that pregnant student-teachers should seek for more proper social support to help them adjust to pregnancy related stress, hence aiding their academic attainment.

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