



Motherhood and Higher Education: Coping Strategies of Distance Learning Student-Mothers at the University for Development Studies, Sawla Study Centre, Ghana

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Abstract

Student-mothers in distance education programmes in Ghana have to combine traditional domestic roles with their academic pursuits. This study sought to find out the coping strategies adopted by student-mothers in balancing motherhood and higher education at the Institute of Distance and Continuous Learning (ICDL) of the University for Development Studies (UDS). The study employed a quantitative research approach with a descriptive survey design. A questionnaire was used to collect data from all 51 student-mothers at the Sawla Study Centre. Descriptive statistics of frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviations were used to analyse the data collected. The findings revealed that student-mothers widely adopted multiple coping strategies. The most frequently used strategies included periodically stepping out of lectures to breastfeed (M = 3.94, SD = 1.03), breastfeeding during lectures (M = 3.54, SD = 1.17), employing paid domestic workers (M = 3.22, SD = 1.20), and relying on spousal or family support (M = 3.21, SD = 1.21). Despite these strategies, respondents reported substantial challenges in coping, particularly unreliable family or spousal support during face-to-face sessions (M = 3.37, SD = 0.69) and societal expectations of motherhood conflicting with academic engagement (M = 3.25, SD = 0.72). The study concludes that although student-mothers employ various adaptive coping strategies, sustainable academic success requires structured institutional support systems to reduce stress and enhance their participation and overall well-being. The study recommends the establishment of daycare facilities at the study centre to enable student-mothers to leave their children in safe care during lectures.

Introduction

There is a substantial body of literature supporting the claim that education is a pillar of growth and development across all spheres of human life (Appiah & Esia-Donkoh, 2018; Moses & Kingsley, 2013). Governments globally are allocating more resources to the education sector, recognising that education is central to the development of individuals and nations (Tyack and Cuban, 1997). Thus, the development of education in the country begins with the enrolment of students in schools provided by the education sector. Therefore, since the development of every individual in society matters, governments are concerned about the number of people enrolling in schools and usually advocate policies and interventions that aim to make education accessible to every individual



(Ministry of Education, 2013). Though education has a significant effect on the socio-economic growth for both sexes in Sub-Saharan African nations, girls' education is a better predictor of growth than boys' (Baliamoune-Lutz & McGillivray, 2015). Thus, the capacity of women to promote national development, which appears to be lacking in the Sub-Saharan region, can be unleashed through women's education (World Bank, 2018). As Dr. James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey (1875-1927) famously stated, "If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation." This underscores the vital role of women in shaping future generations, making their education a societal priority. For instance, women's education increases women's earning potential and supports healthier, better-adjusted families in successfully navigating the challenges of the 21st century (Schiffrin & Liss, 2017).

In modern times, the definitions of schooling and education have changed significantly. The adoption of distance education has driven change by providing an additional means of delivering education to the public. Distance learning in developing nations has evolved as a strategy to expand educational access for qualified postsecondary applicants who are unable to secure admission due to the inadequate capacity of existing tertiary institutions (Burns, 2023). The programme's mode of delivery in Ghana primarily relies on face-to-face tutorials held every two weeks at a university satellite campus. Distance education has become one of the fastest-growing educational programmes in the country, compared with other educational interventions such as the non-formal education system. Today, all public universities in Ghana offer academic programmes in both on-campus and distance learning modes. Thus, millions of students are enrolled in distance learning programmes across the country's tertiary educational institutions.

In many distance learning institutions in Africa, the percentage of female students enrolled tends to be higher than in on-campus programmes (Chawinga & Zozie, 2016a; Kwapong, 2007). Among these female students are nursing mothers who are of great interest to the current study. Common observation indicates that you can identify three nursing mothers among every twenty students in distance learning in the Savannah Region of Ghana. Unlike traditional education (mainstream/regular), in which mothers typically leave home to live on-campus and attend classes, distance learning allows them to remain at home, blending their family roles with academic commitments, though not without challenges. Students in distance learning are expected to attend face-to-face sessions, take quizzes, submit assignments, and write an end-of-semester examination, while also managing their families' responsibilities.

Studies have indicated that adult education programmes often prioritise women, including nursing mothers, through flexible scheduling, childcare provisions, and health-integrated curricula (UNESCO, 2016; Amedorme & Fiagbe, 2013). Recent empirical studies reveal an increasing incidence of pregnancies among students in education programmes globally (UNESCO, 2020; Amoako, 2018), and in Ghana, this trend is exacerbated by cultural norms and gaps in policy support for pregnant learners (Amedorme & Fiagbe, 2013). Some girls have dropped out of traditional schools due to pregnancy-related cases (Amina, 2015). Distance learning now provides women the opportunity to pursue education while managing childbirth and family responsibilities, though this opportunity comes with challenges. Nursing mothers sometimes miss school to care for ill infants, and when they bring infants to face-to-face sessions, they must divide their time between academic discussions and attending to the infants' needs. It is common for nursing mothers to miss sessions due to a child's ill health, and they must feed their babies intermittently outside the lecture hall at the expense of fully participating in discussions. Student-mothers further face emotional challenges when partners are unsupportive, leaving them vulnerable in their educational pursuits. In addition, there are anxieties



about meeting family responsibilities, insufficient time, fear of failure, tension, and balancing family issues with academic commitments (Dowling & Osborne, 2020).

Support services are essential for student-mothers pursuing higher education through distance learning. Yet, Dhillon et al. (2015) found discrepancies between officially declared support services and the realities student-mothers face. With appropriate support, student-mothers can balance their multiple roles, but the absence of specialised curricula forces them into frameworks designed for younger learners, thereby deepening inequities (Knowles et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020). In Ghana, higher education systems often fail to account for learners' socio-economic realities (Amedorme & Fiagbe, 2013). Parenting and schooling rarely align, and many mothers cannot afford childcare. Without institutional provisions such as childcare facilities, flexible schedules, or parental leave, student-mothers are pressured to choose between parenting and education (UNESCO, 2020). Studies show that students with accommodations, such as hybrid learning, are more likely to succeed, whereas those without support experience attrition or poor performance (Britto et al., 2017). Thus, instead of questioning whether mothers should pursue education, policymakers must address structural barriers (Stromquist, 2014). Education systems must recognise caregiving as integral to lifelong learning, as student-mothers continue to struggle with social, academic, and family roles.

To cope with these pressures, student-mothers often adopt strategies such as seeking paid domestic help, enrolling children in daycare, or relying on support from husbands, relatives, and friends (Uwakwe et al., 2021; Opit et al., 2020). In the Savannah Region, however, babysitting is informal and often provided by young girls or relatives with limited skills. This option also raises concerns, as studies portray babysitters as lacking appropriate maternal qualities and sometimes as irresponsible (Weiner, 2010; Tomlin, 2008). These perceptions reinforce the notion that no one can fulfil the role of a mother as effectively as the mother herself, thereby adding pressure on student-mothers. While nannies or babysitters may assist, they cannot replace the mother, highlighting the significant challenges families face when student-mothers pursue higher education.

Women enrolled in distance education programmes are permitted to have children while participating in their studies. The only expectation for them is to complete the entire task assigned to them as students. It is therefore not surprising to see pregnant women and nursing mothers during face-to-face learning sessions. These student-mothers juggle multiple roles, including those of mother, employee, and student. Balancing these responsibilities can lead to high levels of stress and anxiety, struggles in meeting academic requirements, challenges in fulfilling family obligations, financial strain, and limited support from partners. Given the heavy responsibilities placed on distance learners, researchers must speculate on how nursing mothers in distance learning cope to maintain academic excellence (Edwards, Hanson, & Ragatt, 2013).

Specifically, the study examines the coping strategies adopted by student-mothers at the Sawla Study Centre of the Institute of Distance and Continuous Learning (IDCL), University for Development Studies (UDS), as they pursue their academic work alongside their non-academic responsibilities. In addition, the study aims to explore the challenges these student-mothers encounter in adopting and sustaining such coping strategies while pursuing distance education at the IDCL UDS Sawla Study Centre in the Savannah Region of Ghana.

Theoretical Framework

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping Model

Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (1984) posits that stress is a dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments, emphasising the importance of cognitive appraisal in determining how stressors are perceived and managed. Central to the model are primary



and secondary appraisals. In primary appraisal, individuals assess whether a situation poses a threat, challenge, or harm. For student-mothers at the UDS, IDCL, Sawla Study Centre, this involves evaluating the daily academic and parenting demands they face. Challenges such as meeting academic deadlines while caring for young children may be appraised as significant threats, shaping whether they perceive their circumstances as manageable or overwhelming (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Secondary appraisal then involves assessing available resources and coping options (Lazarus, 1990). Student-mothers rely on internal resources, such as self-efficacy, and on external supports, including family, friends, and institutional structures (Folkman, 1984). Those lacking social support may feel overwhelmed and resort to avoidance. In contrast, those with strong social networks may engage in problem-focused coping, such as seeking academic assistance or flexible scheduling.

The model categorises coping strategies into problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Problem-focused coping includes direct actions, such as creating study schedules or delegating responsibilities, whereas emotion-focused coping may involve seeking emotional support or practising self-care. These strategies illustrate how student-mothers manage the complexities of balancing academic and parental roles. The model also distinguishes between adaptive strategies, such as planning and seeking help, which foster balance and resilience, and maladaptive strategies, such as avoidance or self-isolation, which may worsen stress and hinder academic performance (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985).

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a quantitative, descriptive survey design to explore the experiences of student-mothers as they combine motherhood and higher education. This is because the descriptive survey is commonly utilised to gather information on individuals' attitudes, opinions, and behaviours, as it provides a structured method for understanding various aspects of the human condition, particularly in educational and social science contexts (Brewer et al., 2019). Notwithstanding its usefulness, the design has certain limitations, including its inability to establish causal relationships and its limited capacity to capture in-depth personal experiences. In addition, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias. Despite these limitations, the descriptive survey design was suitable for this study as it facilitated the collection of data from a relatively large population within a limited time frame and allowed for the quantification and comparison of responses, making it possible to identify common coping strategies and challenges among student-mothers at the IDCL UDS Sawla Study Centre.

Study Setting

The University for Development Studies was purposively selected because of its mandate to promote access to higher education for underserved and rural populations, which aligns with the objectives of distance education. The Sawla Study Centre serves a predominantly rural population in the Savannah Region, where student-mothers often experience distinct socio-economic and cultural challenges in balancing academic responsibilities with motherhood. Furthermore, the substantial number of student-mothers enrolled in distance learning programmes at the centre makes UDS an appropriate and relevant setting for examining the challenges and coping strategies of student-mothers in higher education.

Participants

The study population comprised 51 student-mothers enrolled in distance learning programmes at the University for Development Studies (UDS) Institute of Continuing and Distance Learning (ICDL), Sawla Study Centre. Census sampling was employed to include all student-mothers at the Sawla



Study Centre. In quantitative descriptive survey designs, census sampling is used when the population is small to ensure comprehensive data collection and to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings (Zikmund et al., 2010; Taherdoost, 2016; Hossan et al., 2023). However, census sampling may be affected by non-response and has limited generalizability beyond the study setting. Despite these limitations, this study was justified because the population was manageable and the study sought to capture the experiences of all student-mothers at the Sawla Study Centre.

Data Collection Instrument

A questionnaire was used as the primary data collection instrument, employing a four-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Uncertain (U), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). A pilot study with ten student nursing mothers from the ICDL Tamale Study Centre was conducted to ensure reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of 0.789 exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.7 (George & Mallery, 2019; Sekaran & Bougie, 2016), confirming the instrument's reliability.

Data Collection Process

Data for this study were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to all fifty-one (51) student-mothers enrolled in distance learning programmes at the UDS ICDL Sawla Study Centre. The process began with obtaining permission from the management of IDCL UDS and the Sawla Study Centre, which facilitated the researchers' introduction to the participants. Data collection took place between March and April 2024, when students were actively engaged in academic activities. Questionnaires were distributed in person at the study centre. Completed questionnaires were collected immediately, and responses were checked for accuracy and consistency before analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were coded and statistically analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows, Version 27.0. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the extent to which student-mothers utilised coping strategies in their academic and non-academic roles and the challenges they faced. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were generated. Responses were measured on a four-point Likert scale: Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1, Disagree (D) = 2, Agree (A) = 3, and Strongly Agree (SA) = 4. Given this, when the mean responses fall within a specific scale (e.g., the +0.5 to -0.5 range), it becomes the overriding response. For instance, a mean value of 3.5 is considered as falling on the 4th Scale, hence implying Strongly Agree. The use of descriptive statistics was intended to improve the presentation of the results for analysis (Fulk, 2023; Selvamuthu & Das, 2024).

Results and Discussions

Coping strategies adopted by student-mothers of Sawla Study Centre, IDCL, UDS, in their academic pursuits while performing their non-academic roles.

Table 1 presents the coping mechanisms embraced by student-mothers enrolled in distance education at the UDS Sawla Study Centre in their academic pursuits while doing their non-academic roles.



Table 1: Coping Strategies of Student-Mothers

Statement	SD (%)	D (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	M (STD)
Always asking for help from my husband	11 (21.6)	12 (23.5)	7 (13.7)	21 (41.2)	3.21 (1.21)
Employing services of a paid home worker	11 (21.6)	10 (19.6)	9 (17.6)	21 (41.2)	3.22 (1.20)
Breastfeeding in classroom during lectures.	8 (15.7)	6 (11.8)	5 (9.8)	32 (62.7)	3.54 (1.17)
Periodically stepping out of the classroom during face-to-face to breastfeed my child.	3 (5.9)	2 (3.9)	2 (3.9)	47 (92.2)	3.94 (1.03)
Employing the services of a relative when attending face-to-face.	9 (17.6)	8 (15.7)	5 (9.8)	29 (56.9)	3.06 (1.21)
Overall Mean					3.40
Overall Standard Deviation					(0.83)

Source: Field Survey (2024), N=51; Strongly Disagree (SD) =1; Disagree (D) =2; Agree (A) =3; and Strongly Agree (SA) =4

Results in Table 1 indicate that student-mothers commonly reported adopting coping strategies to support their academic pursuits (overall M = 3.40, SD = 0.83). The majority noted that they periodically stepped out of the classroom to breastfeed their children (M = 3.94, SD = 1.03) and that they breastfed in the classroom during lectures (M = 3.54, SD = 1.17). They also agreed to employ family members (M = 3.06, SD = 2.78) or paid domestic workers (M = 3.22, SD = 1.20) to assist with childcare and to seek support from their partners or husbands (M = 3.21, SD = 1.21). These findings align with studies on coping strategies adopted by student-mothers in distance education to manage challenges. Opit et al (2020) found that student-mothers relied on childcare assistance from friends, family, hired caretakers, and spouses. Similarly, Bogi et al. (2023) noted the use of social coping mechanisms, including seeking assistance from relatives, modifying schedules, and engaging in effective communication to manage role conflicts. The findings support the assertion of Grohman and Lamm (2009), who found that a key coping strategy that cannot be overlooked is assistance from families, particularly husbands, parents, grandparents, and other relatives, in Africa. The authors added that emotional support from husbands and peers, along with effective time-management strategies, was commonly used as a temporary solution. The findings above strongly align with Lazarus and Folkman’s Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. The coping strategies adopted by student-mothers, such as seeking support from husbands and relatives, employing paid domestic workers, and adjusting academic participation through breastfeeding arrangements, reflect problem-focused coping, where individuals take deliberate actions to manage stressors associated with educational and caregiving responsibilities (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). These strategies demonstrate student-mothers’ efforts to modify their environments to reduce stress and sustain academic engagement. In addition, the reliance on emotional and social support from family members illustrates emotion-focused coping, which helps regulate psychological stress arising from role conflict (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

Challenges faced by student-mothers in adopting coping strategies while pursuing distance education at IDCL, UDS, Sawla Study Centre.

Table 2 presents significant challenges that student-mothers face in adopting coping strategies while pursuing distance education at the ICDL, UDS, and the Sawla Study Centre.



Table 2: Challenges in Adopting Coping Strategies while Pursuing Higher Education

Statement	SD (%)	D (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	M (STD)
Dependence on husband or family support for face-to-face lectures is unreliable.	1 (2.0)	4 (8.0)	21 (41.0)	25 (49.0)	3.37 (0.69)
Financial pressures hinder hiring a domestic worker or reliable childcare for attending lectures	2 (4.0)	6 (12.0)	24 (47.0)	19 (37.0)	3.18 (0.77)
Difficulty with breastfeeding during lectures due to lack of acceptance from tutors and peers.	3 (6.0)	8 (16.0)	20 (39.0)	20 (39.0)	3.12 (0.83)
Societal expectation of my role as a mother conflict with effective academic coping strategies.	1 (2.0)	5 (10.0)	25 (49.0)	20 (39.0)	3.25 (0.72)
Overall Mean					3.23
Overall Standard Deviation					(0.75)

Source: Field Survey (2024), N=51; Strongly Disagree (SD) =1; Disagree (D) =2; Agree (A) =3; and Strongly Agree (SA) =4

The results indicate high means across all statements, indicating general agreement among respondents regarding the difficulties encountered, with relatively low standard deviations indicating moderate variation. The overall mean of 3.23 suggests that these barriers are widely experienced, highlighting substantial challenges in adopting effective coping strategies, while the overall standard deviation of 0.75 indicates some variability. The table shows that most student-mothers agree that constantly seeking support from partners or family during face-to-face lectures is a major challenge (M = 3.37, SD = 0.69), underscoring the critical role of social support in managing academic and family responsibilities. Financial pressures also impede student-mothers from engaging paid house workers or accessing reliable childcare services (M = 3.18, SD = 0.83), highlighting how limited resources restrict options for managing childcare alongside academic demands. Table 3 further shows that societal expectations about motherhood conflict with their ability to adopt effective coping strategies (M = 3.25, SD = 0.72), reflecting the difficulties of navigating traditional gender roles that hinder academic success.

Additionally, student-mothers find it challenging to leave and re-enter class to breastfeed (M = 3.18, SD = 0.77), with some tutors and students perceiving this as distracting. This reflects broader societal attitudes toward motherhood within academic environments, often resulting in feelings of discomfort or exclusion. These findings align with Brown and Nichols (2013), who emphasise the importance of social support in mitigating challenges faced by student-mothers. Conversely, inadequate support contributes to dropout risks and academic underachievement (Mulrenan et al., 2023). Similarly, the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (2019) highlights that financial strain affects student-mothers’ ability to afford childcare and educational expenses, often leading to compromised academic performance and delayed completion (Smith, 2019). In line with this, Amos et al. (2021) and Ogunji et al. (2020) emphasise how maternal responsibilities and societal norms affect academic experiences, underscoring the need for institutional policies that better support student-mothers in higher education. The challenges identified above, including unreliable family support, financial constraints, societal expectations of motherhood, and discomfort with breastfeeding during lectures, represent stressors that negatively influence student-mothers’ primary and secondary appraisals as indicated in the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). When student-mothers



perceive their available resources as insufficient, their ability to cope effectively is diminished (Lazarus, 1990).

Perception of student-mothers' on the institutional support to help cope with their academic pursuit.

Table 3 presents student-mothers' responses on the institutional support needed to help them cope with the constraints of their academic pursuit.

Table 3: Institutional support to Help Student-Mothers Cope with their Academic Pursuit

Statement	SD (%)	D (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	M (STD)
There should be a lactating room at the centre where they can store breast milk and to be given to their babies.	4 (7.8)	3 (5.9)	5 (9.8)	39 (76.5)	3.55 (0.92)
Student-mothers should be provided with guidance and counselling.	0 (0.0)	4 (7.8)	4 (7.8)	43 (84.3)	3.76 (0.59)
There should be a day care centre at the centre for the children of Distance-student-mothers in UDS.	5 (9.8)	3 (5.9)	6 (11.8)	37 (72.5)	3.47 (1.00)
There should be the provision of hostel accommodations on-campus for Distance-student mothers in UDS. Why? or for what?	5 (9.8)	7 (13.7)	5 (9.8)	34 (66.7)	3.33 (1.05)
Overall Mean					3.43
Overall Standard Deviation					(0.56)

Source: Field Survey (2024), N=51; Strongly Disagree (SD) =1; Disagree (D) =2; Agree (A) =3; and Strongly Agree (SA) =4

The overall mean and standard deviation of the responses were (M=3.43; SD=0.56), implying that the majority of respondents generally agreed with less disparity in their reactions to the strategies recommended. Table 3 shows that student-mothers strongly agreed that the provision of guidance and counselling services was the best strategy, with the highest mean score of 3.76. They also strongly agreed that a lactation room should be provided to store breast milk and feed infants (M=3.55). Earlier, Table 3 reported agreement on establishing a daycare facility at the study centre and a hostel for distance-student mothers, with mean values of 3.47 and 3.33, respectively.

These findings align with those of Mensah et al. (2008), who highlighted the importance of support services such as guidance and counselling in helping student-mothers balance academic responsibilities with family commitments. Barnett (2008) also underscored the significance of guidance and counselling in providing emotional support, coping strategies, and essential resources. Similarly, the results support Osafo's (2016) suggestion to establish a counselling unit at distance education centres and integrate intensive counselling services into orientation programmes for female students to help them navigate academic challenges arising from pregnancy or childbirth. The findings are consistent with Banda (2000), whose study recommended suitable accommodation, sick bays for student-mothers, reduced fees for nannies, and breastfeeding rooms to ease the difficulties they face. Additionally, the establishment of daycare centres and hostel facilities addresses practical childcare and accommodation needs, allowing student-mothers to fully engage in their studies (Akomaning & Osafo, 2021). These daycare centres would provide professional caregivers to support student-mothers while they focus on academic work (Kisanga & Matiba, 2023). The researchers argue that existing facilities at distance education centres do not meet the National Centre for Educational Statistics (2013) recommendation that such centres provide on-campus childcare. Consistent with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, the strong demand for institutional support services such



as counselling, lactation rooms, and daycare facilities underscores the need to strengthen external resources to enhance adaptive coping, consistent with the assumptions of the Transactional Model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Conclusion

Based on the study's findings, it can be concluded that student-mothers employ various coping strategies to balance the dual demands of their academic and family responsibilities. Key strategies include reliance on spousal and family support, the use of paid or relative caregivers, and flexible breastfeeding arrangements during face-to-face sessions. However, these strategies are constrained by unreliable support systems, financial difficulties, societal expectations surrounding motherhood, and limited institutional accommodation for nursing mothers. Notably, the findings highlight a strong need for structured institutional support, particularly guidance and counselling services, daycare facilities, and lactation spaces, to enhance student-mothers' coping capacity. While student-mothers demonstrate resilience and adaptive coping, the study's inference is that they will continue to face the challenges they currently face unless they receive the necessary, deliberate, and institutional policies from ICDEL and UDS that recognise caregiving as an integral part of distance higher education.

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