



## **Coping Strategies and Perceived Support of Student-Mothers at The University of Education, Winneba-Campus**

**Cecilia Anane<sup>1</sup>, Amos Amuribadek Adangabe<sup>2</sup> and Daniel Inkoom<sup>3</sup>**

*<sup>1</sup>Department of Pedagogy-St. Joseph's College of Education, P. O. Box 15- Bechem*

*<sup>2</sup>Department of Pedagogy-Nusrat Jahan Ahmadiyya College of Education, Box 71- Wa, Ghana- West Africa*

*<sup>3</sup>Berekum College of Education Box 74, Berekum - Bono Region, Ghana.*

**Corresponding Author:** Amos Amuribadek Adangabe, **Email:** jesseayuekanbe@gmail.com

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research work explored the perceived support (needs) of student-mothers as they undertake motherhood and studentship concurrently at the University of Education, Winneba campus of Ghana. The study is a qualitative piece that employed the case study design. Twenty student-mothers between the ages 26 – 40 with at least a child aged five years or below staying with them full time on campus were interviewed. The student-mothers were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. An unstructured interview was employed by the researchers to gather data for the research. It emerged from the study that mothering had effects on the health, social, and academic life of student-mothers. The data further revealed that student-mothers coped with their economic challenges by reducing their expenses and budgeting. The study went on to reveal that student-mothers want their lecturers to be more understanding and flexible to reschedule their lecture periods.

### **KEYWORDS**

Coping Strategy, Student-mothers

## INTRODUCTION

With the current trend of technological advancement and economic hardship, there is the need nowadays for women to support the home financially this has led to changes in roles. The burden of housekeeping expenditure cannot solely be the responsibility of the husband but also the wife. There is no doubt about the fact that attitudes about appropriate roles for women go beyond daughter, girlfriend, wife, and mother. It also includes engaging in income generating ventures and occupations that help to support the family. Women are no longer excluded from decision-making in all spheres of economic, social, and political change, and gender perspectives are incorporated into all programs and policies. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo reaffirmed the importance of women working outside the home. Changes in the positions of West African and African American women should offer an insightful perspective on the evolution of working women's lives (Burgess, 1994). This progress would be possible if women improve their knowledge and skills through education.

Christine Churcher, former minister of state in charge of Basic, Secondary, and Girl-Child Education in Ghana's John A. Kuffour administration in November 2005, delivered a speech describing policy on girl-child education at Kumasi Girls Senior High School's 40th anniversary and Speech and Prize Giving Day. She said that 'a generation of highly educated women will be able to turn the nation's socioeconomic fortunes.' She went on to say that when women are educated, they change the home and community, and they become role models for their siblings and children. Thus, girls and women are now tramping into various schools and institutions to upgrade themselves to fit into various types of careers and occupations. Andersen (2000) asserts that the current trend indicates that women labour force participation will continue to increase. There will also be an increase in the demand for their work both in the paid labour force and in the family. It therefore becomes necessary for the woman to obtain a higher education to attain the necessary qualification and certificate that will help them achieve their aspirations, to fit into the job market and equally support the home or family. According to Martin (2003), despite the professional success of those who did not obtain a college diploma, it is becoming clear that obtaining a higher education is important. He asserts that, despite the fact that the cost of higher education continues to rise on a daily basis, people's desire for it will never die for the following reasons: higher education promotes personal development. Furthermore, some people are lifelong learners who have an insatiable appetite to add to their information reservoir, test themselves academically, and experience what they consider to be among the most fulfilling life pursuits;

therefore, the mind develops. A graduate degree provides these individuals with the ability to do all of this in a formal manner that can provide great personal satisfaction. Second, for greater job prospects and career growth, earning a graduate degree demonstrates patience, ambition, analytical prowess, and the ability to deal with difficult situations, all of which are desirable attributes for individuals competing for higher positions. Also, higher education is pursued for an increase in one's income in the job market and it serves as a sense of accomplishment and finally it creates greater credibility and recognition out (Martin, 2003). All the points stated above motivate individuals to thirst for educational up-grade of which women are not left out.

Women entering universities to pursue both graduate and undergraduate programmes are of reproductive age; some are wives or become wives in the course of their studies. Some of such women are capable of becoming mothers while pursuing their courses or were even mothers or parents before enrolling in their various programmes considering the importance attached to childbirth in a typical African society. Student-mothers must therefore face their parenting responsibility in addition to their academic work or studentship roles. The African society is such that reproduction is perceived as a 'mother's work. This involves becoming pregnant and giving birth, yet it seems little or no support is given to student-mothers at the school. Becoming a mother naturally consumes almost all of a woman's time and therefore combining this responsibility with studying is yet another challenge.

The focus for the present study is to explore the lived experiences of student-mothers, as they engage in both motherhood and studentship roles simultaneously. The student mother seems to be encountered with numerous challenges in her quest to pursuing either graduate or undergraduate programme. It is in the light of this that this study seeks to explore the perceived support (needs) that are available for student-mothers as they journey through the University of Education, Winneba.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. How do student-mothers cope amidst their challenges?
2. In what ways are the student-mothers supported?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Coping Strategies of Student-Mothers**

Life by itself is full of events or circumstances pleasant or unpleasant that threatens or seems to have some effect on an individuals' well-being. The individual also either responds negatively or positively to such circumstances. According to Feldman (2005), such responses that people give to such challenges are known as stressors. In order to overcome such challenges, the individual must devise ways and means of coping with the challenges. Similar to the case of the student mother her juggling through mothering and studying concurrently exposes her to a number of challenges which exposes her to stress in one way or the other. Affum et al (2013), explain that "exposure to such stressors generates a rise in certain hormones secreted by the adrenal glands, causing an increase in heart rate and blood pressure changing how well the skin conducts electrical impulses". The above assertion indicates that as the student mother is being exposed to these challenges, she may be exposed to pressure in her functioning. She must therefore device ways and means of handling the situation such that she may not be overtaken by this event and fail her examination hence the need to cope. Coping is therefore the method of attempting to balance the demands imposed by challenging circumstances that are deemed to be taxing or beyond the capacity of an individual's resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It describes how individuals balance external and internal demands through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral efforts (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Coping has two primary functions: resolving the problem that triggered the distress (cognitive or problem-focused coping) and controlling one's emotions to mitigate the distress caused by stressors (emotion-focused coping) (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010).

Issue-focused coping involves attempting to resolve or alter the source of issues by collecting information, analysing it, and making meaningful decisions on how to approach a problem or obstacle, thus removing or evading the problem, or minimizing its effect if it cannot be avoided. For example, during a test, the student-mothers' primary concern may be juggling the needs of the child to study, attend group discussions, and sacrifice sleep in order to prevent failure. On the other hand, emotion-focused coping involves techniques aimed at alleviating or controlling the emotional discomfort associated with issues, such as getting emotional support from others and books, drinking alcohol, and abusing drugs (Anspaugh, Hamrick & Rosato 2003). Another form of this coping strategy employed most frequently is relaxation. This implies that the student mother going through such stressful situation of mothering and studying concurrently may either have to consult a professional who can help her overcome some of her problems or find other ways of

overcoming the problem through relaxation or avoiding some of the stressful triggering situation if possible.

Lynch (2008) posits that student-mothers coped with their conflicting identities by practicing maternal or academic invisibility. This implies that depending on the situation and priority of the student mother she may choose to involve or immerse herself mainly or mostly in her academic work or may choose to part take mostly in her mothering role. For example, a student mother can assign all or most of her mothering responsibilities to the one assisting in taking care of the child so that she gets adequate time for her books and academic work. Better still the deferral of her course to times when the child is old enough so she can get adequate time for her child rearing responsibilities may also be an option. The findings of studies conducted by various researchers such as Bosch (2013), Ajandi (2011) and Lynch (2008) show that studying while raising children involves a lot of juggling, and thus considering strategies that will help the student mother combine these roles successfully are of great benefit. The success of the student mother appeared to be based on being organized and making sacrifices in most areas of her life. On the issue of organization, the student mother must meticulously plan her day. The woman will have to work to a strict routine, so she knows when she could focus on her studies and when she is available to her family (Ajandi, 2011)

Bosch (2013) asserts that the student-mothers had to sacrifice severally if she aims at success. Sacrificing may take the form of sacrificing time spent socializing and sleeping. The Student mother must cut the number and amount of time spent with colleagues and friends if it is not purposely an academic requirement. This is because the student mother as other responsibilities to perform that is either to, put things in place for the next day, attending to the needs of the child or children or catch up with studies. The mother must miss certain social events organized by the faculty, department and university authorities for students so that she can properly manage herself, academic work and child rearing responsibilities (Ajandi, 2011). Most student-mothers may reduce the number of hours they spend sleeping. For example, if a student mother is unable to take part in group discussions or private studies due to attention demands of her child during the day, she must try to catch up with her studies by staying up some hour at night or dawn when the child is asleep to make up for the time spent earlier.

## **Perceived Support System of Student-Mothers**

According to Lazarus (2006), quoting Hobfoll (1989), perceptions of organizational support (POS) are a critical resource that can bolster employees' trust in their ability to meet job demands. POS is described as the degree to which employees believe their company values their efforts and is concerned about their well-being (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Similar to the employee, the student mother believes that if she is accorded the minimum support from people she interacts with (colleagues, lecturers and university authorities) her condition as a mother and a student would significantly improve. Research suggested that most of the difficulties student-mothers encountered were institutionally based, and that if universities amend their policies taking into consideration the plight of the student-mothers, conditions on campus will be a bit favourable to these non-traditional students (Reay, 2003; Walkup, 2004; White, 2009). That is, with improved support from their education provider, student-mothers might better balance the roles of being a mother and a student. Universities may help improve both the academic and domestic lives of student-mothers with supportive Timetabling and Practicum Placement Policies and also through normalization of the services provided through the financial aid offices, the organization of extra-curricular activities on campus, the scheduling of classes throughout the year, the provision of emergency on-campus childcare and family friendly spaces such as breast-feeding spaces or children's activities (Ajandi, 2011).

The student mother believes that if she is supported financially by government improving the access of grants and bursaries given it will go a long way to reduce some aspect of her financial challenges. The Student mother believes that if government can increase the amount given to them as bursaries and grants, it may go a long way to assisting them. The mother has to provide the baby's supplementary foods, diapers, clothes medication and other necessities coupled with the needs of the one assisting in taking care of the child, cost on accommodation, books and handouts. Student-mothers believe that the cost involved in child rearing combined with their educational cost weigh them down and therefore with a little adjustment, it will help them meet some of their financial needs. According to Atuahene (2007), as higher education in Ghana continues to struggle to meet growing demand for enrollment and rising unit costs per student, students' loans have developed into a viable method of financing higher education. Thus, student loans are a prudent way to cover the recurring costs of higher education. Economists (Woodhall, 1988; Bosch, 2013) also generally agree that loans allow students to fund their current studies against potential

earnings. Some of the times allotted to specific courses on the academic timetable are not favourable to the student mother.

According to Williams (2011), graduate school is a space and a place where real change can begin to implement new policies, create a different culture, draw on functioning and efficient support structures, and make inclusiveness and diversity a reality. He argues that these improvements are possible only with widespread help, with graduate students who are mothers not making all the sacrifices alone, and with children and family life being coded in the academy as indicators of inspiration rather than as problems to be solved by individual women. This study concurs with Vryonides and Vitsilakis (2008), who argue that as the number of women entering academic institutions increases, policies must reflect this increase in order to ensure their successful completion of higher educational programs. Universities offer many support and services on campus but these serve only a certain population of students.

Student-mothers would find it very helpful if there is available emergency on-campus childcare centre. If all universities offered childcare on campus, it would not only address a major concern for parents attending university, but it would also increase the visibility of student-mothers in the universities. Another prominent benefit to be derived by students offering various programmes in Early Childhood Education (ECE) is first-hand experience. The provision of this childcare facility on campus will help provide those offering such programmes with hands on practice and experience. Also, it may add up to the income generating ventures of the university since a substantial amount may be charged mothers who patronize these services. Furthermore, on-campus childcare centre can give priority to student-mothers first on their wait lists before faculty, staff and community members. This is one way to increase access for this group that is the student mother, and it will also help to address the challenge of Lack of affordable, quality, and flexible childcare and over reliance on relatives and other employed hands that serve as hindrance to the student-mothers at the University of Education, Winneba campus.

Leavy (1983), in reviewing the literature on social support and psychological change, concludes that the student mother must have access to both direct (health-sustaining) and stress buffering (stress-reducing) effects of social support. Additionally, another way is to categorize social support into multiple dimensions, such as emotional support given by close friends or relatives, support derived from "belongingness" to a community with a common sense of identity, assessment

support provided by skilled counselors in problem-solving, and substantive support or functional assistance (Bedu-Addo, 2000).

Numerous studies have concentrated on social reinforcement as a way of mitigating the negative effects of stressors (Pearlin, 1993; Brotheridge & Lee, 2005). In general, people experience less psychological distress or strain when they feel social support from others. Several researchers have argued in the organizational stress literature (Greenhaus, & Beutell, 1985; Carlson & Perrewe, 1999) that social reinforcement mitigates the negative effects of job stressors by assisting workers in coping with stress.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The exploratory case study approach was used for the exploration of the challenges faced by student-mothers in the University of Education, Winneba campus. The population for this study comprised all current student-mothers pursuing undergraduate programs at the University of Education, Winneba campus. All of the participants were women who have a child of five years old or younger or two or more children with at least one five years old or less. This group of students was selected because there has not been adequate research on how they combine child rearing responsibilities with academic work as they pursue various programmes. Secondly, mothers of children under five are unique because children within this age cohort are more dependent on their mothers and are normally not in school full-time. This means that student-mothers will have to devote much more of their time to the children at the expense of their studies. Also, children at this age range are in their formative years and therefore require greater care and attention from parents especially the mothers (Bosch, 2013). Twenty student-mothers between the ages 26 – 40 with at least a child aged five years or below staying with them full time on campus were interviewed. The student-mothers were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. An unstructured interview was employed by the researchers to gather data. The data gathered were transcribed, coded and analysed thematically.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

### **Coping strategies adopted by student-mothers**

As life in itself is full of challenges, individuals passing through this life equally develop mechanisms known as strategies that enable them to cope or adapt to these challenges. The



following adopted by student-mothers are categorized into; (a) coping with challenges associated with social life and relationships; (b) coping with economic challenges; (c) coping with academic life challenges.

When student-mothers were asked about how they cope with the challenges associated with their social life and relationships as a result of mothering and studying concurrently, the majority of the participating student-mothers revealed that they usually tried to explain the challenges that they faced as a result of mothering and studying concurrently to their friends. The following were some of the responses collected:

*I normally try most at times to explain things to friends and relatives that it is not intentional or as if I don't care about them anymore but it is as a result of the circumstance, I find myself in. Sometimes they understand you, at other times your explanations fall on deaf ears but there is nothing you can do about it. (SM-12)*

*I always try to convince and apologize to friends when I am unable to meet their expectation and I try to explain my current situation to them and entreat them to be in my shoes. Some think I'm just being Pompous. (SM-11)*

Responses from Some of the participants also revealed that with technological advancement, it was easy to communicate with family and friends without necessarily being physically present.

*I ignore friends and sometimes members of my external families especially when they want me to attend social gathering. Time is a very scarce resource for me. (PSW-19)*

The responses given by the participating student-mothers seem to indicate that the students employ problem solving mechanism as a coping strategy since the participating student-mothers all seem to be taking similar steps to escape or evade the stress that is in relation to attending to friends and relatives. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed that Problem-focused coping mechanism is directed at the stressor itself and as such the individual takes steps to remove or to evade it, or to diminish its impact if it cannot be evaded. Calling friends and family members on the phone, apologizing and explaining one's situation to them may all be said to be attempts to diminish the impact of stress.

Most of the students when asked how they coped with their economic challenges revealed that they had reduced their expenses through budgeting, cost reduction and avoidance of rich lifestyle.

They explained that they budget their income and apportioned it to their areas of need accordingly. They talked of prioritizing their needs.

*I have reduced my expenses/expenditure in that I no longer socialize with friends outside and it has also affected three square meals daily. I used to pay for drinks of my friends when we went out to have fun but I no longer do that. (SM-5)*

Some of the student-mothers also revealed that they sometimes borrowed money from their colleagues to cope with their financial difficulties. These were what they said:

*I have reduced my spending drastically but even with that I sometimes become short of funds so when this happens, I am left with no option than to borrow from friends. (SM-9)*

*My husband usually sends me money at the beginning of each month but sometimes it is not enough so I sometimes borrow money from relatives and sometimes my colleagues. (SM-19)*

On the issue of coping with academic challenges, the data collected from the student-mothers indicated that they sometimes adopted technological strategies to help them deal with the challenges they encountered in their academic life. Majority of the participating student-mothers expounded that they used social networks such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype, and conference calls to interact with group members especially when they were not able to attend group meetings to perform an assignment.

*Attending to group meetings and discussions is not possible at all times so when a situation occurs, I reach them through the social media to contribute in the discussion. Mostly I join them on whatApp. (SM-10)*

*Though I don't always make it to study group meetings I sometimes manage to communicate with members of my group through conference telephone calls. (SM-12)*

The comments above give the impression that some student-mothers used social networks to interact with other members of their group when they were unable to make it to group discussions. They see Social networks and media as the easiest and most effective way of communicating in modern times. It serves as the essential mode of communication in this technological era.

According to Good, Sambhanthan and Panjganj (2013), many people prefer to utilize the wide spectrum of ICT applications to facilitate their activities, as opposed to face-to-face activities. They further explained that face-to-face group meetings are often difficult to schedule and are limited in manner of time and location hence the need for electronic applications. It therefore comes as no surprise that some student-mothers are patronizing the services of some social networks to facilitate their academic activities.

Asked how they coped with quizzes, all the participating student-mothers said they either stayed up all night to study or they woke up very early in the morning to prepare prior to writing the test as pointed out in the following comments by some of them:

*In fact, studying and mothering is very difficult but how I cope with it is just staying up at night to learn. I need to sacrifice sleep to enable me prepare for quizzes. (SM-20)*

*I mostly learn early in the morning and learn for the quiz. If I am unable to wake up as early as I want as it happens more often than I can count, I go to campus earlier than usual and learn to enable me write if not I can't concentrate on anything. (SM-1)*

Obviously, all of the participating student-mothers tried to make time to learn before writing quizzes. The comments above also seem to indicate that although the students tried to make time to learn, they were unable to prepare sufficiently for their quizzes. From the data presented and analysed above, it is evident that during day time, most student-mothers were unable to find enough time to learn and for that matter they utilized the time that could be used to rest to engage in learning activities which in itself was stressful.

### **Ways of supporting student-mothers**

It emerged from the interview data collected that the student-mother could be supported in numerous ways to make her academic life easier on campus. These are related to (a) financial support strategies; (b) Making academic life of student-mothers easier; (c) counselling as a support strategy; (d) support from colleagues and lectures.

### **Financial support strategies**

Asked how they could be supported financially, most of the participating student-mothers were of the view that if the government increased the accessibility of student loans, which they received annually, it would help reduce their financial burden. They also suggested that if bursaries were increased and they were given scholarships, their financial problems will be solved.

*Financially I can be supported if grants or loans which will be payable after school are made available and accessible on campus, it can help me. The student loan I receive is not enough to sustain me throughout the course so the amount could be increased. The government can also give scholarships*

*and loans to students who are working and at the same time studying. (SM-13)*

*I will be happy if I receive some support from the government and other non-governmental organizations in the form of money to help relieve me from the financial challenges to enable me to have full time to concentrate on my studies alone. They can also give loans which would be paid after the programme to student-mothers. (SM-6)*

The responses above indicate that the government gave some form of financial assistance to students in the form of loan but in spite of the governments' effort to assist students financially, the money was insufficient to cater for the needs of the student mother, her assistant and child and as such should be increased. The responses also advocated that NGOs could also come to the aid of student-mothers by giving them financial assistance. Atuahene (2007), asserts that as higher education in Ghana continues to face the challenge of meeting the increasing demands for participation and the rising unit cost per student, students' loan is the available alternative of financing higher education. Thus, students' loans are a prudent means by which recurrent costs in higher education can be met.

### **Making academic life of student-mothers easier**

One other support that was perceived could help student-mothers as they perform their mothering responsibilities and studying at the same time identified during the interview was the issue of time table. Majority of the participants were of the view that the time-table was not favourable to them.

*Some academic and social Programmes cannot be attended because it may close late or start very early so the students with children should be considered when organizing such Programmes.*

(SM-15)

*The time-table should be made considering student-mothers. If the university as well as my department would make adjustment in the time-table to suit me I would be happy. Actually, they can shift most of the lectures to weekends. (SM-11)*

The responses above proposed that the time table be made more convenient for students enrolled in graduate programs. The responses revealed that if lectures were scheduled too early or late, within the day, it became be very difficult to fulfil the demands of study activities since they would be engaged in child rearing activities. The above comments made by the students seem to imply

that time for study activities should be designed putting student-mothers who are undertaking regular graduate programmes into consideration.

Some of the participants were also of the view that the mode of communicating instructional activities in the university could be upgraded to suit modern methods of instruction in this technological era. The participating student-mothers were of the view that the unfavourable nature of the lecture periods had some bearing on their academic life.

*Some of the lecturers are too difficult, rigid and inconsiderate to student-mothers. in my department, we attend lectures in groups. one group attend lectures at 7am and the others follow but the lecture hours shouldn't be rigid for a student mother to attend. They should be more flexible and considerate to student-mothers. Moreover, because of time factor, lecturers can give assignments and other academic tasks to students through the internet. They can also introduce take home exams. All these strategies would be beneficial to me. (SM-10)*

*The department as well as the university can provide students who are working concurrently with counsellors. The department should explain our situation to the lecturers so that they will be more understanding and adapt new convenient methods of instruction. (SM-6)*

The responses above suggest that the lecturers can adopt electronic means of communication so that instead of traveling or moving to and from the campus and then to the house, they could sit in the comfort of their offices or homes and engage in study activities with the aid of the internet. With the advent and advancement of technology, communication has become much more effective than it was decades ago. The internet system is one of the strongest modes of communication in modern times due to its limitless ways of receiving and transmitting information and the responses above seem to encourage its use in instruction (Affum et al, 2013). Lecturers can equally use the internet to communicate academic activities to student-mothers.

It also emerged from the data collected that if university authorities provided child care centre on campus it would ease their burden on student-mothers sending their children to child care centres outside campus. Below are some of the comments made by student-mothers;

*If possible, the university authorities should include a crèche in the building plan so we can drop our children off and pick them up after lectures. The money to be used to pay outsiders can be kept for other things. (SM-4)*

*The early childhood programme can provide child care centre for such children since they have students to assist. That way it becomes easy to rush from the lecture hall or stay on campus while the centre manages the child. This will even aid practical tuition. (SM-10)*

It also emerged from the responses obtained from data collected that if university authorities could provide accommodation for student-mothers on campus, it would make the academic life of student-mothers somehow conducive and productive. The mothers were of the view that authorities could allocate a hall purposely for student-mothers or better still put-up sheds or breastfeeding rooms for them to attend to their children's needs on campus.

*Accommodation for nursing mothers should also be provided. The children are the future leaders of the country so their upbringing is crucial to a healthy country. (SM-18)*

*The authorities should make places where nursing mothers can sit to attend to their children when they come for lectures on campus. (SM-1)*

*Authorities should build private hostels purposely for student-mothers for them to rent at reasonable cost to ease the burden of paying huge amounts of monies to individual landlords. (SM-7)*

The statements made by the student-mothers above seem to imply that assisting student-mothers with on-campus housing would significantly ease their academic lives. According to Williams (2011), graduate school is a space and a place where real change can begin to implement new policies, create a different society, rely on working and functional support structures, and make inclusiveness and diversity a reality. He argues that these improvements are possible only with widespread support, with graduate students who are mothers not making all the sacrifices alone, and with children and family life seen in the academy as examples of inspiration rather than as problems to be solved by individual women. (2011) (Williams). This study concurs with Vryonides and Vitsilakis (2008), who argue that as the number of women entering academic institutions increases, policies must reflect this increase in order to ensure their successful completion of higher educational programs.

### **Counselling as a support strategy**

All the participants were of the view that counselling could be used to help them deal with their concurrent roles of mothering and studying. The mothers were of the view that counselling could

be used to address issues in their lives which involves planning, managing stress and helping deal with emotional disturbances.

*Counselling can be of great help to we the student-mothers. It is a difficult situation we find ourselves in; sometimes we don't really understand what we are going through and that can be very frustrating. I could remember once when I was at lectures and my mother who is taking care of my child at the hostel called to inform me that my child has fell on a coal pot, she was cooking with I became disturbed and disoriented. I just needed an emotional catharsis and the university's counselling centre provided just that. (SM-19)*

The above responses seem to suggest that counselling may be a useful tool that could be employed to help student-mothers' deal with their numerous challenges they face as a result of combining mothering responsibilities with study activities. The responses made by the participants also affirm the assertion made by Bedu-Addo (2000) that counselling as a support system, helps an individual to clear away entangling and hampering tentacles so that he/she can be what he really is and contribute more both to self and his fellows. This definition implies that counselling may be useful in helping an individual who is encountering some challenges be it psychological or social, internal or external that is hindering her functionality to gain a measure of functionality in his or her life. An individual who is experiencing the challenge of role conflict may be experiencing some form of disorganization and stress in his/her life and may need counselling as a support strategy to overcome his/her problem or obtain some form of organization in his or life. The responses above also indicate that student-mothers experience some form of disorganization because of the pressure for their double concurrent roles and for that matter they may need counselling to help them create a balance in their lives (Affum et al, 2013).

The interviewees were also asked how their colleagues could be of assistance to them. Majority of the student-mothers disclosed that their colleagues could be of immense assistance to them by being more understanding and compromising especially if they could not make it to study group discussions. The following are some of the responses that evolved from the interview data:

*My colleagues can be of assistance to me by being lenient on me especially if I am unable to participate in study group discussions. They should try to understand those of us nursing babies on campus when we seek their consent to stay away from group meetings. I could remember one group member told me they would not include my name in the group list if I do not take part in group discussion. (SM-4)*

*My colleagues will be of assistance to me if they stopped complaining all the time about my absence from study group activities and be more understanding of my situation. (SM-18)*

*It is common to become stressed up as a result of performing multiple roles but it is more stressful or frustrating when your colleagues are also adding up to your stress. If colleagues show us a little bit of care, understanding and concern, it will go a long way in lightening our burdens. (SM 15)*

Another support that could be beneficial to help student-mothers who are combining learning and taking care of their children at the same time could be the provision of counselling for lecturers on how to handle or talk to student-mothers before their colleagues. This will help reduce some of the demeaning comments made by some lecturers about some student-mothers. Data emerging from the interview indicated that some of the lecturers sometimes intentionally or unintentionally used words or passed comments that dampened and stigmatized the student mother.

*I think some of our lecturers should sometimes consider and show us a little respect. I remember getting to lecture late because I took my child to the hospital and when I came and explained to the lecturer, she told me before the class that I cannot use my child as an excuse and that if I had wanted to give birth. I should have stayed in the house to do so. I became humiliated and down cast the whole day. (SM-3)*

*Some of our lecturers encourage us to work extra hard because we the mothers are doing extra work. One of my lecturers always enquires about the welfare of my child and entreats me to ask for help when necessary. (SM-11)*

The responses above indicate that peers and colleagues sometimes complained about their absence from group activities and this made them feel guilty. It also indicates that pressure from their colleagues as regards fulfilling their responsibilities in groups could increase the stress that they experience. It was evident from the findings here that some participating student-mothers tried to shirk or elude some of their responsibilities to ease themselves of stress. These findings correspond with the findings of Leavy (1983).

## **CONCLUSION**

According to the findings of the study, the coping strategies include ignoring some of their family relations and friends, using social networks such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Skype, electronic mail and phone calls to interact with the family and friends, budgeting and reducing their expenses, sacrificing their time for socializing and sleeping to catch up with academic work. University authorities should also provide student-mothers with housing and child care centres on campus, as



well as organise counselling services for student-mothers, lecturers should be more understanding and flexible in rescheduling their lecture periods, and the government should provide financial assistance to student-mothers.

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