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Barriers Faced by Pregnant Learners When Trying To Finish Their Education in Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa

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KEYWORDS Isolation. Stigma. Discrimination. Name calling

ABSTRACT The aim of the study was to determine barriers faced by pregnant learners when trying to finish their education in the Vhembe district of Limpopo Province, South Africa. A qualitative research approach was used to investigate the phenomenon from the learners' perspective. The target population comprised of senior phase pregnant adolescent learners (grade 7 to 9 learners), Focus group interview schedule was used to collect data from the participants. Data was analysed thematically. The findings revealed amongst others the following barriers: stigmatisation and isolation and also name calling. Recommendations were made on Educators to be flexible by providing educational and emotional support in order to remove pregnancy as a barrier to the young girls' education.

INTRODUCTION

Although fertility and motherhood continue to be important factors in the life course of a woman, pregnancy during adolescence is viewed as a major setback in terms of educational and economic aspirations (Panday et al, 2009). Even though teenage pregnancy is often well accepted within the African societies (Jewkes et al, 2001; Zwang & Garenne, 2008), it is sometimes subject to stigma and sanctions (Zwang & Garenne, 2008). Stigma is an aspect of one's identity that is devalued by society (Seacat, 2006). Goffman in Seacat (2006) stated that stigmatised individuals were discredited on the basis of possessing attributes considered to be deviant from the social norms of a society because these attributes are viewed as shortcomings and failings.

Labels ignore the fact that each individual is a whole person with talents and strength` an individual with rights, dignity and preferences that must be respected (Skills for Life, n/d). Pregnant learners are punished, discriminated against and stigmatized (Harrison, 2008; Chigona & Chetty, 2008; Zwang & Garenne, 2008). Social isolation in school (Walton & Cohen, 2007) and stigmatised learners perform poorly scholastically (Walton & Cohen, 2007; Inzlicht, 2011). According to Walton and Cohen (2007), a sense of social connectedness predicts outcomes.

In SA, it is believed that becoming a pregnant learner is an embarrassment that marks an end to childhood and therefore to education (Khumalo, 2011). A growing body of evidence has proved beyond doubt that pregnant learners need support and encouragement to aid their academic performance, failure to obtain support from their school and home environment results in poor academic performance and school dropout (Mpanza, 2006; Hallman & Grant, 2006; Chigona & Chetty, 2008 and Khumalo, 2011). A pregnant learner who is constantly subjected to name calling and labeling is likely to feel less inclined to attend school, which have an adverse effect on their scholastic performance and might choose to avoid school (Basch, 2010). Learners who have a trusting relationship with their educators are able to take advantage of critical feedback and other opportunities to learn. According to Khumalo (2011), pregnant learners drop out of school because of the pressures they experienced, including stigmatization associated with early parenting, isolation from peers and lack of needed support from family, friends and the school environment. Runhare (2010) stated that pregnant learners encountered a lot of abuse in schools ranging from loss of friendship, isolation, mockery, negative labeling, being used as examples of bad behaviour to being given nicknames. Peer rejection has a negative effect on scholastic

performance and can prevent a learner from coming to school while friendship improves grades by making school more enjoyable and worthwhile Spavins, 2007). Spavins (2007:7) states:

“Peer rejection could cause a fear of participating in class or general dread of school, both which will impede academic success.”

Teenage pregnancy often represents a financial burden to young girls and their families, often without support of a partner who may have no interest or ability to acknowledge the child (Harrison, 2008). Teenage pregnancy is seen as a source of shame to the community, where few people were willing to speak about the problem (Khumalo, 2011). Pregnancy and motherhood in teenage girls is also common motives for discrimination in education (Hubbard et al, 2008).

Pregnant learners are subject to particular and insidious shaming and pathologising practices that diminish their sense of self and profoundly affect their chances of success in and beyond school (Shacklock, 2007). A 2002 Fawena and Rundu studies (Hubbard et al, 2008), found shame and stigma to be a problem and male learners and educators harassed, mocked and teased young mothers and referred them as “mother”. When a young girl fell pregnant she is prey to family sanctions to punish her of her immaturity, her lack of respect for the elders and to prevent the recurrence of the pregnancy again (Zwang & Garenne, 2008). Sanctions involve physical punishment, being chased out of the paternal home (Zwang & Garenne, 2008; Runhare, 2010; Khumalo, 2011) or dumped at the door of the boy’s family, (Zwang & Garenne, 2008). While sexual activity is the norm and encouraged among friends, having an early pregnancy is regarded as poor female decorum and subject to severe stigma by family and friends (Zwang & Garenne, 2008; Hubbard et al, 2008; Panday et al, 2009; Khumalo, 2011). Returning to school after delivery is also associated with a variety of stigma (Zwang & Garenne, 2008). Friends may dissociate themselves from the girl and such isolation from peers is perceived negatively by the young woman who may end up blaming or neglecting the child (Zwang & Garenne, 2008). Zwang and Garenne (2008) posit that stigmatization of an early pregnancy may also apply to the whole family as are seen as having failed their duty to teach and control their daughter.

Problem Statement

In their daily lives, adolescents are exposed to mixed and confusing information about sexuality from their peers, media, educators, parents (not common in the African culture for parents to talk

about sex with their children) and religious leaders. They need this information to develop their own sexuality and behaviour. In trying to resolve their confusion, they tend to expose themselves in risk-taking behaviors such as unprotected sex. Unprotected sex may have serious repercussions like unplanned pregnancy which may interfere with their schooling. The reality is that problems associated with the scholastic performance of adolescent pregnant learners may be greater than many realize. Therefore, this study explores the barriers faced by pregnant teenagers when trying to finish school.

Research Question

What are the barriers faced by pregnant learners when trying to finish their education in Vhembe district?

Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to explore and describe the barriers faced by pregnant learners when trying to finish their education in Vhembe district.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:

- Identify the barriers faced by pregnant learners when trying to finish their education in Vhembe district?
- Recommend strategies that could be used to alleviate barriers faced by pregnant learners when trying to finish school

Definition of concepts

Adolescent

Adolescent period covers the age of 10-19 years. This is the period of transition from childhood to adulthood characterized by development of sexual feelings, efforts towards construction of identity (Dangal, 2005). For the purpose of this study, the terms teenage and adolescent are used interchangeably.

Learner pregnancy

Learner pregnancy is pregnancy in a girl who becomes pregnant while still at school aged 10-19 years. For the purpose of this study, the term learner pregnancy, teenage pregnancy and adolescent pregnancy are used interchangeably throughout the study.

High-risk behavior

For the purpose of this study, the term “high risk behavior” refers to unprotected sexual engagement that may result in sexual transmitted diseases including AIDS, and unintended pregnancy.

Scholastic performance

For the purpose of this study, scholastic performance refers to the performance of pregnant learners in relation to attendance, concentration, behavior, assertiveness, motivation and moral support and assessment results.

Significance of the study

In recognizing that teenage pregnancy is a social problem that covers all regions of the SA Provinces, this study may have a vital role to play in: Giving adolescent learners a better understanding of the barriers faced by pregnant when trying to finish school. It might also add knowledge which could help educators in giving these pregnant learners support and the use of inclusive education strategies that can enhance the scholastic performance of pregnant learners.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Research Design

In order to seek illumination, understanding and extrapolation of similar situations to understand phenomena in context specific settings, a qualitative research strategy was deemed the most suitable for this study. Using qualitative approach, gave researchers a leeway to explore the intricate aspects of meaning attribution. In this study, it relates to the ways in which pregnancy can hamper the scholastic performance of pregnant learners through the perceptions of their educators. (Babbie & Moutton, 2006:270)

Context of the study

In this study, barriers faced by pregnant learners when trying to finish their education were explored amongst teenagers in Vhembe district of Limpopo Province. Limpopo Province is

divided into five districts, namely Mopani, Vhembe, Capricon, Waterberg and Sekhukhune. Vhembe is found in the far Northern side of South Africa, bordered by Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

Study Sample.

The target population for this study was all senior phase pregnant adolescent learners (grade 7 to 9 learners) in the Vhembe District of Limpopo. Purposive sampling was used, with a sample size of 15 pregnant learners drawn from 1 rural primary and 2 secondary schools in the Vhembe district, Vhumbedzi Circuit (Limpopo Province of South Africa). Focus group interview schedule was used to collect data from the participants. A series of verbal questions were posed to the participants in a face to face situation such that the participants were able to share many features on their everyday lives that include the barriers they face in school.

Data collection methods

Focus group interview schedule with structured open ended questions was utilized. Focus group data were recorded verbatim using a tape recorder and the assistant moderator tried to capture exact phrases and statements made by participants when taking notes. Careful consideration was taken to maintain control in conducting the group interview to ensure that notes taking should not interfere with the discussion. It was important for me to make sure that notes were complete and usable in the event the tape recorder stopped working. Furthermore, control was maintained to ensure that there was no dominant group or individuals and at the same time I tried to play a neutral role. As indicated by New York State Teacher Center (2008), it is important to use information recording technique that: capture all of the essential information, collect information in an unbiased manner, put statements made during the focus group into proper context and try to capture nonverbal behavior of group participants.

Data Analysis

Data from the focus group was transcribed verbatim from the tape recording, then translated from Tshivenda to English by a language practitioner, analysed and discussed to identify sub categories, categories and key themes. Analysis was done guided by eight steps of Techs open coding method (Cresswell 2009:193)

Ethical Considerations

In this study, human beings were used as subjects. Whenever human beings are the focus of the investigation, ethical implications must be looked closely (Leedy, 2006). For the purpose of this study, the following ethics were taken into consideration : Permission to conduct research was sought from The Department of Education in the Limpopo Province, parents and the principals of the schools. Participants in this study were involved on an entirely voluntary basis and their anonymity was assured. Protection from harm: The participants were not exposed to undue physical or psychological harm meaning that there was no risk of losing life, limb or would they be subjected to stress, embarrassment and loss of self-esteem. The participants were informed of the nature of the study to be conducted and be given choice of either participating or not participating. Participants were requested to fill in the consent form to confirm their willingness to participate in the research. Participants' right to privacy were respected. No names or any form of identification was used. Anonymity of the information gathered was upheld.

Trustworthiness of data

In this enquiry, credibility was addressed by utilizing member checks and peer debriefing. Member checks involve the researcher seeking verification with the respondent groups about the constructions that are developing as a result of data collected and analysed (Mertens, 2010: 257). At the end of the focus group interview, I summarised what has been said and asked if the notes accurately reflect the learners' views and drafts of the research report was shared with the educators for comment. The issue of transferability was also taken into consideration. Guba and Lincoln in Mertens (2010: 259), discussed the term transferability as the parallel concept that enables readers of the research to make judgments based on similarities and differences when comparing the research situation with their own. In this study, I provided sufficient detail to enable the reader to make such judgment. Extensive and careful description of time, place and context were given and thus, the finding of this study could be transferred and generalised to similar situations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Two themes emerged from the analysed data as follows:

- **Stigmatisation and isolation**

Pregnant learners face negative social stigmatization associated with teenage pregnancy. Recent research provide compelling evidence for establishing that stigmatisation can give rise to belonging uncertainty – the need for social belonging, for seeing oneself as socially connected is a basic human motivation(Runhare,2010).

In our society, teenage pregnancy is seen in a negative light. Pregnant learners are treated as outcasts, negatively perceived as ill-mannered and also those who were badly brought up in single-parent families. These negative attitudes have a profound effect on pregnant learners to engage actively in learning and in turn, this has an adverse effect on their scholastic performance. Learners look up to their educators as role models and for their guidance. It is very hard for the pregnant learner to be ridiculed in front of other learners by their educators. When educators make jokes about their learners, it shows that pregnant learners who choose to remain in school are in the school environment that is not supportive and does not motivate them to perform well scholastically.

Similar accounts were made by Masimbe (2010), who expressed that more schoolgirls were coming home with babies at the end of the year instead of school progress reports. This is also supported by Runhare (2010) who found that mainstreaming of pregnant learners was seen as rewarding anti-social behaviour. Community members made comments that pregnant learners caused school indiscipline, increased rate of pregnant learners and generally lowered educational standards of schools where they were enrolled.

Pregnant learners were rejected by their peers. In our view, pregnant learners might feel alienated by their friends and might feel afraid to participate in class for fear of being ridiculed. A further possibility is that a pregnant learner who is rejected might withdraw from coming to school. There is a myth that if one sits on a desk next to a pregnant learner, one will fall asleep, in this study it was also argued that non-pregnant used that myth to discriminate against pregnant learners

Evidence is complementary to previous research showing that peer rejection could cause fear of participating in class or general dread of school, both which would impede academic success (Spavins, 2007). Spavins (2007) went further and concluded that friendship improves grades by making school more enjoyable and worthwhile.

Another theme that emerged was that pregnant learners also isolated themselves and see themselves as outcasts. Participants indicated that they were afraid to mingle with other learners during breaks. The way they wore their uniform trying to disguise the pregnancy also make them look odd amongst other learners.

Isolation by parents was another sub-theme that emerged. Parents of pregnant learners may reject them because they feel frustrated angry and disappointed. This might cause a teenager to withdraw from her parents as she feels ashamed and guilty. The overwhelming feelings of guilt have a profound impact on their scholastic performance.

- **Name calling**

Pregnant learners were subjected to name calling such as bad girls, mothers, parents , prostitutes and were labelled as loose and immoral and ill-disciplined by their educators and fellow learners. These learners are seen as young people who have discarded their traditional norms which prescribes what is and what is not permissible in terms of sex before marriage. A pregnant learner who is constantly subjected to name calling and labelling is likely to feel inclined to attend school. Therefore, they may lack motivation and ability to learn and this can have an adverse effect on their scholastic performance.

Evidence is in line with recent research that labelling ignores the fact that each individual is a whole person with talents and strength, an individual with rights, dignity and preferences that must be respected (Skills for life n/d). Past researches support this finding. Runhare (2010) found that negative labels and hate language directed at pregnant and former pregnant learners were expressed at the community, family and at school level.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it is evident that barriers faced by learners will continue to hinder the scholastic performance of pregnant learners if no proactive measures are taken. The findings are significant especially in South Africa where teenage pregnancy is in the rise and recommendations are essential in guiding on how to support pregnant learners in schools. If support is given to pregnant learners, their educational attainment would improve tremendously.

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