Reflections on lived experiences of teenage mothers in a Ghanaian setting: a phenomenological study

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ABSTRACT
Teenage motherhood is a social occurrence that presents itself in every country. This paper explored lived experiences of teenage mothers in the Adaklu District of Ghana. The study was a phenomenological qualitative study. Data for the study were obtained through narratives, and photovoice; using an in-depth interview guide. The thematic data analysis technique was employed to present the findings. The study purposively sampled 30 teenage mothers. Teenage mothers used pictures such as trees by the riverside, stacked blocks, and electrical sockets to explain their motherhood experiences. Codes from the data revolved around instruction, and communicative learning lived experiences. Teenage motherhood experiences were largely on issues such as the irresponsible attitude of a child’s father, rape, remorsefulness, engagement in apprenticeship, supportive partners, and relatives. It can be concluded that teenage mothers have different perspectives on their lived experiences which could either help or hinder how they make meaning of their lives.

Introduction
Teenage motherhood is an important social phenomenon that occurs worldwide (Asare et al., 2019). Teenage motherhood ensues when a girl between the ages of 13 to 19 years gives birth (Kost-Smith et al., 2010). About 16 million girls between the ages of 13 to 19 give birth every year. Out of the 16 million girls, 95% live in developing countries (World Health Organization, 2012). In Ghana, 12% of teenagers aged 15–19 years were either pregnant or had already given birth in 2012. This increased to 14% for the same age cohort in 2014 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2015).

Research has shown that teenage motherhood is associated with a lot of experiences, which can either be positive or negative. For instance, teenage motherhood presents a lot of challenges, such as being unable to further education, living in abject poverty, inadequate knowledge of sexual and reproductive health, and poor health and housing (Aparicio et al., 2018; Mollborn & Jacobs, 2012). In addition, the challenges associated with being a teenage mother are not limited to the mother. The children born to teenage mothers, and society as a whole share in these challenges. For example, children of teenage mothers are prone to health complications, negative socio-economic conditions, neglect and abuse, and the possibility of becoming a teenage parent (Aparicio et al., 2018).
Although most teenage mothers face challenges, a number of them become successful and more resilient in life. A study by Howard and Stratton (2012) indicated that becoming a teenage mother marks the beginning of an important phase of life. According to some studies, teenage motherhood causes an increased sense of responsibility and serves as motivation to fulfill personal aspirations (Dlamini, 2016). Hence, people who go through a phenomenon can reflect and make a conscious effort to put the situation to advantage. Probably, in certain transitional periods of life, it is impossible to rely on foreknowledge or already established perspectives. The ability to adapt during such transitions is made possible only with critical reflection and reconstruction of life. Thus, considering how teenage mothers have reflected, reviewed, and reconstructed their lived experiences will help in planning support systems for the teenage mothers (Wilkinson & Callister, 2010). To better understand the lived situations of this vulnerable group, this study importantly sought to contribute to research on lived experiences of teenage mothers building much on how they have made sense of their experiences (Gbogbo, 2020; Krugu et al., 2016; Mollborn, 2016). The study explored the teenage mothers’ perspectives on the role of their experiences in transforming their lives. In this regard, the main research question was: how does teenage motherhood experiences transform teenagers’ lives?

**Theoretical perspective**

To understand the research question, the study drew on Mezirow’s transformative learning theory. The theory expounds on how to effect a change (Mezirow, 1991). According to Mezirow, the theory explains how adult learners make sense of their experiences. The study dwelled much on transformative theory but not transition theory because the researchers were not just interested in their journey of transiting through motherhood. The focus of the research was on things they have learnt out of their experiences and how they are making sense of those things learnt. The theory explores the influence of social (and other) structures on the process of constructing the individual experience. This includes the dynamics involved in modifying meanings and implementing changes when learners find such structures to be dysfunctional. The main aim of the transformative learning theory is to help individuals challenge the current assumptions on which they base their actions and to change these assumptions if they are considered ineffective. This includes both mental and behavioural change (Akpinar, 2010). The theory is more focused on individual transformation and, hence, argues that each individual has a particular view of the world. It further explains that the worldview of a person may not be articulated but it is usually based on a set of paradigmatic assumptions that are derived from socialization, experiences, culture, or education of the individual.

Transformative learning can occur when individuals endure social crises such as natural disasters, the death of a loved one, teenage motherhood, or any series of cumulative transformed activities. These experiences are often stressful and painful and can cause individuals to question the very core of their existence (Mezirow, 1997). Teenagers who experience motherhood may see the events as cumbersome or fulfilling and may want to reflect on meanings they make out of being a teenage mother. Reflections may lead some teenage mothers to reconstruct their previous assumptions or knowledge based on the new information they derive from their experiences.

The two basic foci of the theory are instrumental learning, and communicative learning. Instrumental learning focuses on problem-solving-oriented tasks which evaluate the causes and effects of relationships while communicative learning focuses on how people evince their feelings, needs, and desires. For the transformative theory to be successful, the experience must proceed along with various phases. The phases are a disorienting dilemma, self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, planning a new course of action, acquisition of new skills and knowledge to accomplish the plan, exploring and trying new roles, and finally, self-efficacy.

In this study, Mezirow’s transformative theory, which focuses on how adult learners make sense of their experiences, is used as a guide to provide insight into the lived experiences of teenage mothers in the Adaklu District of Ghana. Studies that applied the transformative learning theory concentrated
on the implications of the theory and its position in classrooms of higher education institutions (Taylor, 2007). In the present study, the focus of using the transformative learning theory has been shifted to a particular life event; thus teenage motherhood. The interest is on issues that shape transformative experiences (reflections, reviews, reconstructions – in a holistic approach).

**Methods**

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study. It allowed the participants to share their views and experiences to inform policymakers who would suggest possible interventions (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Also, qualitative design was opted for because it allowed teenage mothers to express their experiences on their terms (Watts, Liamputtong & McMichael, 2015). Further, it was essential for the researchers to learn from the teenage mothers’ experiences hence the usage of phenomenology. This paper dwelled much on the hermeneutic philosophy of phenomenology which seeks to understand the deeper layers of human experiences that lay obscured beneath surface awareness and how individual lifeworlds influence these experiences (Bynum & Varpio, 2018). In view of that narratives and photo voices of teenage mothers were used to understand those individuals’ experiences in their daily lives.

**Study setting and participants**

The study was conducted in the Adaklu District (in the Volta Region) of Ghana. Adaklu was chosen because the district had the highest rate of teenage motherhood (22.1%) in Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service, 2015). In addition, the Adaklu District recorded the highest percentage of teenage motherhood (which was 23.2%) in the Volta Region (Duodu, 2016); where one out of every four pregnant women who patronized health facilities in the Adaklu District was a teenager (Duodu, 2016). Similarly, studies have admitted that though agencies are working on how to curb teenage motherhood in the Adaklu District, still, there is a high prevalence of teenage pregnancy in the district (Adjei, 2018; Nyatsikor, 2021). Again, in a project conducted in Volta Region, it was revealed that teenage pregnancy was still high in Adaklu District although the rate has dropped to 12.2% in 2019 (Gyapong et al., 2020). These statistics made the Adaklu District very suitable for this study.

Recruitment of teenage mothers occurred at the community level. At the health facility level, a nurse compiled a list of all teenage mothers who had visited the facility and were still in their teens. From the list, mothers were traced who, in turn, through snowball sampling, helped locate other teenage mothers who had not visited any of the health facilities. To ensure that the study included teenage mothers who may not have visited health facilities, facilitators helped to identify such teenage mothers in their respective villages. Again, the snowball approach was employed to expand the list of potential participants in the district. The identified study participants were visited at home by the researchers and their community assistants. The home visits were done to help establish rapport and build confidence among parents, guardians, and the researchers. During the home visits, dates and venues for the photovoice and narratives were scheduled. In all, thirty (30) teenage mothers participated in the study. Two teenage mothers rejected being part of the study because of their health status during the time of data collection.

At any first point of entry into a community, our intentions were communicated to an assembly member or a unit committee member (where assembly members were not available) of the community, who in turn introduced us to the chief of the community. We then told them our purpose for being in the community and then those (teenage mothers and opinion leaders) with knowledge and experience on the subject of discussion were consulted and purposively recruited for IDIs and photo voices. The concept of saturation was used in selecting respondents for the study. Saturation is reached when there is enough information to replicate the study (Saunders et al., 2018). The 32-item checklist consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative studies (COREQ) guided the study (Tong et al., 2007).
Photovoice

Photovoice is a participatory method that enables people to identify, represent and enhance their community life circumstances or engagement with a programme through photography and accompanying written captions (Wang et al., 2000). Photovoice involves giving cameras to a group of participants to enable them to capture, discuss and share stories they find significant (Wang, Cash & Powers, 2000). With photovoice, different photographs are captured, different stories are told, and different outcomes are sought. Thus, the heart of photovoice is the intermingling of images and words (Hunter, 2005). Three main objectives of the photovoice technique are: identifying and recording community strengths and struggles, explaining experiences through critical reflection and group dialogue, and informing decision-makers and influencing policies (C. Wang & Burriss, 1997). The photovoice technique comprehensively places control of the research in the hands of study participants from the onset. It enables vulnerable and marginalized persons to record and mirror their personal life experiences through photographs which generate discussion, and share knowledge about important issues (Wang et al., 2000).

In photovoice, cameras are provided for people who are often marginalized in the community’s social decision-making, yet whose lives are greatly affected by those decisions made by stakeholders. In this study, participants were trained to use phone cameras and storytelling to enable them to voice their experiences and concerns. We encouraged the recording of important issues and facilitated discussions and reflections on the meanings of the images. This was done as individuals and then in groups (collective photovoice). The images and the accompanying stories that were developed through group dialogue assisted in sharing individual expertise for change (Kelly et al., 2006).

Again, photovoice methodology does not only give marginalized people a voice, it creates an opportunity to raise awareness of issues and challenges that these people have experienced (Wang, 1999). Photovoice benefits research as it can be used to increase knowledge about building the capacity of participants by valuing their knowledge and experiences. This can ultimately promote and influence changes that will impact the people involved in the process. The process is a credible and effective way through which marginalized individuals become advocates in their communities (C. C. Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Teenage mothers who participated in the photovoice learned more about the photovoice process, the risks and benefits of the method, the goals of the research, and the benefits of the research to themselves. This was done before the participants were given the cameras to go home and capture their images.

Narratives

How teenage mothers reflect, review or reconstruct their lived experiences are issues that can effectively be answered by the teen mothers themselves. They need to voice their own stories and bring to life their experiences, lifestyles, and problems. Regard for the teenage mothers’ perspectives would allow a deeper understanding of their issues and how the situation has transformed their lives (Leerlooijer et al., 2013). To achieve this, we employed narratives, which are in-depth ways of gathering, analysing, and interpreting the stories that people talk about in their lives. In narrative data collection, interviews, diaries, photographs, and letters are useful sources (Marshall & Rossman 2015). While the term narrative can include a broad spectrum of definitions, our focus was on stories of experience. For this research, stories are what Esin and Squire (2013) refer to as external expressions of internal phenomena (events, thoughts, and feelings). It is important to clarify that we were interested in personal narratives about teenage mothers. They were asked to narrate stories of how they reflected on, reviewed, or reconstructed motherhood experiences. As with many studies that are based on self-reporting, we appreciate the risk of ‘social desirability bias’ (Bergen & Labonté, 2020) whereby participants may present a more favourable or sympathetic account of their situations. In this case, our participants narrated their lives after becoming teenage mothers, which might
be exaggerated to receive sympathy or empathy. However, it appeared that our participants were open in telling their stories, and even appeared somewhat relieved in sharing their experiences with us.

Data analysis

Given the circular nature of hermeneutic phenomenology (Oerther, 2020), data pertaining to the study were analysed concurrently along with the researcher’s interpretations. The research team investigated teenage mothers’ experience as lived, rather than as it is conceptualized, and reflected on the essential [phenomenological] themes that characterize the participant’s experience with the phenomenon, simultaneously reflecting on their own experiences. Thematic data analysis procedures, with a deductive approach, were employed to summarize narratives from teenage mothers. First, organizing and getting familiar with the data was done. At this point, the authors listened to recorded individual audios to get an overview of the narratives, and transcription of each audio was done shortly after the interviews. Second, seven codes were then obtained from the transcribed data (Table 1). Third, these codes were put into two themes to reflect the theory underpinning this present study (Table 1). The codes of each theme were reviewed, their relationships by linking the codes to the focus of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory. The themes were established according to the teenage mothers’ approach to their lived experiences. The aim here was to interpret the data through the social construction of the experiences of participants in adapting to being mothers. In general, the idea was to gain a clear understanding of the context of the situation, focusing on different situations, move from the general to the specific and be able to contextualize the group of teenage mothers interviewed. Researchers captured teenage mothers’ reflections in writing and then reflect and write again, creating continuous, iterative cycles to develop increasingly robust and nuanced analyses. Throughout the analysis, the researchers maintained a strong orientation to the phenomenon under study and attended to the interactions between the parts and the whole. That is, how the teenage mothers’ experiences have transformed their lives and how they are making sense of these experiences. This last step is described as the hermeneutic circle, which emphasized the practice of deliberately considering how the data (the parts) contribute to the evolving understanding of the phenomena (the whole) and how each enhances the meaning of the other. Data from the photovoices was used to corroborate the narratives for the analysis. Selection of narratives and photos to depict lived experiences of teenage mothers were collectively done and agreed upon by all authors. The data preparation and processing were done using Microsoft Word, and Qualitative Data Miner Software.

In order for the researchers to achieve trustworthiness, which is an important component in qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2017), the analysis followed a step-by-step way of analysing hermeneutic phenomenology. Apart from that, issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, audit trails, and reflectivity were taken into consideration during the continuous, iterative cycles.

Table 1. Codes and themes from narratives.

| Thematic areas | Instrumental learning lived experiences (Focuses on problem-solving-oriented tasks which evaluate the causes and effects of relationships) | Communicative learning lived experiences (Focuses on how people evince their feelings, needs, and desires) |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Codes          | ● School dropout/Being able to go back to school  
 ● Engagement in apprenticeship  
 ● Involvement in farming activities/ menial jobs  
 ● Support from my father and mother, or grandparent | ● Disrespectful to family, and community members  
 ● Runaway or irresponsible baby father  
 ● Victim of rape |
Informed consent and ethical clearance

On ethical considerations, we ensured that participation was voluntary and that participants were given the option to withdraw at any time. For participants who were children (less than 18 years), consent was sought from both the participants and their parents or guardians. Their confidentiality and anonymity were also assured. All responses were anonymized before analysis, and particular care was taken not to reveal identifying details of places, practices, or participants. In this regard, pseudonyms were used to represent the participants in presentation of the results. In addition, ethical clearance (with ID number UCCIRB/CHLS/2017/30) to conduct this study was obtained from the Internal Review Board of University of Cape Coast, Ghana.

Results

Socio-Demographic characteristics of participants

The socio-demographic variables that were of interest to this study included age, level of education, ethnicity, religion, marital status, and number of children. The predominant ethnic group of the research participants (29 out of the 30 participants) was Ewe (Table 2). Also, almost all the participants (29 out of 30) were Christians, mostly aged between 18–19 years (23 out of 30 participants), never married (24 out of 30), had one child (25 out of 30), and with primary education (20 out of 30).

Lived experiences of teenage mothers

The research found that teenage mothers have different views about how they reflect on, and reconstruct motherhood status or experiences. In relation to Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, narratives (codes) were appropriately aligned with its two constructs. Thus, instrumental learning, and communicative learning lived experiences. On the photovoices, most of the pictures the teenage mothers took were from their environment, which they thought could relate to their world. They chose objects from their environment because they understood the symbolic relation between such objects and their day-to-day activities.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants.

| Variable                  | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Ethnicity                 |           |         |
| Ewe                       | 29        | 93      |
| Dagomba                   | 1         | 0.3     |
| Religion                  |           |         |
| Christian                 | 29        | 96.6    |
| Muslim                    | 1         | 0.3     |
| Marital Status            |           |         |
| Never Married             | 24        | 96.6    |
| Co-habitation             | 6         | 20      |
| Age                       |           |         |
| 15                        | 1         | 3.3     |
| 16                        | 3         | 10      |
| 17                        | 3         | 10      |
| 18                        | 10        | 33.3    |
| 19                        | 13        | 43.3    |
| Educational Level         |           |         |
| No formal Education       | 1         | 3.33    |
| Primary Level             | 20        | 66      |
| Basic Level               | 7         | 23.3    |
| Secondary School          | 2         | 6.7     |
| Number of Children        |           |         |
| One child                 | 25        | 83.3    |
| Two children              | 4         | 13.3    |
| Three Children            | 1         | 3.3     |
**Communicative learning lived experiences**

Narratives that related to communicative learning lived experiences of the teenage mothers were: runaway or irresponsible father of a child; disrespectful to family, and community members; and victim of rape. Some of the teenage mothers viewed their situation as completely disheartening. They saw the teenage motherhood journey as the end of their lives. They wished they were not alive because of the challenging situations in which they found themselves. Teenage mothers under this category used pictures such as sticks and stacked building blocks to explain their situations. Narratives of these teenage mothers were traced to explain why they choose these pictures as their photo voices.

**Runaway or irresponsible father of a child**

Tracing a participant’s narratives, she was in love with the man who impregnated her. They were staying together in their village. One day, the man decided to emigrate in search of greener pastures. After that day, she has not heard about her baby’s father. People tell her that the man is dead and that she should move on. To her, life has been very unfair and there is nothing to fight for. She wished she was dead and represented her experiences with a stick on the cement floor (Figure 1). This is how she explained herself:

> Figure 1. Picture of a stick on a cement floor. “It means I won’t grow again(19-year-old teenage mother, Adwoa)”
The reason why I chose a stick is that there is nobody to assist me or push me forward. Yeah . . . It means I won’t grow again (19-year-old teenage mother, PA1)

**Victim of rape**
A similar story was narrated by Yaa who gave birth at the age of 15. According to Yaa, she was raped by a friend she trusted. To her, life has been heavy like stacked concrete blocks (Figure 2) as she used them to represent her ordeal. How can she unpack these hardships and sorrow from her life? This is how she summarized her story:

> All the struggles that I have gone through are like the weight of those stacked blocks. How can a little girl like me unpack all these blocks? It will just kill me one of these days. I do not know what to do with my life anymore. There are times I wish I could end my life and my baby’s life but something inside tells me that I should not [16-year-old teenage mother, PA4].

**Disrespectful to family, and community members**
Other participants reflected on motherhood and they were remorseful about their situation and life in general. According to these teenage mothers, they were very disrespectful and adventurous when they were growing up. They used to insult their elders, never yielded to advice, and did not take their education seriously. Now, they wished they could turn the hands of time but nothing can be done about their lives. They are willing to change their lives for the better.
since they have children. Some of them have tried apologizing to their parents or community members whilst others were planning to do so. Some of those who have apologized were still not accepted by their parents or guardians in question. This is how one represented her story. She took a photograph of a red cloth (Figure 3) that indicated how she had cried so much that her eyes turned red.

Hmmm, when I was growing up, I was really “wild” and disrespectful. I gave birth in that situation. I am calm now but nobody believes me. I am left alone to fend for myself. My parents are alive but I live my life as though they are no more. Red signifies how much I have cried for my eyes to turn red. Red signifies that I am in danger. Red signifies that I am helpless. Madam, I am stranded in life. I don’t have anyone to help me. [17-year-old teenage mother, PA8]

Tracing her narratives, a participant knew she was a beautiful girl so she did not respect her parents, teachers, and elders in her community. Everybody in the community tagged her as disrespectful hence she hardly gets support from anyone. She showed remorse in all aspects of life but she thought it was too late to apologize. To her, life has now become a struggle and she is finding it difficult to complete such a struggle. She has already considered herself a failure and that nothing good can come out of her life.

![Figure 3](image-url). A picture of a red cloth. “Red cloth signifies how much she has cried for her eyes to turn red” [17-year-old teenage mother, Nhyira]
**Instrumental learning lived experiences**

Though most of the teenage mothers admitted that the whole experience was cumbersome, they portrayed resilience in aspects of venturing into a job, going back to school or learning a trade through apprenticeship. Teenage mothers in this category were motivated to make it in life. They believed motherhood could never wreck them because they were strong and very determined to make it in life. These were stories of being inspired. The teenage mothers exhibited signs of being encouraged to make a living in both group and individual photovocies. In a collective photovoice, a picture of a tree by the riverside (Figure 4) was used to represent how encouraged they are to make it in life as teenage mothers.

*We chose a tree by the riverside because such trees never shed their leaves. They are evergreen. Whether in the rainy or dry season, their leaves always look fresh. For us, we each have a baby now but we want to go back to school so that we can become like a tree planted by the river that never sheds its leaves. And so if we get someone to take care of us, we can become great people in the community (Collective photo voices, a group of seven girls).*

**Engagement in apprenticeship**

This group of teenage mothers was motivated to work hard and continue to make a better living out of life. Although the journey was not all that clear, some of them have started some apprenticeships to learn a trade. This group of teenage mothers never thought of starting a job for themselves.
without their parents pushing them into it. They believed the little positive things they have started working on will take them through a better life. Furthermore, some teenage mothers viewed their situation as a positive experience because it has enabled them to achieve certain things that they would have otherwise been unable to achieve. A picture of a white sheet was used to explain their situation (Figure 5).

Yeah!! We would say that in the past, we were in a mess (life was dirty) but now we find ourselves in a better place and so we are clean now

[Collective photo voice].

**Support from a baby’s father, parents, or relatives**

Though some teenage mothers were not engaged in any meaningful work, they were lucky to have family members who were taking care of them and their children. Some mothers or the babies’ fathers had taken up the responsibility of catering to their children. To these teenage mothers, giving birth has been the hardest lesson learned throughout life. They have challenged themselves to work harder and improve their self before they will think of getting another child. In addition, there were participants who were doing virtually nothing meaningful but had their babies’ fathers, parents, and aunties who were taking care of them despite their situation.

![Figure 5. Picture of a white sheet of paper. Finding themselves in a better life[Collective photo voice].](image)
School dropout/Being able to go back to school

From the narratives, some of the teenage mothers also saw the future to be blurry while others saw it as bright. Pictures of a lantern, an electrical plug, and a socket were used for their photo voices. Their explanations were in two parts. The first group was those who envisioned a bright future because they were back at school or learning through apprenticeship. This group of teenage mothers had support from their parents, the babies’ fathers, or both. One of such individuals explained her story using Figure 6:

First, I was in white (very good girl) before I got into this temptation and I became dark (all hope was lost). Now that I am back at school, I have become white again. Like this socket that powers any electrical appliance plugged into it, so is my life now. I am ready to take advantage of any support that will come my way. I have tasted life and I am ready to move on to be better in future [18-year-old teenage mother, PA9].

One of them assessed her motherhood experiences with a picture of a lantern (Figure 7):

I was supposed to and I still want to be the lantern of my family so that I can shine for everybody in the community to see. My dreams are a bit shattered but I will go back to school and become somebody great in the future so that I can shine. Like this lantern, I am filled with kerosene and I am just waiting for someone to help light it and I will be the light of the community [19-Year-old teenage mother, PAS].

Involvement in farming activities and menial jobs

The second group also aspired to have a bright future but they did not receive any support from their family members or community. In their own doing, they were struggling to make a living for themselves. They were into maize farming, deshelling groundnuts, and fetching water for ongoing developmental projects in the district. They wished someone would come to their aid and support them. A participant who was part of this group narrated how he has been challenged to change her narrative to a positive story:

![Figure 6. A picture of an electric plug and socket. I have tasted life and I am ready to move on to be better in future.](image-url)
I have given birth to two children. Though I did not learn through an apprenticeship, I can sew dresses for money. Also, I have a maize farm which I harvest to support my business. Alongside, I help people during planting seasons and in return, they either give me some foodstuff or pay in cash. I also wash for male government workers in the community. Previously, I was not so responsible but now I have to feed myself and my baby [19-year old teenage mother, PA3].

Discussion

We explored the lived experiences of teenage mothers and how these affect the outlook of their future aspirations and challenges. As illustrated by Mezirow’s transformation learning theory, teenage mothers reflected on their lived experiences mostly from an individual or group point of view. Some of them were disoriented by their lived experiences and were not ready to proceed with life. That was the first stage in the process of heading towards a transformed life. As they went through the experience, some showed remorse on some of the assumptions they were basing their life on in the past. For instance, some teenage mothers assumed that being disobedient to the elderly was the best behaviour to adopt but their learning experience taught them new ways of transforming that behaviour. They were ready to apologize and put on good behaviour, reflecting what Mezirow (1991) termed as self-examination and critical assessment of assumptions.

While some teenage mothers found the situation challenging, others started new jobs, went back to school, and challenged themselves to make a positive transformation out of the situation. In reference to Mezirow (1991), as adults experience any event, they plan a course of action by
acquiring new skills, information, and knowledge that will help them in exploring a lot of avenues. It was realized that some of the participants tried many different jobs to help secure food and financial independence for themselves and their children.

Most of the teenage mothers had support from either baby-fathers or family, especially their mothers who persuaded them to learn new trades or skills. Again, there was this group of participants who were not supported but had made a decision to take their destinies into their own hands. They had purported to make something good out of the situation. Such people had built self-confidence which assured them of making it in life. Documentation of such situations can be found in Mezirow’s transformative learning theory. This is what he termed as building self-efficacy. It involves the ability to make your own decisions and have your own beliefs.

This study highlighted the fact that teenage mothers in the district had different perspectives about motherhood status. Participants’ views of motherhood included themes such as hopelessness and hopefulness. Bowman (2013) highlighted that teenage mothers have different perspectives about their situations and their lives revolve around three main themes such as: whether the experience was positive, negative, or has taught them lessons to work positively towards their future.

The findings further indicated that some of the teenage mothers assessed motherhood as a hopeless situation. For them, motherhood has led to financial and educational constraints. Also, they have been abandoned by loved ones. There was no hope for these teenage mothers in their present circumstances or shortly. Equally, a number of studies have indicated that being a teenage mother is very cumbersome for younger girls. Thus, teenage motherhood leads to poverty, stigmatization, school dropout, health complications, and many other negative outcomes (Amorim et al., 2009; Dattani et al., 2007; Hilton & Slugoski, 1986; Kearney & Levine, 2012).

While some teenage mothers acknowledged the fact that motherhood has made them vulnerable, they focused on things that would make them better. They described themselves as evergreen leaves that will continue to strive for better things in life. These teenage mothers were ready to bounce back, cope and adapt to the situation to improve their lives. They did not feel defeated by their situations and were ready to fight to succeed in life. Issues of such nature have been documented by Ntinda, Thwala, and Dlamini (2016) that teenage mothers are determined to add value to themselves. Also, this finding confirms a study that concluded that teenage mothers thrive to succeed by developing themselves positively in their present situations and the future (Seamark & Lings, 2004).

Living responsibly had not been the norm for some but after bearing children, some of the teenage mothers saw the occurrence as a turning point in their lives. Some of the teenage mothers admitted that motherhood has been a stepping stone for achieving greater things in life. Others also said that motherhood has led to positive behavioural changes in their lives. A similar study indicated that teenage motherhood was the catalyst for positive change as they shared stories of growing up, becoming more independent and responsible after becoming mothers (Brand et al., 2016). Likewise, other studies also indicated that teenage motherhood marks the beginning of an important phase of life, one marked by responsible behaviour, care, love, and courage (Dlamini, 2016).

Finally, a section of the group of teenage mothers saw motherhood as an opportunity to aspiring for a brighter future. They were facilitating the process of reaching this bright future by resuming school, farming, apprenticeship, planting for others, and many more. In this regard, a study by Rosario et al. (2016) asserts that, given the overwhelming challenges of motherhood responsibilities and financial limitations, teenage mothers’ dreams of a bright future may not be realized, without strong support from families, schools, and the government.

**Conclusion**

Teenage mothers have different views on how they have experienced motherhood. Through photovoice and narrative methodologies, this study has unravelled some lived experiences of teenage mothers in the Adaklu District of the Volta Region, Ghana. Their views revolved around
instrumental, and communicative learning lived experiences. Although they have different views about their experiences, it is obvious that most teenage mothers saw motherhood as challenging but they strive to be more resilient. They demonstrate the phase of transformation by returning to school, learning a new skill, venturing into menial jobs like fetching water for construction works, deshelling groundnuts, and planting for other farmers.

Local authorities could initiate support systems such as policies and programmes (for example, helping to train the teenagers in vocational skills, policies like free healthcare services or free education) that would offer teenage mothers’ better opportunities in life. In addition, the photo­­­­­­voice methodology gave the teenage mothers the voice to express themselves properly. Researchers are encouraged to use this method to empower vulnerable groups like children to share their ideas or lived experiences.

**Strengths and limitations of the study**

This study was appropriated design to explore the lived experiences of teenage mothers, however it has some limitations. The findings cannot be generalized since a small segment of teenage mothers were qualitatively recruited into the study. Although the researchers engaged the teenage mothers in friendly environments to enable them express the views, there might be instance where teenage mothers could have over- or under-expressed their lived experiences. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution. The study has some strengths despite its limitations. The usage of photo­­­­­­voice as a method added much value to the lived experiences of teenage mothers. This enable teenage mothers to explicitly express the views from two instances. Thus the narratives and then supported them with picturesque symbols within their environments. In addition, the study has been able to unearth mix-feelings of teenage mothers that largely indicates that notwithstanding their circumstances they are willing to progress positively in life.

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