journal of ethics in higher education

Teacher-Student Relationships and Engagement Strategies on Teenage Mothers' Learning in Non-Formal Secondary Education

The Case of Tanzania

Anna John Ntiruvakule, Luka Mkonongwa

Department of Educational Foundation and Continuing Education, University of Dodoma, Tanzania.

June 2026

Keywords

Teenage mother, Tanzania, education, teacher-student relationship.

Abstract

This study examined the influence of teacher–student relationships and engagement strategies on the learning of teenage mothers in non-formal secondary education (NFSE) settings in Tanzania. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining questionnaire data from 197 teenage mothers and 91 teachers with semi-structured interviews from six selected NFSE centres. The data were analysed descriptively and thematically. The findings revealed that positive teacher–student relationships, characterised by respect, open dialogue, and emotional support, significantly enhance teenage mothers' engagement and participation. However, despite teachers' awareness of learners' low motivation and unique challenges, there is limited implementation of individualised support, mentoring, and structured engagement strategies. The study contributes to existing knowledge by demonstrating the critical role of relational and pedagogical practices in improving educational participation among teenage mothers in NFSE contexts. It recommends targeted professional development for teachers, strengthened institutional support systems, and improved policy frameworks that promote inclusive education and quality education or sustainable conditions for young mothers.

Corresponding Author: Anna John Ntiruvakule, University of Dodoma, Tanzania. Email: annantiruvakule@gmail.com

To quote this article: Ntiruvakule, Anna John, Mkonongwa, Luka. 2026. "Teacher-Student Relationships and Engagement Strategies on Teenage Mothers' Learning in Non-Formal Secondary Education: The Case of Tanzania" *Journal of Ethics in Higher Education* 8.2(2026): 217–240. DOI: https://doi.org/10.26034/fr.jehe.2026.9509 © the Author. CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Visit https://jehe.globethics.net

1. Introduction

The global challenge of teenage pregnancy continues to disrupt girls' educational trajectories, particularly in developing nations where early motherhood significantly limits future socio-economic opportunities (UNESCO, 2015; UNFPA, 2020; World Bank, 2022). In Tanzania, the repercussions of teenage pregnancies have prompted vital policy reforms aimed at facilitating the re-entry of young mothers into formal schooling or alternative pathways such as Non-Formal Secondary Education (NFSE) centers (MoEST, 2024). The introduction of Education Circular No. 2 of 2021 allows young mothers to continue their education after childbirth, embodying Tanzania's commitment to the principles of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), which advocate for inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UNESCO, 2015). This policy aligns with a broader recognition of the need for educational systems to be responsive to the unique challenges faced by teenage mothers, reflecting a shift towards creating educational environments that support their specific needs and aspirations.

Despite these advancements in access, the sustained engagement of teenage mothers in NFSE remains a significant challenge, as they often confront a multitude of academic, social, and psychological obstacles. Rigid educational timetables frequently clash with childcare responsibilities, forcing many to choose between attending classes and fulfilling their roles as primary caregivers. In addition, financial constraints can limit access to necessary resources, further exacerbating dropout rates (Mgunda et al., 2024). Social stigma attached to teenage motherhood compounds these issues, leading to feelings of low self-esteem and emotional stress that can hinder academic participation (Fallis, 2013; Birungi et al., 2015; Mgunda et al., 2024; Tobister et al., 2024). The role of teachers is critical in this context, as insufficient teacher preparedness and a lack of psychosocial support uniquely affect the educational outcomes of teenage mothers (Costantine et al., 2025). A supportive and understanding classroom environment can significantly mitigate some of the barriers these young women face, highlighting the need for professional development that equips teachers with the skills to address these challenges effectively.

International and national initiatives reflect a growing recognition of the need to support teenage mothers in educational settings (MoE, 2020; UNICEF, 2022). However, despite the commitment underscored by policies, the persistent issues faced by young mothers suggest that the gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities remains wide. In developed countries, the support offered to teenage mothers often includes flexible scheduling, access to childcare, and life skills training aimed at fostering empowerment and resilience (Lee et al., 2020; World Bank, 2019). However, in many Sub-Saharan African contexts, while some re-entry policies have been established, systematic challenges such as inadequate financial resources, stigma, and insufficient educational infrastructure continue to limit their effectiveness (Ngaza& Mwila, 2022; Timothy & Juhudi, 2023). These compounded challenges suggest that access alone is not enough; there must be a comprehensive approach that considers the full range of obstacles teenage mothers encounter.

The current body of literature has extensively documented the policy landscape surrounding teenage mothers and the systemic barriers they face in re-entering education (Darroch et al., 2016; Tobister et al., 2024; Mgunda et al., 2024). Yet there is a notable empirical gap concerning the specific interactions and dynamics within NFSE classrooms that influence learning outcomes for teenage mothers. Specifically, the role of teachers, particularly their instructional strategies, levels of psychosocial support, and overall attitudes toward this demographic, has received insufficient attention (Tobister et al., 2024). Understanding how these factors play into the broader educational experience is critical for developing effective teaching methods tailored to meet the unique needs of teenage mothers. The dynamics in NFSE classrooms are pivotal for translating policies into practical support, and enlightening this aspect could lead to improved engagement and academic success for young mothers.

This study aims to fill the existing knowledge gap by investigating the specific ways teachers influence the educational experiences of teenage mothers. It seeks to assess teachers' engagement strategies, delve into the psychosocial support they provide, and explore their attitudes toward teaching teenage mothers within the NFSE framework (Darroch et al., 2016).

By concentrating on these teacher-related determinants of engagement, the research aspires to generate empirical evidence that can inform interventions aimed at enhancing teacher capacity and fostering supportive learning environments. This study ultimately aims to contribute significantly to the discourse on effective educational practices for teenage mothers, focusing on actionable recommendations that can improve academic outcomes and engagement in Tanzanian NFSE centers.

Objective of the study and Research Question

This study examines how teachers' engagement strategies and attitudes influence the learning experiences and academic engagement of teenage mothers in non-formal secondary education (NFSE), addressing the research question: How do teachers' engagement strategies and attitudes affect the learning experiences and academic engagement of teenage mothers in NFSE settings?

Theoretical Underpinning of the Study

The foundation of this study is rooted in educational engagement theory as articulated by Rachmad (2022), which posits that engagement is a dynamic and collective endeavor requiring active involvement and commitment from all participants in the learning process, including students, teachers, and educational institutions. This theory transcends the simplistic notion of physical presence in the classroom, framing engagement as a complex construct that intricately weaves together emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of student involvement in educational activities (Rachmad, 2022). For teenage mothers in Non-Formal Secondary Education (NFSE) settings, this theoretical lens is particularly vital, as it highlights the importance of customizing educational methodologies to resonate with their distinct needs and interests. Key indicators of engagement delineated by this theory, such as enhanced attendance, active class participation, improved academic performance, and greater satisfaction with learning experiences, are critical metrics for evaluating the effectiveness of educational strategies tailored to this demographic (Wang, 2025). The practical applications of educational engagement theory within the context of the current study are

profound. It underscores the obligation of educators to cultivate an environment that actively promotes engagement, specifically addressing the unique hurdles faced by teenage mothers. By employing interactive and supportive teaching strategies, including engaging instructional methods and robust psychosocial support systems, educators can empower teenage mothers to attain both academic and personal success. Furthermore, this theoretical framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how various factors, such as the attitudes of teachers and the mechanisms of support can significantly elevate engagement levels among teenage mothers in educational contexts. Ultimately, this focus on engagement equips individual teenage mothers with the essential skills needed to navigate their challenges and positively reshape their educational trajectories and everyday lives. Such an emphasis is crucial for fostering long-term educational advantages, enabling these young women to break free from the cycles of poverty and inequality often exacerbated by early motherhood, thereby enhancing their overall quality of life and future prospects.

2. Methodology

Research approach and design

The study employs a mixed methods research approach utilizing a convergent parallel design, which is particularly beneficial for exploring the multifaceted issue of teachers' influence on teenage mothers' engagement in learning within Non-Formal Secondary Education (NFSE) centers. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, this approach enhances the validity and credibility of the findings, enabling a more nuanced interpretation of the results (Creswell, 2018). Specifically, quantitative data provided measurable insights into engagement levels and academic performance, while qualitative data can offer rich, contextual understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by teenage mothers in the classroom. This duality not only allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the research problem but also adds value by addressing the limitations often associated with singular methodological approaches. The practical implication in this context is that the findings can inform more effective educational strategies and policy

development, aimed at improving the learning environment for teenage mothers. Ultimately, the utilization of mixed methods provides a broader perspective on how teachers' instructional approaches and support systems can be optimized to enhance engagement and educational outcomes for this vulnerable group.

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

This study was conducted in six Non-Formal Secondary Education (NFSE) centers selected from a total of fourteen in Mwanza Region, utilizing a simple random sampling technique to ensure that each center had an equal chance of inclusion. The sample consisted of 197 teenage mothers and 91 teachers drawn from these centers, which enhances the representativeness and generalizability of the findings. Additionally, purposive sampling was employed to select key informants, including six center coordinators (one from each selected center), a Regional Resident Tutor, and a Regional Adult Education Officer. This dual approach provides a robust data set, combining quantitative insights with qualitative, in-depth perspectives essential for understanding the contextual factors influencing engagement among teenage mothers. The informants provided their expertise and experiences enrich the study, allowing for a more comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the educational dynamics at play. This holistic understanding is crucial for developing effective strategies and policies tailored to improve engagement and support for teenage mothers in NFSE environments.

Data Collection, Analysis Plan and Ethical Concern

Data for this study were collected using questionnaires administered to 197 teenage mothers and 91 teachers, incorporating both open and closed-ended questions to gather comprehensive information on teachers' approaches that enhance teenage mothers' engagement in learning within Non-Formal Secondary Education (NFSE) centers. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants to gain detailed insights into the strategies teachers employ to influence engagement among teenage mothers. This mixed-methods approach allowed for the triangulation of data, enriching the overall understanding of the educational dynamics at play.

However, analysis was made descriptively through mean and standard deviation for the quantitative data, whereas thematic analysis was for the qualitative data. The study adhered to established ethical standards, obtaining necessary ethical clearance and permissions from relevant authorities, including the University of Dodoma Research Committee and the Mwanza Regional Administrative Secretary. Participants were thoroughly informed about the study's purpose, and informed consent was secured prior to data collection. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used, and data were stored securely with appropriate encryption measures.

Validity and Reliability of the Study

To ensure the reliability of the data collection tools, Cronbach's Alpha was applied to the quantitative data, serving as a method to assess the internal consistency of the scales employed in the study. A reliability coefficient above the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, as indicated by Creswell (2018) and Taber (2018), was considered a marker of good reliability, suggesting that the items within the scales are measuring the same underlying construct. In addition to this quantitative measure, the study also addressed key aspects of trustworthiness, specifically focusing on credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. These components are crucial for enhancing the overall integrity of the research findings. By implementing these measures, the study ensured that the data collected not only accurately represent the educational experiences of teenage mothers in non-formal educational (NFSE) settings but also provide valuable insights for developing effective educational strategies and interventions tailored to their unique needs. Thus, the combined use of Cronbach's Alpha and trustworthiness criteria contributes to a robust understanding of the subject matter.

3. Results

Approaches Teachers use to engage teenage mothers in the teaching and learning

This study sought to explore the approaches teachers use to engage teenage mothers in the teaching and learning process in the NFSE program. Based on the analysis, the following sub-themes were identified to address the third specific objective of the study, which is the teacher-student relationship, teaching strategies and methods, formative assessment techniques, motivation and engagement techniques, support systems and resources and professional development and training.

Teacher-Student Relationships

This study aimed to explore whether or not the teacher-student relationship encouraged learners to participate fully NFSE programme. A Likert scale with five points (i.e., 1. Strongly Agree =SA, 2. Agree = A, 3. Neutral = N, 4. Disagree = D, 5. Strongly Disagree = SD) was used to ascertain the teacher-student relationship and how it affects teenage mothers' school engagement, are presented in Table 4.1:

Table 4.1 Teacher-Student Relationships

Statement	Likert Scale				
	SD	D	N	A	SA
I encourage teenage mothers to share their personal experiences in classroom discussions.	3(3.3%)	20(21.98%)	16(17.58%)	25(27.47%)	27(29.67%)
I create a welcoming environment for teenage mothers at the beginning of each class.	5(5.49%)	19(20.88%)	25(27.47%)	10(10.99%)	32(35.16%)

I try to learn the names of all teenage mothers in my class within the first week of the term.	3(3.3%)	16(17.58%)	19(20.88%)	24(26.37%)	29(31.87%)
I follow up with teenage mothers after expressing their concerns about their studies.	3(3.3%)	16(17.58%)	19(20.88%)	30(32.97%)	23(25.27%)
I provide one-to-one learning support to teenage mothers after a normal class session	6(6.59%)	35(38.46%)	15(16.48%)	14(15.38%)	21(23.08%)
I encourage teenage mothers to participate in every classroom activity	3(3.3%)	23(25.27%)	15(16.48%)	30(32.97%)	20(21.98%)
I respect the opinions of teenage mothers during classroom discussions	2(2.2%)	7(7.69%)	26(28.57%)	26(28.57%)	30(32.97%)
I maintain a positive attitude to foster trust with teenage mothers in my class.	17(18.68%)	20(21.98%)	6(6.59%)	21(23.08%)	27(29.67%)
I invite teenage mothers to visit my office whenever they experience learning challenges	1(1.1%)	26(28.57%)	7(7.69%)	27(29.67%)	30(32.97%)

Data from Table 4.1 indicates that a significant number of teachers, 57 (62.6%), agreed that they invite teenage mothers to visit their offices whenever they face learning challenges. Additionally, 56 (61.5%) affirmed that they respect the opinions of teenage mothers during classroom

discussions. Moreover, 53 (58.2%) of teachers reported that they not only follow up with teenage mothers after they express concerns about their studies, but also try to learn the names of all teenage mothers in their classes within the first week of the term. By inviting teenage mothers to visit their offices, respecting their opinions, and actively following up with those who face challenges, the teachers demonstrate respect, kindness, understanding, commitment, and trustworthiness. This approach helps establish and maintain a caring and warm environment for the teenage mothers.

However, the study revealed that 41(45%) disagreed that they provided one-to-one learning support to teenage mothers after a normal class session, whereas only 35(38.9%) agreed with the notion. This indicates that there are a few teachers who provide one-to-one mothers one to one learning support. These findings are important because they show the strengths and gaps in teacher–student relationships with teenage mothers, highlighting generally positive interaction and respect, but also revealing inconsistencies in individualized support, follow-up, and accessibility, with implications for strengthening trust, communication, and consistent learner support.

Through an interview, teenage mothers were asked to indicate the quality of the teacher-student relationship they aspired to. Teenage mothers pointed towards the different personal characteristics – what we refer to as 'teacher being' – that they found important in order for a teacher to be considered a good teacher. These characteristics reflect the teacher's capacity to relate to the teenage mothers and to do a good job as a teacher. One teenage mother said,

> "A teacher should be 'caring', 'fair, 'kind' and 'funny'", and 'fair'. Another teenage mother said: "To me, a good teacher is the one who thinks about students, makes the students happy. Think about what is best for the students…. make students feel safe with him/her" …

teenage mother said thatthey wanted their teachers to build relationships with them by getting to know them, listening to them, and being friendly. Or, as some students suggested, by being like an 'extra parent' (e.g. 'They should

be like an extra parent, like my parent during the daytime). According to the teenage mothers, if teachers were considered not to represent these personal characteristics, such as being hostile and aggressive instead of kind, being too strict, uncaring, unhelpful, and unfair, and not building relationships with the students, this would have a negative influence on students' learning process.

In sum, the analysis of the students' narratives highlights how teachers are viewed as promotors of a good school climate, where 'teacher doing' and 'teacher being' connect to students' learning environment, engagement, and sense of safety at school. From the teenage mothers' perspectives, the two categories reveal how teachers can influence the classroom climate and student engagement through their actions by influencing students to be more or less on task, to enjoy their lessons and to be more or less disruptive, and through their beings by building trustful relationships, making students feel safe and being helpful. The teenage mothers reveal the importance of teachers being strict and building relationships with students, in the classroom and elsewhere, and both of these aspects are important for students' engagement, learning, and sense of safety. For example, teenage mothers stated that they became less engaged in their learning tasks if teachers did not use classroom management to handle disruptive behaviour, but how this was done was also important, as teenage mothers wanted strict but kind teachers in order to feel safe at school.

Teaching Strategies and Methods

This study also sought to identify teaching strategies and methods used by teachers to influence teenage mothers' engagement in classroom activities. A Likert scale with five points (i.e., 1. Strongly disagree =SA, 2. Disagree = A, 3. Neutral = N, 4. Agree = D, 5. Strongly agree = SD) was used to ascertain the teaching strategies and methods influence teenage mothers' engagement. The results generated on this are presented in Table 4.2:

Table 4.2. Teachers' Responses Related to Teaching Strategies and Methods

Statement	Likert Scale				
	SD	D	N	A	SA

I plan learning activities according to learners' abilities	24(26.37%)	10(10.99%)	1(1.1%)	30(32.97%)	26(28.57%)
I incorporate hands-on activities in every teaching lesson.	8(8.79%)	27(29.67%)	25(27.47%)	1(1.1%)	30(32.97%)
I use group discussion and collaborative learning activities	0(0%)	8(8.79%)	7(7.69%)	34(37.36%)	42(46.15%)
I integrate technology into my lessons to enhance learning in my lesson	0(0%)	76(83.52%)	3(3.3%)	8(8.79%)	4(4.4%)
I often focus on my students' interests during teaching	3(3.3%)	12(13.19%)	11(12.09%)	64(70.33%)	1(1.1%)
I often provide constructive feedback to my students	20(21.98%)	15(16.48%)	11(12.09%)	28(30.77%)	17(18.68%)
I assess my students' learning by using different assessment techniques.	70(76.92%)	3(3.3%)	5(5.49%)	9(9.89%)	4(4.4%)
I often develop a conducive learning atmosphere in the classroom during class sessions by telling my students the aim and purpose of this program	13(14.29%)	15(16.48%)	16(17.58%)	27(29.67%)	20(21.98%)

The data in Table 4.2 indicates that a large number of teachers, 76 (83.5%), agree that they use group discussion and collaborative learning activities to facilitate students' interactions. It was followed by 65 (71.4%) who agree that they frequently focus on their students' interests while teaching, whereas 56 (61.5%) agree that they plan learning activities according to learners' abilities. Further analysis shows that 47 (51.6%) often create a conducive learning atmosphere in the classroom during lessons by explaining the aim and purpose of the programme, whereas 45(49.5%) agreed that they frequently provided constructive feedback to my students. This finding shows teachers use various teaching strategies, including the use of focus groups and collaborative learning strategies, focus on learners' interests during teaching and create a conducive teaching and learning environment. These findings are important because they reveal strengths and gaps in teachers' teaching strategies for supporting learners, showing the need to improve inclusive methods, technology integration, assessment techniques, and classroom practices to enhance effective learning engagement.

Motivation and Engagement Techniques

Using a Likert scale with five points, teachers were asked to rate the motivation and engagement techniques they often used in their classroom. Their responses have been processed into the details presented in Table 4.3:

Table 4.3 Teachers' Responses Related to Motivation and Engagement Techniques

Statement	Likert Scale				
	SD	D	N	A	SA
It is my responsibility to engage and motivate teenage student mothers'	27(29.67%)	33(36.26%)	7(7.69%)	2(2.2%)	22(24.18%)

I do believe that I have adequate resources and strategies to use when teen student mothers are not engaged	26(28.57%)	32(35.16%)	7(7.69%)	2(2.2%)	24(26.35)
Sometimes I change my timetable to accommodate teenage student mothers who miss regular class time	26(28.57%)	34(37.36%)	22(24.18%)	7(7.69%)	2(2.2%)
I do care about teenage student mothers learning in my class	36(39.56%)	26(28.57%)	4(4.4%)	1(1.1%)	24(26.37%)
I do believe that the learning motivation for mothers of teenage students in my subject is low	77(84.62%)	7(7.69%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	7(7.69%)
I do believe that teenage student mothers need more support than others do in my class	14(15.4%)	2(2.2%)	0(0%)	39(42.9%)	36(39.6%)
I do believe that my classroom activities support learning for teenage student mothers	32(35.16%)	27(29.67%)	0(0%)	7(7.69%)	25(27.47%)

Data in Table 4.3 shows that the majority of teachers, 78(85.7%), agreed with the notion that they believed the learning motivation for mothers of teenage students in my subject is low. It was followed by 75(82.4%) who agreed that they believed that teenage student mothers need more support than others do in their class. Ironically, further analysis revealed that only 24(26.4%) teachers agreed that it was their responsibility to engage and motivate teenage student mothers, while over two-thirds, 60(65.9%), disagreed. In the same vein, only 9(9.9%) agreed with the notion that sometimes they changed their

timetables to accommodate teenage student mothers who miss regular class time and again over two-thirds, 60(65.9%), disagreed. More importantly, over two-thirds 59, 64.8%) did not believe that their classroom activities support the needs of teenage student mothers. This comes to suggest that despite teachers agreeing that teenage mothers had low motivation to learn and they need an individualised support programme, they were not ready to provide any of them. These findings are important because they reveal strengths and gaps in teachers' motivation and support for teenage student mothers, showing the need to improve engagement strategies and classroom support.

Support Systems and Resources

This study also sought to assess the support system and resources available to influence students' engagement in the NFSE programme. To achieve this objective, teachers were asked to indicate their level of support systems and resources available to support teenage mothers' engagement in the NFSE programme by using a five-point Likert scale and findings are summarised in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4 Teachers' Responses Related to Support Systems and Resources

Statement	Likert Scale				
	SD	D	N	A	SA
I inform teenage mothers about available support services (e.g., counselling, childcare)	3(3.3%)	30(32.97%)	31(34.07%)	25(27.47%)	2(2.2%)
I collaborate with social workers to address the needs of teenage mothers.	25(27.47%)	26(28.57%)	22(24.18%)	16(17.58%)	2(2.2%)
I encourage participation in extracurricular activities that support teenage mothers.	27(29.67%)	28(30.77%)	19(20.88%)	14(15.385)	3(3.35)

I connect students with mentors or role models at least once every term.	44(48.35%)	18(19.78%)	10(10.99%)	13(14.29%)	6(6.59%)
I facilitate communication between students and their families regarding educational needs at least once a month.	27(29.67%)	33(36.26%)	22(24.18%)	7(7.69%)	2(2.2%)
I offer free textbooks to every teenage mother	24(26.35)	7(7.69%)	2(2.2%)	26(28.57%)	32(35.16%)

Based on the results from Table 4.4, support systems and resources for teenage mothers in the NFSE programme are underutilized and inconsistent. A significant majority of teachers (67.04%) either disagree or strongly disagree with informing teenage mothers about available support services, such as counselling and childcare. This indicates a major gap in connecting students with essential resources. Similarly, collaboration among staff is weak: over half of teachers (56.04%) report that they do not work with colleagues to address the needs of this group of students. While slightly less pronounced, a majority (60.44%) also do not allocate time for these students to participate in supportive extracurricular activities. Most strikingly of all, efforts to engage families are severely lacking: a combined 68.13% of teachers either disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that they communicate with families about educational needs every month. These findings are important because they reveal gaps and strengths in teachers' support for teenage mothers, showing implications for improving counselling, mentorship, family communication, and coordinated educational support.

4. Discussions

The findings of this study underscore the significant influence that teacher-student relationships have on the engagement of teenage mothers in non-formal educational (NFSE) programs. Data reveal that a large number of teachers are committed to cultivating welcoming atmospheres by encouraging students to share personal experiences and respecting their viewpoints. This approach aligns with the work of Reyes et al. (2012), who argue that supportive relationships between teachers and students are instrumental in creating a positive classroom environment that enhances learning engagement. These findings are in line with educational engagement theory as articulated by Rachmad (2022), which posits that engagement is a dynamic and collective endeavor requiring active involvement and commitment from all participants in the learning process, including students, teachers, and educational institutions. This theory transcends the simplistic notion of physical presence in the classroom, framing engagement as a complex construct that intricately weaves together emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of student involvement in educational activities (Rachmad, 2022). For teenage mothers in Non-Formal Secondary Education (NFSE) settings, this theoretical lens is particularly vital, as it highlights the importance of customizing educational methodologies to resonate with their distinct needs and interests. However, the need for individualised attention remains a concern, as nearly half of the teachers reported insufficient one-on-one interactions with their students. This lack of personal connection may hinder the establishment of deeper relationships essential for educational success, as emphasized by O'Connor and McCartney (2007). The preferences expressed by teenagers for caring, approachable, and understanding teachers reflect their need for emotional support, reinforcing Pianta and Hamre's (2009) assertion that positive interactions with teachers are crucial in influencing engagement and academic performance. Key indicators of engagement delineated by this theory, such as enhanced attendance, active class participation, improved academic performance, and greater satisfaction with learning experiences, are critical metrics for evaluating the effectiveness of educational strategies tailored to this demographic (Wang, 2025).

The study further highlights the impact of diverse teaching strategies and methods on the engagement of teenage mothers. Teachers who prioritize group discussions and collaborative activities, as indicated by 83.5% of respondents, align with literature suggesting these techniques effectively promote student engagement (Wang & Eccles, 2013). Nonetheless, while there is recognition among teachers of the necessity to tailor lesson plans to students' abilities, many still limit their use of hands-on activities and technology integration. This limitation correlates with Rachmad's (2022) Educational Engagement Theory, which suggests that a failure to employ varied teaching methods may alienate students. Engaging students through topics that resonate with their personal experiences is vital, as outlined by Kindermann (2007). Without these tailored strategies, teenage mothers may find it challenging to maintain interest and motivation, complicating their educational pursuits. The practical applications of educational engagement theory within the context of the current study are profound. It underscores the obligation of educators to cultivate an environment that actively promotes engagement, specifically addressing the unique hurdles faced by teenage mothers. By employing interactive and supportive teaching strategies, including engaging instructional methods and robust psychosocial support systems, educators can empower teenage mothers to attain both academic and personal success.

A critical aspect of fostering a conducive learning environment involves understanding motivation and engagement. While most teachers recognize that teenage mothers need additional support, only a minority acknowledge the importance of actively motivating these students. This gap signifies a misalignment between teachers' perceptions of students' needs and the necessary actions required to enhance engagement. Scholars like Nelson and Debacker (2008) emphasize the importance of motivation for academic success, particularly for at-risk groups such as teenage mothers. Although teachers may perceive a lack of motivation among these students, their hesitation to adopt strategies that engage these learners reveals a pressing issue in both teacher training and professional development. This disconnect illustrates the urgent need for educators to embrace more proactive methods to inspire motivation, advocating for a mentoring approach rather than merely

instructional. Educational engagement theory provided a comprehensive understanding of how various factors, such as the attitudes of teachers and the mechanisms of support can significantly elevate engagement levels among teenage mothers in educational contexts. Ultimately, this focus on engagement equips individual teenage mothers with the essential skills needed to navigate their challenges and positively reshape their educational trajectories and everyday lives. Such an emphasis is crucial for fostering long-term educational advantages, enabling these young women to break free from the cycles of poverty and inequality often exacerbated by early motherhood, thereby enhancing their overall quality of life and future prospects.

Finally, the study uncovers significant gaps in the availability and use of support systems for teenage mothers within the NFSE program. Teachers report minimal interaction with support services, mentorship programs, and extracurricular activities designed to assist these students. Despite recognizing the needs of teenage mothers, educators frequently fail to connect them with existing support, as highlighted by Ngaza and Mwila (2022). This aligns with Shaningwa's (2007) finding that supportive educational environments are critical in helping teenage mothers overcome various barriers. To address these deficiencies, fostering effective communication and collaboration between educators and support staff is essential, as emphasized by Mushi (2012). Such comprehensive support systems should collectively address the diverse needs of students holistically. Integrating these insights with Educational Engagement Theory reinforces the necessity of engagement in transforming educational experiences for teenage mothers, highlighting that active participation fosters not just academic achievement but also emotional welfare.

5. Conclusion

The study illuminates the profound impact that teachers have on the engagement of teenage mothers in non-formal secondary education (NFSE) centers. It becomes clear that strong teacher-student relationships are foundational to fostering an environment conducive to learning. The findings demonstrate that when teachers create welcoming atmospheres that

encourage open dialogue and respect for students' opinions, they significantly enhance student engagement. However, the study also highlights gaps in personalized support, as many teachers reported limited one-on-one interactions, which are critical for building deeper connections. This lack of individualized attention may hinder the educational experience for teenage mothers, as emotional support is essential for their motivation and academic success. Teachers' roles extend beyond imparting knowledge; they are key figures who must nurture trust and understanding, thereby influencing both engagement and positive academic outcomes.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of teaching strategies plays a vital role in engaging teenage mothers. The study shows that while collaborative learning techniques are widely embraced, there remains reluctance among some educators to diversify their instructional methods through hands-on activities and technology integration. This limitation could alienate students and diminish their interest in learning. The observations call for a reassessment of how teachers approach engagement, particularly by recognizing the unique challenges faced by teenage mothers in NFSE settings. By aligning their practices with proven strategies that resonate with students' interests and experiences, educators can significantly improve learning outcomes. Therefore, the study emphasizes the urgent need for professional development that equips teachers with the skills and strategies necessary to effectively mentor and motivate teenage mothers, ultimately fulfilling the educational aims of empowerment and personal growth in non-formal educational contexts. The study further concludes that while teachers show positive attitudes toward supporting teenage mothers, there are still major gaps in individualized support, motivation strategies, teaching methods, and use of support systems; therefore, the study's main contribution should be clearly focused on these four areas, and recommendations should be more practical by emphasizing teacher training, mentorship, stronger support linkages, and consistent follow-up systems.

6. Recommendations

The study recommend that structured teacher training programs be developed and implemented to equip NFSE educators with practical skills in learner-centred pedagogy, emotional support, motivational strategies, and the use of diverse instructional methods such as collaborative learning, hands-on activities, and technology integration to effectively engage teenage mothers. These interventions should be jointly implemented by educational authorities, NFSE program coordinators, school administrators, and social welfare stakeholders to ensure coordinated and sustainable support. At policy level, there is a need to strengthen guidelines that mandate inclusive teaching practices, compulsory in-service training on adolescent motherhood, and formal referral systems linking schools with social and psychosocial support services. Furthermore, NFSE centres should institutionalize support mechanisms by establishing structured mentorship programs, regular counselling services, and formal collaboration frameworks with social workers and community support agencies to ensure continuous academic and emotional support for teenage mothers.

7. Bibliography

Abdelmalak, M. (2014). Towards flexible learning for adult students: Hyflex design. In M. Searson & M. Ochoa (Eds.), *Proceedings of SITE 2014--Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference* (pp. 706-712). Jacksonville, Florida, United States: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE). Retrieved January 7, 2026 from https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/130839/. YA KULIPIA

Ahabwe, P. (2022). *Secondary schools' preparedness to receive teenage mothers back to school following childbirth in Ruhaama, Ntungamo district*. Makerere University.

Astin, H. S. (1984). The meaning of work in women's lives a sociopsychological model of career choice and work behavior. *The counseling psychologist*, *12*(4), 117-126.

Asumini, P., & Mwila, C. (2023). *Prospects and challenges of teenage mothers' re-entry into secondary education in Sub-Saharan Africa.* Journal of Educational Management and Studies, 14(1), 16-26.

Cornelius, S., Gordon, C., and Ackland, A. (2011).Towards flexible learning for adult learners in professional contexts: An activity –focused course design. Interactive Learning Environments. 19(4), 381-393.

Costantine, E, Mwinjuma, J. S., & Nemes, J. (2025). Teachers ' perceptions on effective resilience strategies to challenging teaching space. *International Journal of Education Science*, 2(2), 133-146. https://ijofes.net/index.php/ijofes/article/download/5573/2687;1–9.

Creswell, J.W & Creswell, J.D (2023). Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approach (6th Ed).

Dlamini, T. P. (2016). *Experiences of mothers in secondary schools in the Lubombo region of Swaziland.* (Unpubl. master's thesis). University of Swaziland, Kwaluseni, Swaziland

Fallis, A. (2013). *The challenges experienced by teenage mothers in secondary schools: The case of Hlanganani South Circuit. Journal of Chemical Information and Modeling*, 53(9), 1689–1699.

Farida, M., & Bali, T. (2014). Exploring Experiences of Pregnant and Mothering Secondary School Students in Tanzania. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, *4*(1), 80–88.

HakiElimu (2024). *Experience of the implementation of reintegrating teenage mothers into formal secondary school in Tanzania.* Dar es Salaam. https://www.hakielimu.or.tz/publications

Institute of Adult Education (2024). Report of results for Teenage Mothers who sat for national examination (NECTA).

Laurencio, D. L., Gervas, I., & Nyinondi, O. S. (2024). Understanding teachers' and students' perceptions on the re-entry of teen mother-students in public secondary schools of Dodoma City. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education, 13*(6), 145–157. https://doi.org/10.5861/ijrse.2024.24073

Mgunda, T. P., Kano, E., & Sungwa, R. (2024). Challenges Facing Teenage Mothers Re-Entry into Secondary Schools in Tanzania: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study. *Journal of Issues and Practice in Education*, *15*(2). https://doi.org/10.61538/jipe.v15i2.1397.

Ministry of Education (2020). National guidelines for re-entry in early learning and basic education. Nairobi: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2022). Alternative secondary education pathway implementation guidelines, Tanzania

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST). (2021). *Education Circular No. 2 of 2021 on the re-entry of students who dropped out of school.* Government of Tanzania.

Mmassy, Z. P. (2023). Challenges Facing Teenage Mothers Re-Admitted to Non-Formal Education System in Tanzania: Empirical Evidence from Learners at Wamo Open School, Morogoro Municipality. *Journal of Adult Education in Tanzania*, *25*(2),32-38.

Mmassy, Z. P. (2023). Challenges facing teenage mothers re-admitted to the non-formal education system in Tanzania: Evidence from Wamo Open School, Morogoro Municipality. *Journal of Adult Education in Tanzania, 25*(2).

Morris, S. R. (2023). Teen mothers forgotten: The gap between high school and higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, 4(2), 107-117. https://doi.org/10.61186/johepal.4.2.107

Mwakililo, P. S. (2025). Reintegrating adolescent mothers into secondary education: Investigating the availability and effectiveness of support systems in Mbeya Region, Tanzania. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 30*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2025.2552335

Ngonyani, R. (2022). To Explore View of Teachers and Students on Readmission of Teenage Mothers in the Formal schooling System in Tanzania. *International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity*

and Social Sciences, *9*(6), 10–15. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.732012

Nyaisa, F. N., & Njowele, J. H. (2025). Assessing the experiences of teen mothers under the re-entry policy in secondary schools: A case of Uyui District Council-Tabora, Tanzania. *Journal of Issues and Practice in Education, 17*, 35–50. https://doi.org/10.61538/jipe.vi17.1615

Shirima, G. H. (2020). Managing the provision of non-formal secondary education in Tanzania: The emerging sustainability issues. *Papers in Education and Development*, *38*(1), 2-10.

Tobister, J., Choge, D., & Musyoka, M. (2024). Challenges and academic performance of re-admitted teenage mothers in Kenyan secondary schools. *African Journal of Educational and Social Studies*, 12*(1),* 56-72. Retrieved from https://journalarjass.com/index.php/ARJASS/article/view/581

United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] (2015). *Education 2030. Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*. UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245656.

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (2024). Overcoming the Challenges of Education in Uganda. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/uganda/media/16861/file/Challenges%20of%20Education%20Sector%20in%20Uganda%20in%20Brief.pdf.pdf

8. Short biographies/affiliations

Anna John Ntiruvakule and Luka Mkonongwa work at the Department of Educational Foundation and Continuing Education, University of Dodoma (UDOM) in Tanzania.

Email:annantiruvakule@gmail.com
Email:mkonongwa@gmail.com