



Navigating Motherhood and Education: A qualitative exploration of the Challenges Experienced by School-Going Mothers in Hurungwe District of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

In many societies, school-going mothers typically bear the most significant burden after giving birth. Previous research studies have confirmed that school-going mothers face various challenges. This study examined the challenges faced by school-going mothers in Hurungwe, utilising Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory. Qualitative interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of fifteen school-going mothers in three selected secondary schools in Hurungwe District. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the research participants. Data collected was analysed thematically. Key findings identified several challenges experienced by school-going mothers, including educational challenges, financial constraints, stigmatisation, isolation, and an unsupportive school environment. The results include poor academic performance and a failure to balance the dual roles of motherhood and learning. Additionally, the research study recommends that schools ensure teachers and other staff are trained, and that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education create a national data collection system to inform policy decisions. This system would analyse enrollment and retention statistics, as well as the challenges experienced by school-going mothers.

Introduction

Worldwide, early motherhood has become a rising global phenomenon in both developed and developing countries. For example, nearly 16 million teenage girls give birth each year (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2021), with nearly 44,000 births per day globally, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa (Ndahimana, Umutooni, Nteziryayo, Semafara, Binayisa, Ishimwe & Ruton, 2023). This group of teenagers faces numerous challenges as they balance motherhood, childcare, and the desire to improve their lives. These challenges have been experienced by several countries in the education sector, especially at the secondary school level. Ntinda, Thwala, and Dlamini (2016) state that challenges experienced by learner mothers appear to be more prevalent in developing nations, for which they may require support. In fact, mothers who are seemingly not well supported by their families are likely to withdraw from school (Ntshayintshayi, Sehularo Mokgaola, & Sepeng, 2022); therefore, they may need support from family and friends to pursue their academic journey (Mukuna, 2023).



Zimbabwe has faced the significant challenges of schoolgirls who drop out because of pregnancy. The Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) (2019) indicated that at least 12.5% learners dropped out in 2018 as a result of pregnancy-related cases. Consequently, 7000 schoolgirls were reported to have dropped out of school. NewZimbabwe.com (2020) reported that the Primary and Secondary Education Department has also recorded 581 dropouts among primary school learners, while 6419 are in secondary schools. Furthermore, statistics show that 59% of the pregnant schoolgirls decided to go back to school after giving birth. However, only 3.3% of adolescent mothers were attending school. Despite substantial efforts to provide access to education for all, developing countries like Zimbabwe still face a lot of challenges in implementing a second chance for parenting and pregnant students.

This prompted several countries to create school policies that enable mothers to return to school. The Zimbabwean Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) Circular Minute P.35, 1999, subsection 5.2, the Education Amendment Act of 2020, Section 68(C) (1) and Statutory Instrument 13 of 2025 are some of the policies that the Government of Zimbabwe enacted to address the challenges faced by pregnant learners and student mothers (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). Shefer, Bhana, and Morrell (2013) agreed that such legislation aims to provide support and protection to mothers who intend to pursue their education, as well as to inform stakeholders on the appropriate processes to follow when addressing pregnancy and student mothers' enrollment. Nonetheless, despite the implementation of progressive policies that support school-going mothers, only one-third have re-enrolled in school (Nkosi & Pretorius, 2019). Teachers, parents, and learners continued to undermine these policies, as research shows that school-going mothers still experience an unfavourable school environment (Haiping, Ferguson, & Griffiths, 2023). Timothy (2024) asserts that this forces school-going mothers to abandon their studies to avoid humiliation. This study aimed to explore the challenges faced by mothers of school-age children when returning to school after childbirth.

Theoretical Framework

To explore the underlying research question, the study was informed by Uri Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which provides insight into the family as a developing unit in which members accept one another (Ndwandwe, 2023). Bronfenbrenner (1979) states that this theory comprises five distinct, interconnected levels: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the microsystem focuses on factors that influence children's well-being within their immediate environment, including parents, siblings, peers, teachers, the child's father, and members of the community. This is the most intimate level of the ecological systems theory. According to Freedle and Wahman (2022), the microsystem is where the child experiences challenges. An understanding of the problems at the microsystem level, such as financial challenges, stigmatisation, and isolation, as well as an unsupportive school environment and a lack of community support, can help us comprehend how close relationships directly influence the experiences and achievements of school-going mothers.

The second level is the mesosystem, which, according to Flynn and Mathias (2025), describes how individual microsystems are interconnected and influence one another rather than functioning independently. This theory focuses on the connections among a person's microsystems, including family, peers, and spouses. For instance, poor communication between parents and teachers, and teachers' unwillingness to provide support to school-going mothers, can lead to stress that harms



mothers. This is essential because relations at the mesosystem level may influence school-going mothers' decisions to continue their education. School-going mothers' parents or guardians must collaborate with teachers to support these mothers, recognising that this may be the only way for them to stay in school despite the challenges they face at home and at school. The demands of motherhood and school are not easy, as student mothers face numerous challenges, including childcare burdens and financial constraints, which can ultimately lead to school absenteeism (Mcambi, 2021).

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the exosystem constitutes the third level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which encompasses the entire neighbourhood and community that indirectly shape individual experiences. For example, this could include the government, health systems, educational policies, and even the distribution of goods and services. Bronfenbrenner (1999) reiterates that exosystems are the social structures, formal or informal, that surround a child's daily life and affect their development through their interactions with the environment. In this study, the exosystem is assessed for the accessibility and availability of supportive services for these mothers. This includes support from family members, peer networking and collaboration, support from NGOs, and encouragement from the broader community. For example, if a parent is unemployed, this can have a profoundly negative impact on the child, as the parent will be unable to afford necessities such as food and school fees. In this case, it will be challenging because many school-going mothers rely on their parents for financial support to care for their children. Furthermore, the chronosystem encompasses developmental time, which shapes how systems interact and influence individual development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Antony (2022) highlights the importance of considering issues of stability and instability in the family, school, or neighbourhood through the chronosystem. For this study, this implies examining the influence of context on school-going mothers and how instability within the family and community affects their decisions to leave school.

The ecological systems theory was relevant to our study because it offers a multidimensional social framework and a multilayered methodology for data analysis, providing important insights into the interconnected challenges faced by school-going mothers. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, the challenges faced by school-going mothers can be attributed to their direct interactions with schools, family members, policies, cultural values, and temporal change.

Literature Review

The challenges experienced by school-going mothers have been extensively documented. Several studies have shown that school-going mothers face school-related challenges, including frequent grade repetition and declines in academic performance. Malatji, Dube, and Nkala-Dlamini (2020) and Ndwandwe (2023) assert that the demands of motherhood roles, such as feeding, cleaning, and medical care, pose a significant challenge for school-going mothers pursuing their educational careers. These duties can disrupt the school-going mother's social and academic pursuits. A study by Runhare, Majanga, and Mathebula (2021) found that student mothers were required to repeat a grade upon returning to school after childbirth. Janha and Tenha (2023) affirm that childbirth often leads to prolonged absences from school due to health challenges or postpartum recovery cases. Corwith and Ali (2022) and Ngwenya (2017) state that as a result of these absences, mothers miss assignments, leading to learning disruptions and making it challenging to progress to the next level, as they may have forgotten what they had studied. The need to care for their children at home was cited as the primary factor in grade repetition.



According to Rama, Achieng, and Asena (2021), the lack of parental support contributed to a low academic performance among school-going mothers. Rama et al. (2021) found, in a study examining the effects of re-entry policies on the performance of readmitted mothers in mathematics, that a lack of parental support was the primary factor contributing to the decline in the academic performance of school-going mothers. In addition, Nkosi and Pretorius (2019) highlighted that when school-going mothers are reintegrated, their academic performance in class declines from good to average due to the balancing act between motherhood and their academic journey.

The lack of assistance from family members and the child's father is another common problem, making child rearing more complicated for school-going mothers due to the absence of these important individuals in their lives. These challenges affect their studies. Various studies indicate that, due to a lack of childcare support, the educational ambitions of school-going mothers diminish (Mukabana, Abuya, Kabiru, & Ajayi, 2024). In South Sudan, Corwith et al. (2022) report that the most significant challenge was a food shortage that affected infants. Adjei, Caffe, Simpson, Harris, and Mouli (2023) assert that school-going mothers have ensured that they balance childcare, studying, and classes. This presents a challenge when childcare obligations prevent them from studying at home. Research conducted by Nsalamba and Simpande (2019) revealed that the dual role of scholar and mother among school-going mothers has led to lower academic performance, despite re-entry policies that allow them to continue their studies after giving birth.

A study conducted by Ibrahim (2018) also reveals that school-going mothers face financial challenges. These mothers depend on their parents for financial support to meet their basic needs and those of their children. Chiyota and Marishane (2020) contend that school-going mothers face financial challenges related to the purchase of necessities for their children and school fees. Ultimately, these financial challenges affect their educational achievement, significantly hindering their chances of securing a good job. The results align with Hubbard's hypothesis that school-going mothers need support to return to school after maternity leave. It is possible to engage stakeholders in seeking financial support and encouraging others to support school-going mothers.

The inadequacy of support is also seen in secondary schools that allow the mothers to pursue their studies. Previous research studies indicate that school-going mothers face significant discrimination from their teachers (Adangabe et al., 2021; Ruzibiza, 2021). Because of their roles as mothers and students, some mothers sometimes choose to miss classes. For example, health problems in their children may compel them to withdraw their children from school. Some teachers do not sympathise with school-going mothers by giving them extra lessons to help them catch up on missed classes (Malatji, Dube, & Nkala-Dlamini, 2020; Ngaza & Mwila, 2022). The teachers' primary reason was that their challenges were a private matter that did not involve them (Chigona & Chetty, 2008). Adangabe's (2020) study indicates that teachers were concerned about devoting significant time to working with school-going mothers, as this would make it difficult for them to complete the syllabus. In contrast, Baafi's (2020) study found that teachers expressed concern that providing support to such mothers would promote promiscuity among the schoolgirls. Therefore, school teachers are reluctant to pay attention to mothers for fear of community ridicule, which affects learner enrollment (Adangabe, 2020).



Methodology

The research study employed a qualitative research methodology to describe the challenges faced by school-going mothers in Hurungwe. According to Tracy (2024), qualitative research enables researchers to investigate emerging issues. Qualitative research relies on subjective interpretations, which can introduce bias. Participants may modify their responses to make them socially desirable or to present themselves in a more positive light, thereby affecting the authenticity of the collected data. The study utilised a case study research design. Thus, case studies focus on one or a few cases of a particular phenomenon, providing a comprehensive investigation of the events and experiences in those specific situations (Denscombe, 2014). The study examined the challenges faced by school-going mothers. Therefore, to address the research questions, the researchers employed a case study design. A case study research design is suitable because the research questions require a comprehensive understanding of the challenges mothers face in schools.

Population, sample, and sampling procedure

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a population comprises members grouped by common characteristics and purpose and is of interest to researchers; in this study, the population comprises school-going mothers in Hurungwe. The researchers purposively selected participants, as Creswell (2007) contends that this method involves deliberately selecting a sample with relevant knowledge about the research under study. The sample consists of fifteen school-attending mothers from Hurungwe District. Data collection took place over two months from July to August 2024. Research indicates that 2 to 25 participants are suitable for the study (Alaise, 2017). Therefore, after collecting data from six participants, the researchers had sufficient data.

Data Collection Instruments

The study collected data through semi-structured interviews, which, according to Ruslin, Mashuri, Rask, Alhabsyi, and Syam (2022), provide a flexible research strategy that blends the structure of prepared open-ended questions with the freedom to probe further into participants' responses. Through interviews, the researchers intended to examine the challenges faced by school-going mothers. We concluded that semi-structured interviews were a better method for data collection because participants could share information more easily than with questionnaires (Monday, 2020). Semi-structured interviews are primarily used because they are easy to administer, allowing researchers to modify questions as they probe further. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 mothers who attend school. The interview sessions lasted for about thirty minutes.

Data Analysis

The study's findings were thematically analysed. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the process of data analysis involves continuous coding, organising the data chronologically and categorically, and reviewing recurring themes. The collected data were then prepared and organised for analysis and reviewed to categorise themes before coding began. The researchers classified the data into themes similar to the research questions.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the sensitivity of the subject of school-going mothers, all ethical standards were strictly followed when conducting the research study. Permission to carry out the study was given by the University of South Africa College of Education Ethics Review Committee with reference number



(2024/07/12/00000044/02/RB). Permission to carry out the study was also granted by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, informed consent from participants was obtained after discussing confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy.

Results

The primary objective was to identify the challenges faced by school-going mothers in Hurungwe District, Zimbabwe. To protect the identities of research participants, the study used codes such as SGM1, SGM2, and SGM3. The research findings were presented thematically to address the research questions. Using ecological systems theory, the findings show how several environmental factors interact to shape the experiences of school-going mothers. From the findings, four themes that relate to the challenges experienced by the study's participants are as follows: (a) Educational challenges, (b) Financial constraints, (c) stigmatisation and isolation, and (d) unsupportive school environment.

Educational challenges

Most study participants experienced the dual responsibilities of parenting and schoolwork. Researchers found that the difficulties faced by school-going mothers significantly affected their lives. Participant S1GM2 had the following to say,

Every time I reach home, my child will start to cry. I have to look after the baby since my mother will be busy in the market and with other household chores. I have no one to rely on, not even my mother-in-law; we do not have a good relationship.

As an addition to what participant S1GM2 said, participant S2GM3 said,

We start our lessons at 7:00 am and we finish at 3:30 pm. From school, I will proceed to take my child to a daycare centre. The moment I reach home, I do my homework and personal study. I am always absent from school, especially when my child falls sick. My husband does not assist me with childcare duties. He believes that mothers should assume all childcare roles.

A similar view was expressed by another participant, S3GM4, who had this to say,

When I return from school, I do all the cooking and washing when my child is asleep. However, the way he sleeps is unpredictable, as he can wake up at any time. This always disturbs me when doing my homework and studies.

Often, I am very tired because I sleep late at night, as I am looking after the baby. I am always exhausted. My participation in other extracurricular activities has been limited, and my grades in exams have also declined.

The study's findings concur with those of Chiyota and Marishane (2020) and Nkosi and Pretorius (2019), who confirm that failing to strike a balance between being a mother and a learner affects concentration. Additionally, logistical issues, such as the need for daycare and the risk of missing classes when a child falls ill, further complicate their ability to stay on track.

Financial constraints

Evidence on the financial challenges facing school-going mothers indicates that they struggle to care for their children and pay school fees due to limited funds. As a result, participants reported difficulty concentrating during their studies and often missed school. The majority of participants reported struggling to manage this challenge. Here is what participant S1GM3 said,



I often miss lessons because I am unable to afford childcare and school fees. We are experiencing financial difficulties since my husband is currently unemployed. I have no one to leave my child with while I am at school. Even my husband doesn't care, as he is always betting at the shops.

The same view was echoed by another participant, who indicated that they felt ashamed when they were handpicked for having arrears in school fee payments.

It's a challenge for me to concentrate on my studies when I have not paid my school fees. I always think of dropping out to look for employment so that I can pay for my expenses and other needs. -S3GM2

The study participants further described financial constraints, noting that they face significant criticism from fellow learners and family members, which creates a sense of isolation because they cannot freely seek support. Participant S1GM4 said,

Some of us who decided to return to school on our own have faced numerous problems because no one supports us due to the mistakes we made. It seems people are no longer interested in helping us and our children. Personally, I have no money to raise the child and pay school fees and other expenses. I always feel ashamed whenever I fail to buy things for my child.

The above findings support Ndwandwe's (2023) observations that school-going mothers experience financial pressures, which affect their emotional well-being. The majority of participants indicated that economic pressures and academic performance are significant problems for mothers. This confirms the position of Mangeli, Rayyani, Cheraghi, and Tirgari. Mangeli, Rayyani, Cheraghi, and Tirgari (2017) found that school-going mothers did not receive sufficient support from their family members and friends. This lack of support has created numerous challenges for the child's upbringing and fulfilment of basic needs, as well as continuing their education. School-going mothers felt discouraged and were fearful of seeking assistance due to the stigma associated with the mistake they had made.

Stigmatisation and isolation

The findings also revealed that secondary school learners, teachers and parents in Zimbabwe use stigmatisation and isolation. Due to the stigma surrounding school-going mothers, they feel it is unnecessary to maintain relationships with their former friends. This was revealed by a school-going mother, S2GM2, who said:

I have the potential to come to school, but teachers do not believe in me because I have two children at home. In most circumstances, my colleagues mock and jeer at me, saying I should take care of my husband and the two children.

To show the extreme nature of the situation, on whether stigma was a challenging factor, two views emerged. For example, a school-going mother, S3GM4, said,

Whenever I bring my child to school, my colleagues will stare at me as if it is unlawful. Whenever I want to have fun with my classmates, they often feel uncomfortable being close to me because I've become a mother while I am still a student.

Participant S1GM5 was also in agreement with S3GM4 and had this to say,

I have seen that when we are in guidance and counselling sessions, whenever there is a discussion on love affairs, we feel ashamed. Everyone will look at us, and this makes us feel very uncomfortable.



Another interesting thing was that when probed further, S3GM4 had this to say,

In our village, I heard a certain village head saying that mothers should stay at home and look after their children and husbands, if they have one, rather than going back to school to spoil our innocent children.

This finding confirms a study by Ruzibiza (2021) that school-going mothers face the challenge of being shamed in schools and communities. Likewise, a survey by Ndwandwe (2023) revealed that school-going mothers faced significant discrimination from their peers and teachers. The findings show that school-going mothers are not viewed positively. This situation led to low self-esteem, which negatively affected their academic trajectory. According to Kaplan (2023) and Ruzibiza (2021), a student mother who is consistently labelled tends to lose motivation to attend classes, which could negatively affect their academic progress and lead them to withdraw from school.

Unsupportive school environment

This current study also found that the school environment tends to be unsupportive to student mothers. This is mainly due to inflexible timetables, a lack of childcare facilities, inadequate access to counselling, and a lack of understanding from teachers and staff. Participant S3GM2 said,

Our lessons start at 7:15 am, and my child wakes up at 7 am, which means I often fail to attend the first lesson. The school is far away from our homestead. This has significantly impacted my academic performance.

The majority of interviewees expressed frustration with teachers and staff who lacked empathy, particularly given that they are mothers with multiple roles at home and at school. One school-going mother shared her experience. S2GM4 said,

I am always absent from school when my daughter is sick because, as you can see, I have to care for her at home, and there is no one who can take care of her. Sometimes I attend classes only once a week. Teachers tend to be furious with me and express their frustrations by shouting. Some teachers would accuse me of intentionally reducing the school's pass rate due to my frequent absences from school.

Another participant shared her experience. S1GM5 had this to say:

Teachers tend to judge us whenever we visit the staffroom for help. We always feel looked down upon. Teachers often do not understand our situation as students and mothers. If we fail to submit assignments on time, it will be considered a serious offence.

Lack of counselling services among school-going mothers has been a persistent concern, as this has had an impact on their ability to navigate personal and academic challenges. S1GM5 expressed the following views:

I feel overwhelmed with schoolwork and the roles I play at home. We do not offer counselling services at our school. Many times, I think of withdrawing from school because I cannot withstand the pressure I face both at home and at school. In our school timetable, guidance and counselling is allocated as a subject that is done once a week, but there is not even a single teacher who has come to talk to us.

From the interview excerpts, it is evident that schools are unable to provide accommodating environments for school-going mothers, despite the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's policy permitting them to continue attending school after delivery. These findings align well with research by Wekesa (2023), who found numerous challenges faced by school-going mothers due to



timetables that conflict with their children's needs. Mwakililo, Mauki, and Lyakurwa (2025) also report that counselling services within schools are not being provided, which leads to isolation and stresses school-going mothers. On the other hand, teachers' perceptions of learners' school absenteeism pose a problem for teachers. This aligns with the findings of Adangabe et al. (2021), Maarman-Africa (2023), and Ruzibiza (2021), who reported that teachers lacked tolerance towards school-going mothers, as they did not want to be given reasons for their absence from school.

Limitations

This study was conducted in only three secondary schools; therefore, the study results cannot be generalized to other schools. The researchers aimed to comprehend the challenges experienced by school-going mothers in Hurungwe. Similarly, to provide an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by school-going mothers, researchers presented a comprehensive discussion of the research procedures employed in the study.

Conclusion

The study found that school-going mothers experienced various challenges. The study's findings reveal that the challenges experienced by school-going mothers vary, including educational challenges, financial constraints, stigmatisation and isolation, unsupportive school environment, and the feeling of shame associated with being a mother. These challenges led to the dropout of school-going mothers, who could not withstand the demands of motherhood. The study recommends that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's social assistance programmes, such as the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), which assist orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs) by covering school fees, should also be made available to school-going mothers. Researchers have noted that only a few studies have explored the challenges faced by school-going mothers in Hurungwe District. Therefore, the study aims to bridge the current knowledge gap and contribute to the body of knowledge on the challenges faced by school-going mothers.

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