

Pregnant Student Teachers and Educational Stress: Toward Improved Access and Support for Adult Women in Education

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Abstract

The study investigated stress and its effect on pregnant student teachers in Ghana. The specific objective of this study is to identify sources and effects of stress experienced by pregnant student teachers. This exploratory case study design sampled 18 pregnant Student-teachers from the two selected colleges through a convenience sampling technique. Key findings revealed multiple stress sources, including physical, academic, social, and psychological. The study concluded that pregnant student-teachers at the Colleges face significant stress from multiple sources, which can adversely affect their academic performance and well-being. It was recommended that the Colleges implement comprehensive support measures, including regular counselling sessions, support groups, and stress management workshops to address emotional needs. Additionally, improving accommodation facilities, providing tailored uniforms, offering special dietary provisions, and ensuring flexible academic schedules or maternity leave are vital measures to support the unique needs of pregnant student-teachers

Keywords: Pregnant student teachers, Academic Stressors, Social Stressors Psychological Effects of Stress.

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INTRODUCTION

While many women throughout the world view pregnancy as a pleasant and happy time in their lives, many of them experience significant levels of stress and anxiety due to the pressures and changes that come with this reproductive phase as well as the social context in which it occurs. Many changes needed to be made in physiological, familial, financial, academic, occupational, and other areas during pregnancy. These changes can cause emotional distress in women, particularly women who are low-income earners are more likely to experience stress and have fewer resources available to them (Gonzales *et al.*, 2018).

For most African women, being pregnant is a source of happiness and optimism as it is seen as the embodiment of femininity (Kumatia & Agbogli, 2022). Although pregnancy is often linked with excitement, there are also worry and stress connected with the event,

particularly if it is unanticipated. Student pregnancy is a widespread issue, but it is particularly apparent in underdeveloped nations like Ghana (Dankyi, *et al.*, 2019). According to Amponsah *et al.*, (2020), many challenges affect pregnant students, such as subpar academic results and dropping out of school as a result of their inability to concentrate on their studies. Kumatia and Agbogli (2022) also found that pregnant students face a variety of pressures, including the weight of their coursework, financial limitations, and a myriad of other challenges, in addition to the uncertainty of the future and the possibility of social mobility within the system.

Previous researchers have paid close attention to the academic stress that college students experience as a consequence of getting pregnant (Dankyi, *et al.*, 2019; Amponsah *et al.*, 2020; Kumatia & Agbogli, 2022; Bonsu & Ayornoo, 2022). Students who are admitted while pregnant or get pregnant while schooling

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encounter new obstacles; pregnancy cramps serve as additional stressors that need appropriate coping mechanisms. Pregnant students are expected to manage academic stressors in addition to pregnancy-related stressors. Stressors that pregnant students experience include worry about their babies' health, potential pregnancy loss, coping with labour and delivery, and becoming a parent with a variety of school-related stressors, such as getting money and peer pressure (Bonsu & Ayornoo, 2022). Kwaah and Essilfie (2017) noted that irrespective of a person's age, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, stress may affect their health in several ways. It has been suggested that coping serves as a stabilizing perspective that may aid an individual in psychosocial adjustment throughout a variety of stressful situations (Commey-Mintah *et al.*, 2022). Commey-Mintah *et al.*, (2022) elucidated that coping strategies such as effective time management, social support, involvement in pleasurable activities, and strategic problem-solving skills reduce stress levels among university students. Numerous research on coping mechanisms and stress management have been carried out among pregnant students at Ghana's educational institutions (Amponsah *et al.*, 2020; Kumatia & Agbogli, 2022; Bonsu & Ayornoo, 2022). The current Educational Reforms, Tertiary Students Handbook, and Inclusive Education Policy across the various educational circles have permitted pregnancy and childbearing in the Colleges of Education. As a result, some female students in Colleges of Education in Ghana are either admitted pregnant or get pregnant in the course of the programme. Since the College is an academic environment, it has its challenges but in the case of this research, attention is only focused on the stress pregnant student teachers are subjected to in Offinso and Wesley Colleges of Education in Ghana.

The majority of students, including pregnant women in educational institutions, experience stress of some kind when pursuing higher education, especially while adjusting to new learning settings (Bonsu & Ayornoo, 2022). Similar to their university counterparts, students at Ghana's Colleges of Education have to complete demanding coursework, including project work and assignments, prepare for quizzes, and take final examinations after the semester (Commey-Mintah, *et al.*, 2022). It takes a lot of effort to deal with pregnancy cramps and academic stressors to meet deadlines for assignment submissions and other social obligations (Kumatia & Agbogli, 2022).

There is a strong scientific support for the assertion that stress has a detrimental impact on people's physical and mental well-being (Mehfooz & Sonia, 2017; Rozman & Tominc, 2021). Kumatia and Agbogli (2022) found that pregnant students in higher educational institutions normally feel anxious while under stress; this is a sign of temporary tension. Episodes of chronic stress among pregnant students, which include dyspnea and

decreased desire that last for an extended period were identified in a study by Rozman and Tominc (2021). However, when these continue, pregnant students may experience irreversible damage to their mental and/or physical bodies, leading to serious disorders (Bonsu & Ayornoo, 2022).

To function at their best, pregnant students need some adaptation skills to deal with bombarding stressors. It could be advantageous for students to manage some stress if they want to do well in school (Commey-Mintah *et al.*, 2022). People's coping skills mostly dictate how they handle stress. The practice known as "coping" provides a defense against psychological harm brought on by an unfavourable social interaction. Investigating the impacts of stress among pregnant college of education students would be crucial since coping with some stressors may be difficult and time-consuming.

Nevertheless, the majority of the evaluated literature deals with occupational stress among College of Education tutors and academic stress among senior high school and university students (Gyambrah, *et al.*, 2017; Kwaah & Essilfie; Amponsah *et al.*, 2020; Cheney-Afenu *et al.*, 2020; Ladzekpo & Nukpetsi, 2020). This implies that there are few research studies on stress among pregnant student teachers in colleges of education in Ghana. More specifically, there has not yet been any known research study on the subject of stress among pregnant student teachers in Offinso and Wesley Colleges of Education.

Our investigation from the two colleges revealed that at the time of conducting this research, there was no official data on the number of pregnant students in the two colleges of education. The literature reviewed revealed that unlike traditional university students in Ghana, student teachers in the colleges of education are expected to follow laid down rules and regulations such as wearing uniforms, eating from college dining hall among others. Consequently, pregnant student teachers have to adopt coping mechanisms to enable them to meet the academic requirements with limited resources while in school (Kumatia & Agbogli, 2022). Amos, *et al.*, (2021) cited in Kumatia and Agbogli (2022) indicated that due to this, pregnant students experienced stress in adjusting to school conditions due to limited amenities. Even though the Colleges of Education Act 847 of 2012 has upgraded the Colleges of Education in Ghana to tertiary status, the system of administration is regulated as compared to already existing tertiary institutions (i.e. universities). In Offinso and Wesley Colleges of Education, like other colleges of education in Ghana, student teachers are confined to the boarding house, they go out but under permission, wear uniforms, perform chores, and are fed (Kumatia & Agbogli, 2022). The colleges work with the Students' Representative Council (S.R.C.) to decide the menu, which is primarily based on the government-

approved fee allocation for the food grant. Colleges of education students' behaviours must conform to the norms established by the educational institutions. Hence, pregnant teacher trainees are also expected to follow the laid down rules. This calls for an in-depth investigation to discover how these pregnant student teachers are handling stressful situations and suggest possible preventive measures. Hence, this study was conducted to investigate stress among pregnant student teachers in the aforementioned colleges of education in Ghana.

Objective of the Study

The general objective of the study is to identify sources and effects of stress experienced by pregnant student teachers in the Colleges of Education in Ghana.

The Concept of Stress

The fact that there are so many ideas and research on stress in the literature on health issues suggests that stress has become a common word in our society. Nonetheless, the research's analyses of the relevant phenomena and suggested clinical treatments for solving the issue vary. These theoretical stances are all based on the idea that stress is connected to both emotional and physical symptoms (Roberts *et al.*, 2014). Psychologists define stress as a pattern of specific and general responses made by an organism to stimulus events that disturb the organism's equilibrium (Wainaina *et al.*, 2021).

Shilpa *et al.*, (2021) differentiated between what stress is and what it is not. The researchers claim that stress is the body's response to a demanding condition of intense psychological and physiological strain, the body's fight-or-flight response, and the onset of many illnesses. Additionally, he makes the argument that stress is not always negative since it may sometimes be a motivator for achieving objectives. Stress can cause worry, dread/anxiety, sickness, or typically plays a role in development.

Authorities who use the physiological reactions in the definition of stress are normally referred to as earlier writers on stress. They hold the view that when an organism perceives a stressful situation, the sympathetic nervous system and endocrine system are aroused to enable the organism or individual to attack the invader or to flee. This is called the "fight or flight" response.

Sources of Stress/Stressors

Any problem that sets off a stress response is a stressor. According to Okoro *et al.*, (2018) cited in Amponsah *et al.*, (2022), events that tend to be seen as stressful can be categorised into health-related stressors, financial and social factors, and academic factors. Stresses that pregnant students may face include health concerns or obstacles, family issues, financial difficulties, difficulty accessing resources, social issues, pregnancy cramps, and delivery anxiety (Agbogli &

Kumatia, 2022). Due to the constantly shifting nature of college education life, pregnant students may experience high levels of stress that negatively impact their well-being and academic achievement (Ayornoo & Bonsu, 2022).

Financial and Social Stressors

College and university students may experience stress due to a variety of financial and social issues that have been identified. Among these are issues pertaining to money and cohabitation while attending college of education or university (Okoro, *et al.*, 2018; Amponsah *et al.*, 2020; Kumatia & Agbogli, 2022; Bonsu & Ayornoo, 2022). Social stressors like trust issues, infidelity, lack of confidence, relationship exploitation, marital and family issues.

According to earlier research (Dankyi, *et al.*, 2019; Amponsah *et al.*, 2020; Ayornoo & Bonsu, 2022), financial burdens may be a stressor for college students and could potentially lead to poor academic performance. These include financial stressors like tuition fees, unpaid bills, the risk of an account being collected, and the accumulation of unpaid debt from credit cards and loan obligations. Ayornoo and Bonsu (2022) asserted that although college of education students subsidized feeding grants from the Government of Ghana, some have difficulties paying their tuition fees and other expenses. Pregnant students may find this difficult since it may be very stressful for them to worry about their additional financial obligations (attending antenatal, buying medicines, the food they crave for etc coupled with academic activities).

Pregnant students may experience a broad range of social stressors, based on their unique situation and the social environment they are in. Phiri *et al.*, (2021) stated that because of social standards or cultural expectations around pregnancy while in school, pregnant students may experience stigma and judgement from classmates, faculty members, or even family members. Some people could get criticism, for instance, if they do not prioritize their schooling or if they become pregnant while they are unmarried (Phiri *et al.*, 2021). Due to their pregnancy, expectant student teachers may feel lonely or left out of social activities or occasions (Kumatia & Agbogli, 2022). They can think that their friends are pulling away, either because they are uncomfortable or do not know how to deal with someone who is expecting. Okoro *et al.*, (2018) found that students who are expecting often struggle to manage their personal and academic obligations while dealing with the demands of pregnancy and possible caregiving duties. This juggling act may make them feel more stressed out and overwhelmed. Some expectant students may believe that they are not receiving enough assistance from their school (Ayornoo & Bonsu, 2022). Lack of resources such as child care centres, adaptable academic accommodations, or needs-specific counselling services, maybe the cause of this.

Students who are expecting may notice changes in their interactions with their peers. While some peers may disassociate themselves or show disapproval, others could provide encouragement and understanding (Kumatia & Agbogli, 2022). Research has shown that a student's academic progress is positively impacted by the academic incentive their roommates provide (Commey-Mintah *et al.*, 2022).

Academic Stressors

According to many studies, (Amponsah *et al.*, 2020; Commey-Mintah *et al.*, 2022; Kumatia & Agbogli, 2022; Bonsu & Ayornoo, 2022), academic issues are the most prevalent cause of stress for students. Amponsah *et al.*, (2020) found that school-related stresses, such as the continual pressure to study, lack of time, writing term papers, taking exams, boring teachers, and planning, were often the most annoying daily annoyances. Test anxiety is one of the primary sources of academic stress among stressors, and most students, especially expectant mothers, seem to be more emotionally susceptible to exams (Kumatia & Agbogli, 2022). Receiving a worse mark than anticipated is another often-mentioned type of stress that the majority of college of education students go through (Commey-Mintah *et al.*, 2022). When it comes to their academic performance and marks, students are afraid of failing. One runs the danger of suffering both external and internal consequences when they do not live up to their own and other people's expectations in their academic or any other area of their life. These consequences include embarrassment, rejection, guilt, and a hit to one's self-esteem (Okoro *et al.*, 2018).

Based on prior research, it has been determined that the items below are associated with academic stress. These include the amount of work associated with coursework, attendance at lectures, assessments, curriculum and lack of learning resources, subject-related projects, and unfavourable academic environments such as dim lighting, extreme heat, or loud noises that may heighten the risk of injury and consequently exacerbate skeletal and muscular disorders. High academic standards, detailed lesson plans, integrating class and antenatal attendance, tests and assessments, the measurement of coursework and poor grades, time management and Supported Teaching in School (STS) are some of the sources of academic stressors. Stress related to school activities has impacted negatively on students. These include poor health (Roberts *et al.*, 2014; Ofori *et al.*, 2020), depression (Amponsah *et al.*, 2020), and therefore, subpar academic performance. Ayornoo and Bonsu (2022) for instance, found a strong positive association between the test grades and the prevalence of stress among pregnant students. In a similar vein, Shilpa *et al.*, (2021) revealed that among college students, poor academic performance was linked to perceived academic stress.

Effects of Stress

Selye (1976), a physician and an early pioneer in stress research established that while almost any incident can create a stress response in someone, symptoms of stress are always the same. A person's blood pressure rises, the heart beats faster, and adrenaline and other hormones are produced. The breathing rate increases and blood sugar is pumped into the body's extremities.

Stress, a phenomenon which affects every individual has both positive and negative sides. The effects of stress influence our psychological, behavioural, and physical reactions to situations. Research has shown the following effects on people.

Physiological Effects

According to Asante *et al.*, (2022), stress may cause nerve disorders including shaking, wolfing down food, smoking, binge drinking, feeling exhausted all the time, and even suicidal thoughts. Extended periods of physical excitement may result in health issues including breathing difficulties, sleeplessness, migraine headaches, irregular bowel and urine movements, aches and pains in the muscles, and parched mouth. These effects normally dwindle the capabilities of the fresh man or woman on campus. Migraine especially, makes learning and concentration on tasks difficult.

Psychological Effects of Stress

Psychological effects of stress could be grouped into short-term and long-term. Short-term can either be emotional or cognitive. The short-term psychological effects of stress on an individual would be in the form of anxiety which is a feeling of imminent but unclear threat (Commey-Mintah *et al.*, 2022). Anger which results from frustration and fear is usually the reaction when a stressor involves real danger. The cognitive effects of stress are one of the most debilitating to first-year undergraduate students on campus (Amponsah *et al.*, 2020). It includes difficulty in concentrating on a demanding activity and frequent loss of attention. Also, the individual may have memory problems; the short-term and long-term memory decrease (Dankyi, *et al.*, 2019). Another cognitive effect is that the response speed of individuals becomes affected. Problems which need an immediate and spontaneous response are solved in haphazard and unpredictable ways. The individual may also be fond of committing mistakes. Thus, any problem which requires logical thinking tends to be solved with higher-than-normal errors. This happens because thinking does not follow logical and coherent thought patterns but is disorganised. Researchers Roberts *et al.*, (2014) found out that college students reported less pleasure in their everyday activities during final examination week than at a less stressful time. The long-term effects of prolonged stress would usually affect the mental health of the individual which may lead to disorders such as attempting suicide, depression, and schizophrenia

(Asante *et al.*, 2022). Roberts *et al.*, (2014) also posited that a whole class of medical problems known as psychosomatic disorders also result from stress.

Social Effects of Stress

Many studies (Okoro *et al.*, 2018; Commey-Mintah *et al.*, 2022; Kumatia & Agbogli, 2022) have looked at the impact of social factors (parents, family members, friends, and peers' support) on college students' academic performance. Due to their innate need and desire to sustain healthy social interactions, humans are social creatures by nature. However, it has been stipulated that stress can cause an individual to experience constant conflicts with family members, and become socially withdrawn and hostile towards others. Pregnant students who experience stress may have profound and diverse social repercussions that affect several facets of their lives and relationships with others in their social milieu (Phiri *et al.*, 2021; Kumatia & Agbogli, 2022). High-stress pregnant students may distance themselves from people and activities (Phiri *et al.*, 2021). They can decide to withdraw from friends, classmates, and social gatherings because they feel overburdened by their situation. Relationships with friends, family, and partners may become strained as a result of stress (Ayornoo & Bonsu, 2022). It may be difficult for pregnant students to keep up good communication and connections with loved ones, which may cause arguments and strain in the relationships. Stress may make it more difficult for expectant students to interact with their classmates productively. They could struggle to make new friends or keep the ones they already have because they feel self-conscious or nervous about being pregnant (Kumatia & Agbogli, 2022). Peer connections may worsen because of the pregnancy-related social stigma or judgement.

Pregnant students may sense a reduction in the availability of social support when they are under a lot of stress. They can be reluctant to ask for assistance or open up to others about their problems out of concern for criticism or rejection (Phiri *et al.*, 2021). Feelings of loneliness and isolation may worsen as a result of this lack of social support. Pregnant students' academic performance may suffer as a result of social stress. Social stress may lead to problems focusing, low motivation, and disturbances in study habits, which can eventually impact grades and overall academic performance (Ayornoo & Bonsu, 2022).

Because of cultural beliefs about pregnancy, particularly in educational environments, pregnant students may face stigma and discrimination in social settings (Phiri *et al.*, 2021). Peers and faculty members may judge them, stereotype them, or marginalise them, which may make them feel ashamed and unworthy. Pregnant students' self-esteem and body image may be impacted by stress associated with their pregnancy as well as societal influences. They could battle with

thoughts of inadequacy or insecurity and become more aware of how their bodies are changing.

Overall, the social impacts of stress on expectant students emphasizes how critical it is to attend to these women's social and emotional needs in addition to the medical elements of pregnancy. Pregnant students may benefit from comprehensive assistance and resources that are suited to their requirements in order to reduce the harmful effects of stress and provide a supportive social environment.

Empirical Review on Pregnant Student Teachers and Educational

Research into the educational experiences of pregnant student teachers—particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa has highlighted critical concerns around academic stress, institutional support, and gender-responsive educational environments. These concerns are central to ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all, as emphasized in SDG 4. The unique intersection of adult female identity, student status, and pregnancy poses challenges that warrant empirical attention. Empirical studies show that pregnant student teachers often experience high levels of stress stemming from academic workloads, social stigma, and insufficient institutional support. In a qualitative study by Akyeampong and Fiscian (2017) in Ghana, pregnant teacher trainees reported feelings of isolation, emotional strain, and fear of academic failure due to a lack of maternity accommodations and support from peers and faculty. These stressors significantly affected their engagement and academic performance.

Similarly, a South African study by Chigona and Chetty (2008) found that pregnant learners faced marginalization and psychological distress within educational institutions that lack clear policies and support systems for pregnant students. This extends to teacher education institutions, where cultural and administrative biases persist. Few empirical studies have documented institutional responses to the needs of pregnant student teachers. A mixed-methods study by Mbonigaba and Asongu (2020) in East Africa revealed that universities lacked standardized frameworks for maternity leave, academic deferment, or psychosocial counseling. Where policies existed, awareness and implementation were weak. The study emphasized the need for universities and colleges to integrate pregnancy-responsive policies that enable pregnant student teachers to continue and complete their training without undue hardship.

In Ghana, Dzomeku and Boamah (2021) highlighted the absence of structured mentoring and health services for pregnant trainees in teacher colleges, which exacerbated dropout rates and emotional stress. The study recommended gender-inclusive policy reforms and mental health services. The stress associated

with pregnancy during teacher education has a direct impact on retention and equity. In a quantitative analysis by Kyei and Ampadu (2019), it was found that pregnancy-related dropout was a significant contributor to low female completion rates in teacher education programs in Northern Ghana. The study argued that without strategic interventions, gender parity goals in education may remain elusive.

There is a dearth of longitudinal and comparative studies that examine the long-term educational trajectories of pregnant student teachers. Moreover, very few studies disaggregate data based on age, marital status, or socioeconomic background, which are all critical to understanding the full scope of educational stress in this demographic. Empirical literature consistently underscores that pregnancy among student teachers is a major stressor that affects academic engagement, mental health, and completion rates. However, institutional neglect and policy gaps persist. Addressing these challenges through inclusive policies, mental health services, and social support systems is essential for promoting educational equity for adult women.

Study Design

The study adopted an exploratory case study design. Because the researcher plans to perform an in-depth investigation of the phenomena in its real-life setting, which will represent the viewpoints of the persons involved, a case study design was employed. An exploratory research method was used to explore the life experiences of pregnant students of Offinso and Wesley Colleges of Education in Ghana (Miles & Huberman, 2009). This research was contextual as it was conducted at the above-mentioned Colleges of Education. The exploratory case study design was used in this study as part of the qualitative methodology. The reason this design works so well is to achieve the desired result, which is to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of stress among pregnant students by exploring their personal experiences (Cohen, Manion, Morrison & Morrison, 2017). The researchers, however, have to be more adaptable and go through the entire interview process when a case study design is used (Froehlich *et al.*, 2021).

Population, Sample and Sampling procedure

All pregnant students at the Offinso and Wesley Colleges of Education were the study's target group. The researchers used a convenience sampling technique, which is a non-probability sampling method to choose eighteen expectant student mothers when the saturation point was reached (Schreier, 2018). Four (4) from Offinso College of Education and fourteen (14) expectant mothers from Wesley College of Education made up the sample. In order to obtain the necessary sample size the researcher selected the closest expectant mother to act as responder until saturation. This approach was repeated until the desired sample size was reached (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017). Since there seem to be no information available on the number of expecting mothers at the two Colleges, the convenience sample approach was used.

Data Collection Instrument

The data was collected through a semi-structured interview guide. According to Weber (2017), data collection is the methodical process of obtaining information relevant to the study's precise goals, questions, and hypotheses. Pre-test. The pre-test was conducted to ensure clarity of the items in the research instrument. Four pregnant student-teachers from St. Louis College of Education were randomly selected and interviewed using the semi-structured interview guide. The pre-test was to determine whether items in the interview guide were clear enough to elicit the appropriate responses. After the pre-test some of the questions were rephrased to make them clearer for the respondents and other potential challenges were addressed. The researcher also noticed that some of the pregnant student-teachers were not willing to be interviewed. To address this, the researcher decided to interview all the pregnant student-teachers who were available, accessible and willing to be interviewed irrespective of the stage of the pregnancy to enable her obtained the required number of participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Data

The demographic data collected from the participants include college affiliation, marital status, age group, and level of study.

Table 4.1 College of Participants

	College	Frequency	Percentage
1	Offinso	4	22.22
2	Wesley	14	77.78
	Total	18	100.00

From Offinso College of Education, there were 4 participants representing 22.22%, while Wesley College of Education had 14 participants constituting 77.78%. This indicates a higher representation from

Wesley College in the study. The higher representation from Wesley College implies that the study's findings may more accurately reflect the experiences of pregnant student teachers at Wesley College.

Table 4.2 Marital Status of Participants

	Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage
1	Married	15	83.33
2	Not Married	3	16.67
	Total	18	100.00

Source: Field Survey (2024)

Regarding marital status, the majority of the participants were married, with 15 out of the 18 participants (83.33%) reporting that they are married, while the remaining 3 participants (16.67%) were not married. These findings suggest that marital status might play a significant role in the experiences and stress levels of pregnant student teachers. Married students may have

different support systems and responsibilities compared to their unmarried peers, potentially affecting how they manage stress and balance their academic and personal lives. This highlights the importance of considering marital status when developing support programs and interventions for pregnant student teachers.

Table 4.3 Age of Participants

	Age	Frequency	Percentage
1	20-29	11	61.11
2	30-39	7	38.89
	Total	18	100.00

In terms of age distribution, 11 participants were aged between 20-29 years, which constituted 61.11% of the sample. The remaining 7 participants (38.89%) were aged between 30-39 years. This age distribution shows that most of the pregnant students are in their twenties, with a significant minority in their

thirties. This demographic detail highlights the need for support programs that cater to the specific needs of younger students, who may be experiencing pregnancy for the first time, as well as older students who might have different stressors and support requirements.

Table 4.4 Level of Study

	Level of Study	Frequency	Percentage
1	Level 200	5	27.78
2	Level 300	10	55.56
3	Level 400	3	16.66
	Total	18	100.00

The participants' level of study varied. There were 10 participants in Level 300 (55.56%), 5 participants in Level 200 (27.78%), and 3 participants in Level 400 (16.66%). This distribution indicates that the majority of pregnant student teachers are in their third year of study, suggesting that interventions and support programs should particularly target this group to address their specific academic and personal needs effectively.

FINDINGS

Stress experienced by pregnant students at Colleges of Education.

The first research objective sought to identify sources of stress experienced by pregnant students at Offinso and Wesley Colleges of Education. The data analysis revealed four main themes of stressors with their accompanying sub themes. The main themes under the sources of stress are physical, academic, social and psychological stressors.

Physical Stressors

The interview responses on the physical stressors revealed that pregnant student-teachers at

Offinso and Wesley Colleges of Education faced significant challenges due to the infrastructure and physical demands of their environment. Many students experience exhaustion and physical discomfort from having their accommodations located upstairs, necessitating frequent movement between floors. This constant climbing adds to their fatigue, making it difficult to focus on studies. Additionally, the distance between lecture halls and hostels leads to tiredness and dizziness, with long walks, particularly under the hot sun, exacerbating their fatigue.

The following are supporting quotes from some of the participant

One participant noted that,

"With my hall being upstairs, the building is not comfortable at all. I have to move between floors, and it becomes exhausting. Sometimes, I feel so tired that I need to rest frequently.... The constant climbing up and down stairs adds to my physical discomfort and fatigue, making it difficult..." (Participant,8)

One participant explained her routine

"I have to sit for 30 minutes and then stand for another 15 minutes. It is my routine during lectures... because staying in one position for too long is not easy. It sometimes interrupts my concentration."
(Participant,7)

Another participant highlighted back pain issues

" Sometimes, I experience back pain, which makes it hard to sit still and focus on writing notes during lectures.."

(Participant,1)

Students also reported discomfort from sitting in desks not designed to support a pregnant woman's body, requiring frequent standing and stretching to alleviate pain. This routine disrupts their concentration and ability to follow lectures effectively. The need to frequently change positions due to uncomfortable seating arrangements further hinders their participation in class.

Back pain from prolonged sitting was another common issue, making it hard for students to focus and take notes during lectures. The lack of comfortable seating and the stress of climbing stairs were significant concerns. Some students even had to move off-campus before exams due to inadequate accommodation, adding the stress of relocation to their academic pressures. Overall, the unsuitable seating arrangements made it difficult for pregnant students to sit for long periods without experiencing significant discomfort, affecting their ability to concentrate and perform academically.

College Uniform/School Uniform

The interview responses revealed significant discomfort associated with the school uniforms worn by pregnant students at Offinso and Wesley Colleges of Education. As their pregnancies progressed, students found the uniform becoming tighter and more restrictive, which caused discomfort and made it difficult to move freely. This required frequent adjustments, which were both a hassle and a distraction during classes.

Additionally, the standard uniforms failed to provide the necessary comfort and flexibility. One student mentioned having to open the zip slightly to feel more comfortable, though this makeshift solution was far from ideal. The allowance to expand the uniform provided some relief, but the restriction against sewing a more suitable garment meant that these adjustments were insufficient to accommodate the changes in their bodies fully.

The following quotations substantiate participants' views on College Uniform/School Uniform

One participant noted,

"The school uniform was not comfortable because of the belt. As my pregnancy progressed, the belt became tighter and more restrictive, causing

discomfort and making it hard to move freely. Adjusting the uniform frequently was a hassle and often distracting during classes." (Participant,6)

Similarly, a participant shared,

"The uniform... we are allowed to expand it, but we cannot sew something more fit to our condition. This restriction means that even though some adjustments can be made, the uniform still does not fully accommodate the changes in my body."
(Participant,11)

Food Served

The interview responses revealed that the food provided at Offinso and Wesley Colleges of Education was a significant source of stress for pregnant students. Many students reported that they often had to get food from outside because the meals offered at the Colleges did not meet their preferences or nutritional needs during pregnancy. This need to seek external food sources added extra costs and effort, which contributed to their overall stress.

Students noted that their taste preferences changed during pregnancy, and the college meals were no longer enjoyable or suitable. The limited variety of food options available at the college did not cater to their specific dietary requirements or cravings, making it challenging to maintain a healthy diet. This lack of suitable food options forced students to spend extra money and time planning and obtaining their meals from outside sources.

One participant noted

"I usually get food from outside. The food provided at the college does not help in terms of preferences during pregnancy. I sometimes find myself craving certain foods that are not available, so I have to spend extra money getting food..."

(Participant,15)

One participant explained the challenge of maintaining a healthy diet,

" It was challenging to maintain a healthy diet when the available options are limited and not tailored to the needs of pregnant students." (Participant,6)

Bed

Most of the participants indicated that they were not comfortable with the beds in the halls since they were not made to accommodate pregnant student-teachers.

A participant claimed,

" I struggle to find a good sleeping position..... which affected my rest and well-being. A better bed would have significantly improved my comfort and ability to get the necessary rest..."
(Participant,13)

The interview responses revealed that the beds provided at Offinso and Wesley Colleges of Education were a significant source of discomfort and stress for pregnant students. Many students found the beds to be inadequate, especially in the later stages of pregnancy when their bodies required more support. The lack of a supportive and comfortable bed led to back pain and disrupted sleep, which significantly affected their rest and overall well-being.

Students struggled to find comfortable sleeping positions, and the inadequate bedding exacerbated their discomfort, making it difficult to sleep through the night. This lack of proper rest left them feeling tired and fatigued during the day, impacting their ability to focus on their studies and participate in academic activities effectively.

The interview responses indicated the diverse and significant sources of physical stress faced by pregnant student teachers at the college, ranging from physical discomfort and inadequate infrastructure to unsatisfactory accommodation, uniforms, food, and sleeping arrangements.

Academic Stressors

Academic stressor is one of the main themes under the sources of stress. Most of the participants indicated that academic activities such as such as examinations, quizzes, group /work/discussion, project and Supported Teaching in Schools (STS) served as stress because of combining them with antenatal visits and pregnancy experiences. Some respondents described the challenges below

One participant noted,

"It was effort demanding to attend class. The stress of getting to lectures every day, combined with the fatigue from pregnancy, made it a real challenging to keep up with my academic responsibilities." (Participant,13)

In a similar vein, a participant claimed

"I have to seek permission and go to antenatal appointments in the morning.... missing lectures for antenatal... This means missing out on important lectures and falling behind on coursework, which added to my stress." (Participant,8)

In addition to these challenges, a participant highlighted the difficulty of group work,

"I have to do group discussions via WhatsApp because I missed classes to go for antenatal appointments. It is challenging to keep up with group work and class discussions." (Participant,10)

The interview responses revealed that pregnant students at Offinso and Wesley Colleges of Education faced significant academic stressors, primarily due to the

demands of attending classes and managing pregnancy-related appointments. Many students found it challenging to keep up with their academic responsibilities because the physical exertion required to attend lectures every day, combined with pregnancy fatigue, made it difficult to maintain their previous academic performance.

Students often had to seek permission to attend antenatal appointments, which meant missing important lectures and falling behind on coursework. This regular absence from classes required them to work twice as hard to catch up, adding to their stress levels. The need to balance academic responsibilities with health-related appointments frequently resulted in missed classes, further complicating their ability to stay on top of their studies.

The stress and frequent absences had a notable impact on students' grades, with several reporting that their academic performance had worsened compared to previous semesters. The pressure to maintain high standards despite these challenges was a significant source of stress.

Additionally, group discussions posed another layer of difficulty. Many students had to participate in these discussions via WhatsApp because they missed classes for antenatal appointments. Keeping up with group work and class discussions through digital means proved challenging and less effective than in-person participation. Evening group discussions were particularly stressful as students were already exhausted by the end of the day, making it even harder to engage and contribute effectively.

SOCIAL STRESSORS

Social stressor was one of the main themes under sources of stress. The participants indicated that sometimes they feel isolated due to perception towards them. The respondents also indicated that they did not have any privacy due to the school dormitory system where pregnant student-teachers bath together with other students.

One participant noted

"The tutors generally do not disturb us and understand the situation, but sometimes their looks make it seem like they disapprove of our presence in school while being pregnant. It feels judgmental..." (Participant,7)

Furthermore, a participant highlighted the issue of privacy

"The bathhouse is shared, and while the shower curtain helps, you still cannot hide your belly completely. This lack of privacy made me very self-conscious and stressed." (Participant,11)

The interview responses revealed that pregnant student-teachers at Offinso and Wesley Colleges of Education faced significant social stressors, primarily due to the attitudes and perceptions of others towards them. While tutors generally did not disturb them and understood their situation, their occasional disapproving looks made pregnant student-teachers feel judged and unwelcome in the academic environment.

Many students reported feeling isolated and judged by their classmates, who often viewed them as sinners. This judgmental attitude from peers led to feelings of loneliness and emotional distress.

Psychological Stressors

The data analysis showed that most of the respondents experienced stress due to fear of labour, anxious due to first delivery, worry about the safety of the unborn babies and feeling shy due to unwelcoming comments and mockery from colleagues and the community. The following extracts described the views of some of the participants.

One participant noted,

"I used to ask others how labour goes because I was very fearful of labour. The fear caused significant anxiety."

(Participant,14)

Another participant claimed,

"I was sometimes frustrated and anxious because it is my first time being pregnant. The uncertainty and new experiences made me worry constantly." **(Participant,12)**

Moreover, a participant mentioned, "I often found myself feeling overwhelmed by the thought of balancing my studies and pregnancy. The constant worry about my academic performance added to my psychological stress."

Reflecting on the emotional impact, another participant stated, "The hormonal changes and the physical discomfort often made me irritable and prone to mood swings, which further heightened my stress levels."

In addition, one participant explained,

"I felt isolated because I could not relate to my peers who were not pregnant. The lack of shared experiences made me feel alone in my struggles." **(Participant,7)**

Furthermore, a participant highlighted,

"I was constantly worried about the health of my baby and whether I was doing everything right. This anxiety about the well-being of my unborn child added to my overall stress." **(Participant,14)**

The interview responses revealed that pregnant students at Offinso and Wesley Colleges of Education

experienced significant psychological stressors due to their unique circumstances. Many students expressed a deep fear of labour, which caused significant anxiety. This fear was exacerbated by their lack of experience and knowledge about the birthing process, leading them to frequently ask others about what to expect.

Additionally, the uncertainty and new experiences associated with being pregnant for the first time resulted in frustration and anxiety. The students often worried about their health, their academic performance, and how they would manage both simultaneously. This constant worry added to their overall stress levels.

The social environment also contributed to their psychological stress. Many students felt shy and embarrassed because their friends mocked them. This teasing and lack of understanding from peers intensified their feelings of isolation and stress, further impacting their mental health and well-being.

These responses illustrated the diverse and significant sources of stress faced by pregnant student teachers at the college, ranging from academic challenges and social stigma to psychological fears and discomforts.

The findings revealed that these sources ranged from physical, academic, social, to psychological stressors. Physically, students faced significant discomfort due to inadequate infrastructure, frequent movement between floors, long walks to lecture halls, and uncomfortable desks, leading to fatigue, dizziness, and back pain. The standard uniforms also added stress, as they became tighter and more restrictive with pregnancy, requiring frequent adjustments. The food provided at the college did not meet their dietary needs, forcing many to seek meals from outside, adding extra costs and effort. Academically, managing class attendance and antenatal appointments was challenging, resulting in missed lectures and falling behind on coursework, which impacted their grades. Socially, students felt judged and isolated by peers and occasionally by tutors, leading to emotional distress. Psychologically, the fear of labour, coupled with the uncertainty and new experiences of a first pregnancy, caused significant anxiety and frustration, exacerbated by teasing and lack of understanding from friends.

DISCUSSION

Stress experienced by pregnant students

Stress among pregnant students in higher education is a major issue. It impacts both their academic performance and well-being. Balancing pregnancy with the demands of school introduces unique psychological, social, and physical stressors. Research shows that pregnant students face high stress levels. They juggle academic demands with health concerns, stigma, and

limited social support. Smith *et al.*, (2022) note that these students often feel anxious about their workload, fear discrimination, and worry about pregnancy complications. All these factors heighten their stress.

In Ghana, cultural expectations and infrastructure issues add to these challenges. Agyapong and Osei (2023) find that pregnant university students often deal with social stigma and lack institutional support, which raises emotional distress. The pressure to meet societal norms about motherhood and education can cause feelings of isolation and fear of failing academically. Mensah *et al.*, (2023) also report that financial stress from medical expenses strains tight budgets, further affecting focus and academic engagement.

While many studies agree on high stress levels among pregnant students, some differ on coping strategies and institutional responses. Johnson and Lee (2021) suggest that those receiving social and institutional support report lower stress and better academic outcomes. For example, some Ghanaian universities have implemented counseling programs, flexible attendance policies, and peer support, which help reduce stress, according to Boateng and Adjei (2024). This indicates that with proper support, pregnancy does not always lead to excessive stress.

On the other hand, some studies argue that not all pregnant students experience high stress. Kwame and Amankwah (2023) contend that personal resilience, family support, and past academic success can lower stress levels. Some pregnant students manage their roles well and even excel in their studies. Additionally, gender dynamics and societal views vary between urban and rural areas in Ghana. In some rural settings, pregnancy during school may be more accepted, leading to less stigma and stress, as noted by Owusu and Badu (2022).

The findings revealed that these sources of stress ranged from physical, academic, social, to psychological stressors. Physically, students faced significant discomfort due to inadequate infrastructure, frequent movement between floors, long walks to lecture halls, and uncomfortable desks, leading to fatigue, dizziness, and back pain. The standard uniforms also added stress, as they became tighter and more restrictive with pregnancy, requiring frequent adjustments. The food provided at the college did not meet their dietary needs, forcing many to seek meals from outside, adding extra costs and effort. Academically, managing class attendance and antenatal appointments was challenging, resulting in missed lectures and falling behind on coursework, which impacted their grades. Socially, students felt judged and isolated by peers and occasionally by tutors, leading to emotional distress. Psychologically, the fear of labour, coupled with the uncertainty and new experiences of a first pregnancy,

caused significant anxiety and frustration, exacerbated by teasing and lack of understanding from friends.

The findings from the current study are in line with the findings from Okoro *et al.*, (2018) and Amponsah *et al.*, (2022), who categorised stressors into health-related, social, and academic factors. Health concerns, family issues, and social pressures were identified as major stressors for pregnant students. Studies by Phiri *et al.*, (2021) and Ayornoo and Bonsu (2022) supported these findings, indicating that physical tiredness, poor sleep patterns, and social stigma significantly impact the well-being and academic performance of pregnant students. Agbogli and Kumatia (2022) further emphasized that pregnant students experienced stress from academic pressures, health concerns, and social issues, which aligned with the current study's findings on the diverse stressors affecting pregnant students. Additionally, the study's findings did not align with Commey-Mintah *et al.*, (2022), who highlighted that financial stressors, such as tuition fees and the cost of antenatal care, significantly contribute to the stress levels of pregnant students.

CONCLUSION

The study identified multiple sources of stress faced by these students, including physical, academic, social, and psychological. Physically, inadequate infrastructure, uncomfortable uniforms, and the physical demands of pregnancy contributed to significant discomfort and fatigue. Academically, balancing class attendance with antenatal appointments proved difficult, leading to missed lectures and lower grades. Socially, judgment and isolation from peers and tutors caused emotional distress, while the fear of labour and first-time pregnancy anxieties added to psychological stress.

Significance of the Study

The freedom to be pregnant while attending college in Ghana highlights the need for educators to recognize the significant impact stress has on pregnant students. The findings from this current study will aid expectant mothers in devising suitable coping mechanisms on campus, potentially reducing the need for extensive outside treatment. By understanding the stressors specific to pregnant students, educators and administrators can create more supportive learning environments.

Additionally, this study will contribute to the existing body of literature, enabling other researchers to expand the scope of the study to include more institutions across the tertiary education sector. By adding to the knowledge base, this research will facilitate a broader understanding of the challenges faced by pregnant students and the best practices for supporting them. Future researchers can build on these findings to explore more specific aspects of stress in different contexts and

settings, thus enriching the academic discourse on this subject.

The findings from this current study will also be beneficial to counsellors, providing them with baseline information to intensify their services to students.

This information will be invaluable for potential applicants, allowing them to prepare themselves mentally, physically, psychologically, academically, and socially before enrolling in the program.

Recommendations

The Management of Colleges of Education in conjunction with the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission should design a policy document to guide all Colleges of Education in Ghana to reduce the physical, academic, social and psychological stressors of pregnant students to enable them excel in their academic pursuit. This can be done by enhancing campus infrastructure, providing more accessible and comfortable desks in lecture halls and by providing separate ground floor hall of residence for the pregnant student-teachers at a cost to enable them reduce physical strain.

Additionally, Management of the Colleges in Ghana should liaise with the government or private entities to build hospitals in the Colleges to enable pregnant student-teachers to attend antenatal appointments without missing crucial lectures. The Colleges could also make provision for remote participation in classes through whatsapp and video conferencing to ensure that these students do not lag behind. The Colleges of Education should also have unit for students support services which will develop policies that will ease pressure on their students both from the university and employers. Prospective College of education students should be informed to seek support from family, friends, employers on the limited free times and movements associated with College of Education programs. Prospective students who wish to become pregnant while on the program should also inform their husbands and family about the stress involve in combining pregnancy with academic work at the Colleges of Education to enable them reduce their workload in order to have some reasonable time for meeting academic work.

The Colleges should collaborate with Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs to established vibrant and welled resourced Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) offices in the Colleges to address all pregnancy related issues. There should be a permanent staff in the Office to receive all concerns. The should also be GESI Committee which would meet regularly to address the pregnancy related issues. The Colleges should also foster an inclusive and supportive environment by establishing welled resourced counselling units with trained

counsellors who can provide continuous emotional support and conduct regular stress management workshops for the students. Support groups specifically for pregnant students should be created to offer a sense of community and shared experience, reducing feelings of isolation.

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