PSYCHOSOCIAL CHALLENGES OF ADOLESCENT STUDENT MOTHERS IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS: GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Adolescent pregnancy is on the increase in Ghana, meanwhile most of these adolescents are students mostly schooling in second cycle institutions. The study adopted the qualitative approach to explore the psychological challenges facing adolescent student mothers, and their coping strategies in senior high schools in the Jaman South District of the Brong-Ahafo Region of Ghana. Interview protocol was used to collect data. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select 15 participants out of a population of 85 adolescent student mothers for the study. Data were analysed using thematic and content analysis. The study revealed that the psychological challenges adolescent student mothers faced were, ridicule, inactive in class, loneliness and feeling of guilt. The student mothers used vicarious experience and avoidance of other students as coping strategies. It was therefore recommended that school counsellors should organize group counselling for adolescent student mothers to enable them cope with their situation.

Key words: Psychosocial difficulties, adolescent student mothers.

Introduction

Parenting can be challenging and stressful for any person includin0g adolescent student mothers. Adolescent motherhood is mostly unplanned and as a result, adolescent student mothers are relatively exposed to varied psychosocial challenges. This is usually due to the fact that teenage motherhood subjects adolescents to varied psychosocial crises in their developmental journey.

Parenting poses psychosocial implications on adolescent student mothers because they become overwhelmed with difficulties in meeting educational, physical, emotional and financial needs (Thompson, 2010). For instance, Gyan (2013) found out that teenage mothers experience more deprivation, mental health difficulties, low educational attainment, emotional tantrum and behavioural problems. It has also been realized that teenage mothers often blame the school for bringing more stress than solutions and also often reveal their emotional instability in the form of shame, guilt, anger, self-doubt and dissatisfaction with their parental role (Adqasuraq, & Kualaga, 2012).

According to the World Health Organization (2014) Fact Sheet about 14 million pregnancies occur across Sub-Saharan Africa, with nearly half of them occurring among women aged 15 to 19 years. The Jaman South District also faces a similar situation. For instance, from 2014 to 2016, the Jaman South District recorded 73 pregnancy cases among students aged between 14 and 19 years (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014).

Adolescent student mothers (ASM) experience feelings of fear with the sudden awareness of motherhood. The double role of being a mother and learner is a major concern that impacts on the psychological development of the learner (Yussuf, & Afolayan, 2009). The adolescent mothers, especially student mothers have mix feelings about the behaviours of the people in their communities, because they in as much as they cherish children they also frown on teenage mothers (Faku, & Kablavoh, 2006). The study by Tezza and Gulanhem (2010) indicates that adult frown on adolescent student mothers because they taking care of children demands physical and emotional stress. Literature indicates that adolescent student mothers are not able to balance child care and education favourably since such mothers have to bath, dress and feed their children every day still have to contend with their academic work. These make adolescent student mothers undergo psychological challeges (Tezza & Gulanhem 2010; Banko, Navraga, & Obansa, 2012) that affect their academic performance. Some eventually end up abandoning their courses due to psychological challenges and their attendant academic non-achievement.

In a study conducted by Ansah and Tiwaah (2007) about adolescent student mothers in Manso Nkwanta Township, it was found that 82% of the students gave "names" (names, words, phrases that attract laughter from people) to adolescent student mothers. On their part the adolescent student mothers stated that they received unattractive comments from some of their colleagues and teachers. To them such behaviours from the people around them make it difficult

for them to attend lessons regularly and also contribute effectively in class. According to Gyan (2013), adolescence pregnancy and its associated motherhood are mostly characterized with shame, disgrace, stigmatization and loneliness, which result in teenage mothers experiencing psychological challenges. These conditions most often lead to complicated situations where these mothers may have low self-esteem and feel uncomfortable in the school. The situation that adolescents have become mothers presents a great challenge; and studies have alluded to the fact that adolescent motherhood sometimes ends the individual's dreams of achieving higher academic qualifications (Yussuf & Afolayan, 2009; Gyan, 2013).

Studies on the psychological challenges of student motherhood in Ghana have focused mainly on the student mothers at the tertiary level (Opong-Mensah, Ahiatrogah & Deku, 2008; Esia-Donkor, 2014). Apparently, research findings on student mothers at the tertiary level may not be wholly applicable to adolescent student mothers in the sen-ior high schools because of contextual differences. Again, virtually no studies have been conducted on psychological challenges of adolescent student mothers in senior high schools in the Jaman South District in the Brong Ahafo Region. This study would contribute by filling the research gap with regard to the psychological challenges of adolescent student mothers in high schools and how they cope with these challenges. The findings of the study would also awaken the Ministry of Education to come out with pragmatic and workable policies on adolescent student mothers' education.

Objectives of the Study
The objectives of the study were to:
1. Identify the psychosocial challenges adolescent student mothers in senior high schools in the Jaman South District encounter.
2. Identify the coping strategies adolescent student mothers adopt to minimize the psychosocial challenges they encounter in school.

Research Questions
1. What psychosocial difficulties do adolescent student mothers in senior high schools in the Jaman District encounter?
2. How do adolescent student mothers cope with the psychosocial difficulties they encounter in school?

Methodology
The study adopted the qualitative phenomenological research approach. It was underpinned by the interpretive paradigm which assumes that understanding of

the social world can be deepened through conscious effort to explore the experiences, feelings, and viewpoints of respondents (White, Morrison, & Jane, 2011). This approach was adopted to enable the researchers explore and obtain first-hand information about the psychological challenges faced by adolescent student mothers in senior high schools in the Jaman South District in the Brong Ahafo Region.

The population of the study consisted of 85 ASMs in the five senior high schools in the Jaman South District in the Brong Ahafo Region. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to select 15 ASMs who were from the ages of 15 to 18 years and had babies below years (5) years and were not married. The reason was that children under 5 years would require more attention as compared to those over 5 years (Abebrese & Mumuni, 2007). Again, the adolescent student mothers who had no husbands were selected in order to have a common trend of challenges they encountered. Interview guide was used for data collection. This elicited information on socio-demographic characteristics of adolescent student mothers, their psychological challenges and associated coping strategies.

Face-to-face interview, on one-on-one basis, was conducted for data collection. Analytical themes from the qualitative data were determined in accordance with the research questions; because in the view of Thorndike and Daniel (2001), one way of handling a study data involving the use of interview guide is to use the interview guide questions to organize the data into categories. Patterns of consistencies, similarities and differences are crucial in analyzing qualitative data (White, Morrison, & Jane, 2011) were identified.

Results

Table 1 presents the summary of the thematic analysis of the interview data

Table 1: Summary of Thematic Analysis of Psychosocial difficulties and Coping Strategies of Adolescent Student Mothers

Themes	Sub-themes
Psychosocial difficulties	Ridicule
	Inactive in class
	Loneliness
	Feeling of guilt
Coping strategies	Taking inspiration from vicarious experience
	Avoiding contact with other students

Psychosocial difficulties

The findings on research question 1 which focused on this theme showed that adolescent student mothers experienced psychosocial challenges in so many ways. The most common forms of psychosocial challenges faced includes ridicule, inactive in class, loneliness in school, and feeling of guilt.

Ridicule

The participants reported that they were rediculed because that affected their psychological state. Some of them confessed that their classmates were calling them by the names of their children. This name-calling sometimes intimidated some of them. This participant recounted that:

> "My classmates eventually replaced my name with the name of my daughter and it was quite disturbing. They do call me 'Maame Rose' or 'Bervilin Maame'. This hurt me a lot" (ASM 1).

For some adolescent student mothers, the name calling initiated sudden outbursts of anger and frustrations:

> "Some of my classmates at times embarrass me. Whilst in class, they will come and call me 'Maaame' (mother) go and breastfeed your baby, your baby is crying. This makes me annoy" (ASM 10).

Inactive in class

The interviews revealed that adolescent student mothers became inactive in class. Most of the students always wanted to hear what adolescent student mothers would say and mock them especially when they give wrong answers. Some teachers also pass some unfavourable comments about adolescent student mothers which make them stay put in class. One participant recounted that:

> "I always keep quiet in class because some boys whether you get the answer right or wrong will still mock you, complimenting your answer with, well done young madam. Such comments seriously affect my studies since I am not able to ask questions during lessons about issues that I do not understand" (ASM 4).

Again, comments by some teachers worsened the plight of adolescent student mothers in the school. One participant had this to say:

> "I find it very difficult to interact with some teachers because of how some of them behave towards me. For example, once a

> *teacher told me that he cannot ask mothers questions in class.*
> *Such actions from teachers make it very difficult for me to*
> *approach them for assistance to improve my academic work"*
> *(ASM 5).*

The comments above by adolescent student mothers show that they were inactive in the classroom.

Loneliness in School

It was found from the interviews that participants were lonely because of the unattractive behaviours of their colleagues in their schools. One interviewee commented that:

> *"It is difficult to join them when they are conversing because of*
> *the kind of things they talk about. They do not talk about*
> *things in relation to child caring and marriage. I hardly join*
> *them in conversation. This situation is not good for me*
> *because I am not able to socialize with them"* (ASM13).

Another interviewee said that:

> *"I am not able to join colleagues for extra-curricular*
> *activities because they shun my company. Some tell me that*
> *mothers do not play games. When I gave birth, I lost almost*
> *all my friends. I feel it"* (ASM 6)

The interviews showed that adolescent mothers were lonely because they found it difficult to socialize and participate in extracurricular activities in school.

Feeling of Guilt

Most of the participants had a sense of guilt for being mothers. A participant who felt guilty about her situation lamented that:

> *"Hmmm … I think a lot about my situation and feel that I*
> *have disappointed my auntie who promised to send me to*
> *Canada when I complete SHS but this situation has halted the*
> *whole arrangement so I think a lot"* (ASM 11).

Another participant added that:

> *"It pains me a lot that I couldn't wait for the right time before*
> *giving birth. I feel much guilt within me because I have set a*
> *bad precedence for my younger siblings"* (ASM 7).

From the above data it could be concluded that the adolescent student mothers in the Jaman South District have ridicule, inactive in class, loneliness in school and feeling of guilt as the psychological challenges that they encounter in school.

Coping Strategies

Adolescent student mothers employed several strategies to cope with the psychological challenges that come with taking care of children and schooling concurrently. From the interviews it was realized that they adopted self-determination, avoidance of biting comments as well as drawing inspiration from vicarious experiences as coping strategies.

Taking Inspiration from Vicarious Experiences

Most of the adolescent student mothers recounted that seeing other people in similar situations excelling strengthens their self-efficacy. Therefore, effective learning through observation of the consequences of actions of other people influences the adequacy and competence of adolescent student mothers to cope with parenting and psychological challenges.   Some of the participants mentioned during the interview that they took solace from friends and sisters in similar situations who have gone through school successfully. One of the adolescent student mothers recounted that:

> *"I encouraged myself and also took solace from those in similar situation who have gone through successfully in school. If others have succeeded in similar situation then I have to rise to fulfill my dreams. This has made me focused so as to achieve my aim"* (ASM 4).

Similarly, this participant had this to say:

> *"The same thing happened to the younger sister of my mother. She gave birth when she got to SHS. She studied hard and passed her final examinations, hand admission into the Nursing Training College, and she is now a nurse at Sunyani Regional Hospital. Her situation motivates me to study hard as all is not lost"* (ASM 15)

Avoiding contact with other students

Some participants identified avoidance of biting comments as a strategy they used to avoid ridicules from their colleagues. The following statements express how some participants utilised avoidance to cope:

"… I decided not to move with them. This has helped me from a lot of hurt I feel from my classmates (ASM 2)

Discussion

Psychosocial difficulties of Adolescent Student Mothers

The study again established that adolescent student mothers were ridiculed by their teachers and classmates. Most of them recounted being given nicknames by their classmates and teachers which affected their concentration in class. Name-calling could intimidate some of them to the extent that they will feel uncomfortable in school. This finding confirms a study by Ansah and Tiwaah (2007) which noted that teenage mothers did not see the school as a welcoming environment because their colleague students and teachers no longer called them by their names. This has the tendency to intimidate and make them resentful which may steadily affect their lessen contribution in class. They further explained that such situation could belittle, humiliate and embarrass the student mothers making the school environment not conducive for them.

It was discovered that adolescent student mothers felt lonely and isolated. Most of their friends shunned them for fear of being classified in the same category with teen mothers. Consequently, they were no longer interested in mingling with their peers who were not mothers. This finding confirms some findings which noted that having a baby influenced a teenage mother to feel lonely and isolated and no longer willing to interact with their peers (Teeza & Gulanhem 2010; Banko, Navraga & Obansa, 2012). This situation could affect their studies since isolates find it difficult to share ideas and express their opinions in any learning environment (Stephenson, 2013).

Moreover, it was realized from the study that adolescent student mothers felt guilty about their situations. This finding confirms a study by Tezza and Gulanhem (2010) which showed that adolescent mothers felt guilty and worried because they had the conviction that their younger siblings might copy the act and become teenage mothers. It is emphasized that adolescent student mothers should be motivated to see themselves as smart, confident and strong to help them meet the challenges of schooling (Banko, Navraga & Obansa, 2012).

Coping Strategies by Adolescent Student Mothers

It was found from this study that adolescent student mothers employed taking inspirations from vicarious experience. Vicarious experience is a pathway to self-efficacy that is derived from seeing others act in a particular domain (Lambrakuza, & Hafara, 2002,). This study finding tallies with the finding by Tezza and Gulanhem (2010) who revealed that adolescent mothers took solace from their friends and sisters who were in a similar situation but went through their academic work successfully. Yussuf and Afolayan (2009) have observed that

when adolescent student mothers observe the success of other people in a situation similar to themselves, it has the tendency to bolster their confidence. This observation is also expressed in the views of Stephenson (2013), when he indicates that learning from experiences can be used to bring about attitude modification among students.

Additionally, this study found that adolescent student mothers avoided contact with students in order to avoid biting comments from their colleagues that seem to belittle or humiliate their status. This study supports the view of Stephenson (2013) who states that distressed students avoid environments that make them feel more uncomfortable.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The life of adolescent student mothers has not been easy for them, since they are always under constant psychological challenges in the hands of their colleagues and teachers. The study revealed that adolescent student mothers encounter psychological challenges which include ridicule, inactivity in class, loneliness and guilt feeling. In attempt to overcome all these challenges, they adopted vicarious experience and avoidance of students as coping strategies. It was therefore, recommended that school counsellors should organize group guidance for adolescent mothers to enable them cope properly with their situation. This will help in the smooth integration of adolescent student mothers and as a result improve the psychological outcomes of these young mothers and their academic pursuits.

Guidance and Counselling Implications

The psychological make-up of any individual is very crucial in their lives; so it is with students in their educational endeavours. This being the case, the findings of this study should therefore be given a serious consideration in the context of their guidance and counselling implications. The study found out that the adolescent student mothers had psychological challenges. The se would no doubt affect the educational lives, both socially and academically. There is therefore the need for adolescent students in general to be offered guidance on sex education. This should among other considerations, touch on teenage pregnancy and its attendant problems and commitments. Guidance information should not be limited to students but also be extended to parents and guardians to help in the guidance process of educating their wards.

The study also found out that adolescent student mothers used avoidance of contact with other students as coping strategies of their motherhood predicament. There is the need for such student mothers to be encouraged through guidance talks to mingle with other colleagues for their social and emotional stability and academic work. It would also be proper for school counsellors to offer guidance talks and make it known to other students the negative effect their attitude would have on their colleagues who might by some circumstances become student mothers. Guidance functionaries such as teachers, housemasters and housemistresses need to play a good role by quickly referring pregnant students to the school counsellor for necessary help. This would go to forestall any unpleasant situation that would affect the students' lives socially, emotionally and academically.

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