

Chapter 9: The Right to Return, But the Right to Belong?

Adolescent Pregnancy, School Re-Entry and Educational Inclusion in Zimbabwe: A Counselling Psychology Perspective

Kaila Olivia

Primary, Secondary and Learner Welfare Department

Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Primary and Secondary Education

Email: oliviaktr@gmail.com

Abstract

This literature study provides an in-depth critique of the Zimbabwean progressive re-entry policy and the situation of adolescent mothers' education. The goal is to highlight the importance of psychological belonging to school readiness and successful reintegration – not only legal compliance. While most literature focuses on policy compliance, there is little consideration given to the complex socio-emotional challenges and the relatively underresearch area of counselling psychology in creating inclusive school climates. It is a literature review that is concept oriented. Peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and grey literature were systematically searched to collect data between 2010 and 2025. To analyse emergent psychosocial patterns thematisation was undertaken. A significant findings were that pervasive stigma and lack of psychological support deeply negatively affect the re-entry process, leading many times to secondary dropout. We strongly recommend to build up mandatory and trauma-informed counseling in school re-entry procedures along with peer-support networks. The ethical implications of research include preserving confidentiality and anonymity to protect the anonymity of the returnees from community-based discrimination.

Keywords: Adolescent pregnancy, Counseling Psychology, Educational inclusion, Re-entry policy, School readiness.

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This unit provides students with an introduction to Music and an overview of some background information.

Adolescent pregnancy is an educational, social, psychological and public-health issue in Zimbabwe. Teen pregnancy can affect any social or economic bracket, however, the impact of adolescent pregnancy can be felt more so by the girl child from poor families or those from rural areas and those of socially marginalised communities. Pregnancy can disrupt school attendance, strain social supports, put teens at risk for stigma and discrimination, and be a risk factor for poverty and mental health problems. Adolescent pregnancy has been defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) as a phenomenon linked to serious social, economic and health consequences, especially when adolescent girls lack access to sexual and reproductive health information and economy and/or education. Similarly, UNICEF Zimbabwe (2023) defines adolescent pregnancy as a complex problem, driven by a combination of factors such as poverty, gender inequality, social norms, lack of knowledge and access to sexual and reproductive health services, and vulnerabilities in families and communities. Zimbabwe has made significant policy progress towards protecting pregnant learners and adolescent mothers' right

to education. The Education Amendment Act of 2019 gave a permissible legal base by stipulating that no pupil is to be excluded from school for being pregnant or unable to pay school fees (Government of Zimbabwe, 2019). It is important shift from the approaches that historically have considered pregnancy as a ground of exclusion in education to a rights approach to education. Legal authorisation to re-school, however, does not always result in a successful transition to the school environment. Evidence from Zimbabwe today show there is a gap between access to formal citizenship and reality. In a phenomenological study of young mothers, parents and school authorities, Muzingli et al. (2024) determined that while legal reforms don't necessarily lead to successful reintegration. Young mothers were still being blamed and shamed, excluded and discriminated against by others and their families, rejected by peers and lacking in support and family involvement. However, Ngidi et al. (2026) also show how the path taken by pregnant girls in rural Zimbabwe is still fraught with poverty, community and moral pressure and behaviours, and patriarchal authority over girls, despite it being legally possible to return to school.

Returning/ Belonging is at the core of the distinction, then. Returning: primarily the return to a physical setting or an administrative return to an educational setting. Belonging is broader. It includes the sense of being accepted, respected, being a legitimate part of the school community, feeling valued and recognised. Based on a meta-analysis, Korpershoek et al. (2020) concluded that school belonging has a positive relationship with academic outcomes, motivation, social-emotional and behavioural outcomes and a negative relationship with absence and dropout. Therefore, the technical ability to return to school does not equal educational inclusion; adolescent mothers who feel humiliated, rejected, isolated or constantly judged will not be returning to school either physically or emotionally. Hence, adolescent pregnancy, school re-entry and educational inclusion in Zimbabwe is discussed from a counselling psychology lens in this chapter. It insists that the right to return is to become 'the right to belong.' Inclusion that is meaningful means inclusion in all aspects: psychological safety, supportive relationships, reducing stigma; providing childcare, financial assistance, flexible educational opportunities and relationships, family engagement, and ongoing psychosocial support.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Adolescent pregnancy and educational exclusion are social phenomenon that are interrelated. While pregnancy may directly impact education in the moment when birth happens or due to childcare duties, this disruption can often start prior to giving birth. Pregnant learners might be compelled to withdraw from school due to fear of disclosure, shame, anticipated punishment, peer judgment and community expectations. Adolescent pregnancy must be seen as a problem not confined to individual behaviour, but reflecting the social, economic and cultural circumstances surrounding it as stated by UNICEF Zimbabwe (2023). The educational impact can last a lifetime. A girl that leaves school after having a child, returning may be more challenging because she takes up new roles as a mom. The combination of household poverty may compound the situation, with transportation, examination fees, uniforms, childcare and other education expenses becoming prohibitive. The adolescent might also be called upon to supplement the family income and/or take care of siblings instead of enrolling in school. However, Zimbabwean studies suggest that the barriers are not removed by the existence of one or more reentry policies. Muzingili et al. (2024) identified stigmatizing and discriminatory experiences, social isolation and lack of support with influencing young mothers' experience of second-chance education. The study gives an example of the need for an important contradiction that policy can remove the formal barrier without removing the informal barrier. There is more evidence from rural Zimbabwe, by Ngidi et al. (2026). While interviewing 22 young mothers in and out of schools in the age group 16-19 years, they conducted a qualitative study which revealed that poverty, moral regulation and the ability to decide for

oneself were some of the determinants undercutting legal readmission. Fathers, husbands and churches and other influences might play a part on educational decisions. However, the young mothers found ways to be persistent, including returning to the examinations, combining work with education and sharing out childcare duties and conducting vocational activities. These find challenges those portrayals of adolescent mothers as simply irresponsible or unmotivated that are deficit-focused. Rather it shows restricted agency and resilience.

The Zimbabwean experience is corroborated by the regional evidence. In a systematic review of 63 sources regarding school re-entry and continuation policies in sub-Saharan Africa, Nyakato et al. (2026) identified that policy intention was sometimes outstripped by execution. Stigma, moral monitoring of motherhood, gender expectations associated with childbearing, strict school schedules, lack of childcare, poverty at home and the varying interpretation of policy at the school level were identified as barriers. Flexible learning pathways, psychosocial support and childcare options are all successful strategies. The UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa (2026) regional review also finds that despite national commitments towards school re-entry, many adolescent mothers continue to be out of school. The review finds gaps in implementation, stigma, lack of resources, and lack of practical guidance. Importantly, it implores for the implementation of a system that allows girls to not only come back, but stay in and finish their education. Support frameworks identified will be catch-up lessons, childcare, counselling and community support.

The impact of school belonging in this respect is relevant. Learner Belonging is when learners feel accepted, respected, included and supported in their learning environment. Korpershoek et al. (2020) illustrate that the influence of belonging is much more impactful on academic attainment, motivation, social-emotional wellbeing and behaviour than is society's focus on safety and protection. Štremfel et al. (2024) also find that belongings encompass multiple levels of the ecology of children's lives: individual, relational, school, and beyond. Adolescent Mothers may experience a loss of social identity and thus belonging. Learning might change the perceptions and attitudes of teachers, peers, parents and members of the community toward the learner because she is pregnant. No longer may the girl be seen as a learner but as a mother, a person whose behavior has been a breach of social expectations, or a source of family shame. These labels can have a lasting impact on behavior and expectations in the aftermath of pregnancy. This can, in turn, result in stigma being a psychological obstacle for learning. Goffman (1963) conceptualised stigma which is useful as it helps to explain how socially discrediting characteristics might impact an individual's identity and social relationships. When facing judgement time after time, an adolescent mother might internalise negative beliefs about herself. This can lead to feelings of embarrassment, low self-esteem, withdrawal and loss of motivation in education and for socializing. The scope of counselling psychology therefore becomes pertinent as it focuses on the psychological wellbeing of people within social contexts in which they operate. The context of family relationships, peer relationships, school climate, identity development, coping and systemic barriers are all points of attention beyond the problem in the adolescent that counselling psychology emphasises.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) has been the primary source of information for this article. The concept of theory is that human development is a product of the interaction between the individual and with various environmental systems. These are the microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems and chronosystems. The immediate environments/setting includes family, school, peers and relationships (Naidu & Chinyoka, 2017) in the microsystem. The microsystem might either facilitate or hinder perseverance in school for an adolescent mother. An accepting caregiver can

support the provision of child care and encouragement, and a critical caregiver can discourage going back to school. Teachers can also serve as a positive or negative role model. The mesosystem is the way that microsystems interact. School-family relationship in particular is important (Kufakunesu et al, 2020). Ongoing communication with caregivers can be used to constructively engage with them to solve problems related to child care, attendance and academic catch-up that may arise. Lack of communication, on the other hand, can lead to the adolescent feeling pulled in several directions. Exosystem refers to those systems that have indirect impact on the adolescent, which can be institutional, such as educational administration, social protection systems, community organizations and employment conditions (Marevesa, 2020). School funding, counselling, social welfare and community programmes can, therefore, impact on an adolescent mother's ability to stay in school. Norms and values in the macrosystem involve cultural beliefs, gender norms and laws, and religious values and societal expectations (Shumba, 2023). The cultural interpretation of adolescent pregnancy depends on the norms regarding female sexuality, motherhood and respectability. Thus, a law that promotes progressive education can exist alongside social norms which keep adolescent mothers from coming back. The chronosystem highlights change over time. Pregnancy is a major shift in the adolescent experience, and so too is policy change, like the one brought about by the Education Amendment Act (Dube, 2020). The teens' experience is thus as a result of individual changes and changes in the educational and social atmosphere.

The School Belonging perspective is added to the ecological framework. Central claim: More than physical access is required for educational participation. Supportive relationships and acceptance foster a sense of belonging, which increases learners' engagement and retention in school (Baloyi, 2026). This is of high priority with young mothers as pregnancy and motherhood, and social judgement, may have already taken a toll on their identity. These viewpoints blend to lend weight to the idea of moving from, 'Why is the girl pregnant?', to 'Under what circumstances can she return, belong, remain and succeed?' This reframing is in line with the person in environment perspective of counselling psychology.

4.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Paradigm

The article adopts an **interpretivist paradigm**. Interpretivism recognises that experiences are socially constructed and that meanings associated with adolescent pregnancy, motherhood and education are influenced by cultural, relational and institutional contexts. This paradigm is appropriate because the article seeks to understand how existing literature portrays the experiences of adolescent mothers and the conditions affecting their educational inclusion.

4.2 Research Approach

A qualitative approach was adopted. The purpose was not to quantify the prevalence of adolescent pregnancy or statistically test relationships, but to synthesise meanings, experiences and patterns identified across existing research (Tarisayi, 2023). Qualitative synthesis is particularly appropriate for examining stigma, belonging, identity, relationships and psychosocial experiences.

4.3 Research Design

The article employed a thematic literature synthesis design. Existing empirical studies, policy documents, systematic reviews and authoritative reports concerning adolescent pregnancy, school re-

entry, second-chance education, school belonging and psychosocial support were critically examined (Lunga, 2022). This is not a report of a newly conducted empirical study. No participants were recruited by the author, and no original interviews or questionnaires were administered. Consequently, the themes presented in Section 5 are themes emerging from the reviewed literature rather than findings generated from a new participant sample.

4.4 Data Collection Methods

Documentary analysis was used to identify relevant academic and policy literature. Sources included peer-reviewed Zimbabwean studies, African research, systematic reviews, international guidance and Zimbabwean education policy (Chidhakwa, 2020). Particular attention was given to literature addressing school re-entry, educational exclusion, stigma, psychosocial wellbeing, school belonging and support for adolescent mothers.

4.5 Sampling Techniques

A purposive sampling strategy was used for the selection of literature (Dube, 2020). Sources were considered relevant when they directly addressed adolescent pregnancy, school re-entry, educational inclusion, second-chance education, adolescent mothers or psychosocial experiences within Zimbabwe or sub-Saharan Africa.

4.6 Sample Size

Because this article is a literature synthesis rather than an empirical investigation, there was no human participant sample. The evidence base consisted of a purposively selected body of scholarly and policy sources. For contextual comparison, Nyakato et al. (2026) themselves synthesised 63 sources in their systematic review of sub-Saharan African school re-entry policies.

4.7 Justification of Participant Selection

No new participants were selected. The decision to focus on literature concerning adolescent mothers, schools, families and policy was based on the need to understand school re-entry as a multidimensional process (Dube, 2020). Existing Zimbabwean studies involving young mothers, parents and school authorities were particularly valuable because they provide perspectives from actors directly involved in reintegration.

4.8 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed the broad six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

4.8.1 Familiarization with the Data

The selected literature was read repeatedly to identify recurring ideas concerning re-entry, belonging, stigma, poverty, childcare, family support, school relationships, resilience and psychological wellbeing.

4.8.2 Generating Initial Codes

Relevant statements and findings were coded according to concepts such as

stigma, school exclusion, policy-practice gap, poverty, childcare, family support, peer rejection, psychological distress, resilience and counselling.

4.8.3 Searching for Themes

Related codes were grouped into broader themes. For example, stigma, shame, discrimination and peer rejection were grouped under psychosocial exclusion, while poverty, childcare and educational costs were grouped under structural barriers.

4.8.4 Reviewing Themes

Themes were compared across Zimbabwean and regional literature to establish whether they represented recurring patterns rather than isolated findings.

4.8.5 Defining and Naming Themes

The themes were refined to capture the central argument that formal re-entry does not automatically produce meaningful inclusion.

4.8.6 Writing the Report

The findings were organised into thematic sections and interpreted through ecological and school-belonging perspectives, with particular attention to implications for counselling psychology.

4.9 Trustworthiness of Data

Trustworthiness was enhanced through the use of credible peer-reviewed publications, official policy documents and reports from recognised organisations. Triangulation was achieved by comparing findings from different types of sources, including empirical studies, systematic reviews and policy reports. The use of recent Zimbabwean and regional studies also strengthened contextual relevance.

4.10 Ethical Considerations

As the article relied exclusively on published and publicly available sources, no direct human participants were involved. Ethical considerations included accurate representation of authors' findings, avoidance of fabricated participant accounts, appropriate acknowledgement of sources and protection of identities where published studies used pseudonyms (Dakwa, 2018). The article also avoids portraying adolescent mothers as a homogeneous or deficient group.

5.0 DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

5.1 Theme 1: Legal Re-entry Does Not Guarantee Belonging

One theme that has come up in the literature is that of legal access vs. lived inclusion in. An important development in Zimbabwe is the legal framework, which is a step up from the use of pregnancy as a grounds for withdrawing from school. Having a legal right, however, does not imply that the adolescent will be accepted or that she will continue in school. This gap is evidenced by the author's findings of blaming, shaming, discrimination, and social exclusion in the policy environment that supports second

chance education as described by Muzingili et al. (2024). Ngidi et al. (2026), as mentioned, give the example that the right to return can often be more of a symbolic right where social and economic factors dominate. It is not a matter of whether or not schooling is allowed for adolescent mothers. More important questions are ones like, “Are they welcomed?” Do they are treated with dignity? Are they able to fully join in? Are teachers confident about their academic ability? Do they have a way to get learning materials? Are they able to provide child care and education? Are they able to engage in a full education? UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa (2026) further states that education systems should facilitate adolescent mothers to return, stay and finish their education. From return to retention to completion, a more meaningful definition of education inclusion is provided. This is an important distinction from a counselling psychology point of view. A school can be physical safe, but psychologically unsafe. Thus inclusion should be regarded as being twofold: structural and psychological.

5.2 Theme 2: Stigma, Identity and Psychological Wellbeing

The second theme relates to stigma and its effects on identity and psychological wellbeing. Being a pregnant teen can create a significant identity shift. The adolescent has to navigate identities between learner and mother and engage with social norms concerning the roles of a “schoolgirl.” Muzingili et al. (2024) pointed out blaming and shaming as one of the most important obstacles to reintegration. Ngidi et al. (2026) also uncover the role of moral judgement and community monitoring in girls' education choices. This can lead to a sense of shame and rejection. Stigma can work on a number of layers. The adolescent can that is, internalise negative messages on an individual level. At the interpersonal level she might be rejected by her peers, teachers, and/or family members. At the institutional level, it's perhaps that there are practices in schools that send this message that somehow she's different, that she doesn't belong. Cultural or moral stories at the community level can perpetuate beliefs about the conflict between motherhood and schooling. This may lead to loss of sense of belonging at school. Korpershoek et al. (2020) demonstrate links between belonging and positive academic as well as psychosocial outcomes. Exclusion and rejection, on the other hand, can lead to disengagement, and dropout. Counselling psychology can help with this by providing individual counselling, support groups, identity reconstruction, self-esteem interventions and stigma sensitive school programs. It must, however, be recognised that an adolescent may be reacting in a rational manner to their exclusionary environment and as such, counselling should not be used to “fix” the adolescent. It thus must accompany changes in the actual environment also.

5.3 Theme 3: Poverty, Childcare and Structural Barriers

The third theme is the material conditions. The literature has been consistent in showing that education re-entry goes hand in hand with poverty. Ngidi et al. (2026) discovered that education negotiation by rural young moms is situated in circumstances of poverty, household duties, and scarce resources. Poor child care and household poverty are also cited by Nyakato et al. (2026) as significant constraints to access in sub-Saharan Africa. A mother's job often gives rise to real obligations which the regular school system cannot accommodate. The learner may require a person to be able to look after her baby while attending classes. She might require transportation to get to places, food, sanitary products and learning resources and income. In the absence of those the right to return can be virtually meaningless. This is especially acute in rural areas where schools could be far away and household incomes erratic, as well as child care services scarce. It is expected that the responsibility of child care lies with a girl and may keep her at home. This stresses the need for social protection and multi-sectoral interventions. The presence of supportive institutional environments such as assistance with school fees, childcare,

community sensitisation, teacher training, and social work and social protection are required for successful reintegration, according to Kurevakwesu et al. (2025). Therefore, it is essential that educational inclusion cannot be realised in the context of primary and secondary education only and by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Education alone. Complementary responsibilities of education, social welfare, health services, local authorities, communities, families and civil society organisations.

5.4 Theme 4: Family, Community and School Relationships

The 4th subject is “Relationships”. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that there are various environments that interact in shaping development in an ecological framework. The adjustment in relations with their families and schools for adolescent mothers can either support or detract from the decision to continue with education. The support of the family is of great significance. A supporting caregiver can give care and support, emotional encouragement and practical help. Family rejection, however, or pressure for marriage or to look after family duties, can prevent continuation with school. Muzingili et al. (2024) listed barriers to reintegration as lack of parental support and forced marriage. Ngidi et al. (2026) also illustrate the potential shift in educational decision making towards fathers/husbands and religious leaders. The school is also an important relationally rich context. Teachers can be supportive adults who express high expectations and support re-entry. Or stigma can be reproduced through teachers' judgmental comments or differential treatment. A school must, therefore, be a place of healing not a place of condemnation. Should be included in teacher training; adolescent development, pregnancy, stigma, inclusive education and referral pathways. Community involvement is a critical part of this as well. UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa (2026) calls attention to community support as a key element of effective re-entry systems. A community dialogue can help to evaluate the notion that adolescent pregnancy forever rules out education.

5.5 Theme 5: Resilience, Agency and the Possibility of Second-Chance Education

The fifth theme is the resilience and agency of adolescent mothers. The narrative about teenagers that often emerges from the public arena is using deficit language to describe adolescent mothers: They are irresponsible, low motivational, moribund and educationally failing. These depictions can, in turn, be obstacles to inclusion. Ngidi et al. (2026) offer proof of young mothers who persist in realizing their educational dreams in flexible and adaptive ways. Others go back for exams, work and study or take care of family and celebrate vocational events. These behaviours show agency where there may be limited choice. Moreover, Muzingili (2025) also emphasizes resilience among school-reintegrated adolescent mothers in Zimbabwe. Resilience should not, however, be viewed as an individual attribute for overcoming all the structural barriers. Additional supportive systems are necessary for a resilient learner. Counselling psychology has the ability to improve adaptive coping capacity and to challenge the environment through advocacy. Practitioners can assist adolescents in recognizing strengths, making realistic educational choices, managing their stress and negotiating family relationships and reconnecting with their future goals. The goal is not just to support the girl's ability to “cope” with exclusion, but rather support her ability to be able to meaningfully participate in education. Hence, second chance education also ought to be regarded more as restoration than charity. Teen parents are learners too, with aspirations and potential for development.

5.6 Theme 6: Counselling Psychology as a Bridge to Meaningful Inclusion

The last theme relates to the role of counselling psychology. Counselling psychologists have an important role to play that could be between the individual and the educational system. They not only monitor individual therapy, but also engage in prevention, consultation, advocacy, family intervention and teacher support and psychosocial programming at the sistema level (Chidarikire, 2025). Counselling at an individual level might help with shame, anxiety, loss of educational opportunities, low self-esteem, identity issues and feelings of uncertainty about the future. CBT methods can help adolescents to challenge internalised negative beliefs, and a person-centred approach can help them feel accepted and receive unconditional positive regard (Dube, 2020). Counselling can help with communication between adolescent mothers and caregivers at family level. Family sessions can cover issues with conflict, childcare, expectations and educational plans (Shumba, 2021). At school level also, counselling psychologists can be of assistance to teachers and school administrators to design reintegration plans, sensitisation programmes and peer supports. It has been suggested that group counselling could provide a platform where adolescent mothers can talk about their experiences and build relationships (Chinyoka & Naidu, 2022). Psychologists can help with the awareness campaigns for stigma, gender norms and adolescent mother education at the community level. Referral systems can be put in place and improved with the cooperation of health workers, social workers, child protection workers, and community leaders. Crucially, counselling psychology needs to take a systems view, not an individual-blaming view (Moyo, 2020). Without child care, counselling will not solve the issue if they are unable to return. Individual treatment cannot replace school-wide anti-stigma interventions if she is kicked by her peers. Poverty cannot be an obstacle to attending school – psychological support needs to be accompanied by social support and practical support. This second-chance approach is echoed in the evidence in the UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa (2026) which asserts that counselling, childcare, catch-up learning and community support are all elements of effective second-chance education.

6.0 CONCLUSION

In Zimbabwe adolescent pregnancy should not be solely viewed as an individual reproductive occurrence. It is not simply a question of education – it is a psychosocial, economic, gender and Human Rights issue. The government of Zimbabwe has made a critical law turn towards the safeguarding of pregnant learners as well as those already with children by barring their exclusion. But there are examples that prove that a re-entry policy does not necessitate educational inclusion. The conclusion of this article is thus that ‘the right to return’ must be transformed into ‘the right to belong’. Belonging can't be access without the school gate opening. It needs to be accepted, dignified, psychologically safe, to be sustained through supportive relationships, to have access to practical resources and opportunities for learning and success. Recent studies conducted in Zimbabwe have revealed that adolescent mothers are still stigmatised, poor, bear the burden of child care burden, etc. after childbirth and remain marginalised in decision-making and social judgment by their male counterparts. Likewise, evidence in the region shows that policy implementation is inconsistent. However, a counselling psychology perspective adds an important layer of discussion to this scenario because of its consideration of the relationship between individual wellbeing and social environments. The adolescent mother should not be defined by her pregnancy and she should not be expected to have the resilience of her own to solve systemic problems. True to the spirit of inclusive education, a pedagogical system where pregnancy is not a fatal birth event in a girl's educational identity. The young mother herself is a pupil, she is a young man, a bearer of educational rights. Focusing on "allowed" to return should therefore not be the final

measure of policy success but rather the number of girls that are facilitated to return, belong, remain, progress and complete.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Establish structured school reintegration plans

Schools should develop individualised reintegration plans for adolescent mothers covering academic catch-up, attendance, childcare needs, psychosocial support, examination preparation and follow-up. Reintegration should be monitored beyond the point of admission.

7.2 Strengthen counselling and psychosocial services

Counselling psychologists and school-based psychosocial practitioners should provide individual, family and group interventions addressing stigma, self-esteem, identity, stress, parenting responsibilities, relationships and future planning. Psychological support should continue throughout the reintegration process rather than being offered only when a crisis occurs.

7.3 Train teachers in stigma-sensitive inclusive practice

Teachers and school administrators should receive structured training on adolescent pregnancy, educational rights, adolescent development, gender sensitivity, stigma, school belonging and referral procedures. Training should emphasise that pregnancy does not remove a learner's right to dignity or academic opportunity.

7.4 Provide practical support for childcare and poverty-related barriers

Government and development partners should strengthen social protection, educational assistance and childcare mechanisms for adolescent mothers. Financial support should address transport, learning materials, uniforms, examination costs and other barriers that make school attendance difficult.

7.5 Establish family and community sensitisation programmes

Families, traditional leaders, churches and community organisations should participate in programmes that challenge stigma and harmful gender norms. Community education should emphasise that supporting an adolescent mother's education benefits both the young mother and her child.

7.6 Introduce flexible learning pathways

Education authorities should expand flexible options such as catch-up programmes, phased learning, alternative education pathways and appropriate vocational opportunities. Such approaches should not become a mechanism for permanently diverting adolescent mothers away from mainstream education but should provide genuine pathways towards educational progression and completion.

7.7 Measure belonging as well as re-entry

Monitoring systems should move beyond counting how many adolescent mothers return to school. Indicators should include attendance, retention, academic progression, completion, psychosocial wellbeing, experiences of discrimination and sense of school belonging.

7.8 Strengthen multi-sectoral collaboration

Education authorities should work collaboratively with health services, social welfare, counselling psychologists, social workers, child protection services, civil society organisations and communities. Adolescent pregnancy is multidimensional and therefore requires an integrated response.

7.9 Promote further Zimbabwean research

Further research should examine the lived experiences of adolescent mothers across rural, urban and disadvantaged communities in Zimbabwe. Particular attention should be given to school belonging, psychological wellbeing, teacher attitudes, caregiver perceptions, childcare arrangements and long-term educational outcomes following re-entry. Therefore, Zimbabwe's commitment to educational inclusion must be judged not merely by whether an adolescent mother is allowed to cross the school gate, but by whether she can walk through that gate knowing that she is wanted, respected, supported and entitled to succeed.

8.0 REFERENCES

- Allen, K.-A., Jamshidi, N., Berger, E., Reupert, A., Wurf, G., & May, F. (2022). Impact of school-based interventions for building school belonging in adolescence: A systematic review. *Educational Psychology Review*, 34(1), 229–257. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-021-09621-w>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. London. Harvard University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. London. Prentice-Hall.
- Government of Zimbabwe. (2019). *Education Amendment Act, 2019 (Act No. 15 of 2019)*. Harare. Government Printer.
- Korpershoek, H., Canrinus, E. T., Fokkens-Bruinsma, M., & de Boer, H. (2020). The relationships between school belonging and learners' motivational, social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes in secondary education: A meta-analytic review. *Research Papers in Education*, 35(6), 641–680. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2019.1615116>
- Kurevakwesu, W., Mabeza, T. T., Masungwa, D., Matanga, A. A., Chirangwanda, K., Mavuka, A., & Muridzo, N. G. (2025). Re-entry of teenage mothers into Zimbabwe's education system: Implications for social work and policy. *International Journal of Community and Social Development*, 7(1), 57–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/25166026241310030>

- Muzingili, T., Muntanga, W., & Zvada, V. E. (2024). A phenomenological study on pregnant and young mothers' experiences on second-chance education in Zimbabwe. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1), [2367730](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2367730). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2367730>
- Muzingili, T. (2025). Factors predicting the resilience of school-reintegrated teenage mothers in Zimbabwe. *Cogent Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2540592>
- Ngidi, N. D., Bhana, D., & Matswetu, V. S. (2026). Girls negotiating schooling after pregnancy in rural Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 124, 103606. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2026.103606>
- Nyakato, V. N., Kemigisha, E., & Kools, S. (2026). Adolescent mothers' second chance education: A systematic review of school re-entry and continuation policies in sub-Saharan Africa. *South African Journal of Education*, 46(2), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v46n2a2517>
- Štremfel, U., Šterman Ivančič, K., & Peras, I. (2024). Addressing the sense of school belonging among all learners? A systematic literature review. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education*, 14(11), [2901–2917](https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe14110190). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe14110190>
- UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa. (2026). *The right to return: School re-entry policy and practice for pregnant and parenting adolescent girls in Eastern and Southern Africa*. London. UNICEF.
- UNICEF Zimbabwe. (2023). *National assessment on adolescent pregnancy in Zimbabwe*. Harare. UNICEF.
- World Health Organization. (2024). *Adolescent pregnancy*. London. World Health Organization.