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“It is not good for a pregnant person and it has never been and it will never be”: Experiences of parents whose daughters became pregnant while attending secondary schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of parents whose daughters became pregnant while still attending school in Limpopo province of South Africa, using a qualitative and explorative approach. A purposive sample of five parents was interviewed. Data analysis using Tesch's open coding technique yielded six themes on discovery of pregnancy, continuation of school, dilemmas of attending school, social support, impact on school performance and interaction between parents and teachers. Parents are satisfied with support from teachers, but need to see the implementation of school health services. A model to facilitate social support for pregnant learners is recommended.

Keywords: Learner pregnancy, social support, school health, facilitation, parental supervision.

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Introduction

It is a norm in South Africa and most African countries for parents and other relatives to provide social support to family members who are pregnant and breastfeeding. Pregnant and breastfeeding teenagers need this social support more than adults as teenagers experience more psychosocial strain when pregnant and breastfeeding than adults (Yeboah, 2012; Ekefre, Ekanem & Ekpenyong, 2014; Kheswa & Pitso, 2014). Pregnancy among teenage learners is a challenge to education stakeholders in South Africa (Naong, 2011). The number of pregnant learners who continue to attend school has increased in South Africa since the implementation of the inclusive education by schools as required by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1993 and the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Runhare & Vandeyar, 2011; Mashishi & Makoelle, 2014). Pregnant teenage learners, however, continue to experience stigma and discrimination when they continue to attend school and

these problems contribute to their psychosocial distress (Chigona & Chetty, 2008).

The aim of this study was to describe the experiences of parents whose daughters became pregnant while attending secondary schools in Limpopo province of South Africa. A parent in this study refers to the biological mother or father, a caregiver or guardian of a learner and to any person legally entitled custody of a learner (South Africa, 1996). The study was conducted in the context that parents are obliged by the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 to support their children by participating in their education through communicating with schools their children attend (Shumba, Rembe & Pumla, 2014).

Methodology

Research design

A qualitative, explorative, descriptive and contextual research method was used. The qualitative research method was appropriate as it allowed the researcher to explore and describe the experiences of parents whose teenage daughters became pregnant while attending secondary school in order to understand how their pregnant daughters were given social support.

Population and sampling

The target population was parents of pregnant teenage learners. Parents who had first-hand experience with learner pregnancy as suggested by Streubert and Carpenter (2011) and Liamputtong (2013) were purposively selected using the following criteria: 1) daughter was pregnant at the time of data collection or has given birth already, 2) willingness to participate by sharing experiences of having had a pregnant daughter as a learner and 3) able to communicate in English. The researcher identified parents during the interviews held with pregnant learners (Matlala, Nolte & Temane, 2014a). At the conclusion of each interview with pregnant learners, the researcher requested each learner to request her parents to participate in the study. The researcher requested cell phone numbers of parents from their daughters and after about two to five days contacted the parents to recruit them into the study.

Five parents participated voluntarily in the study and the number was limited by saturation of data. Four of the parents were females while only one was male. All the parents were Black South Africans having Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) as a home language and could speak English. Thus, all the interviews were conducted in English. Two of the parents were permanently employed in the public service while the other three were holding contract and temporary posts in the private sector. All the parents were biological parents of pregnant learners.

Study setting

The study was conducted in Limpopo province of South Africa. Limpopo province is facing a challenge of having the highest number of pregnant learners in South Africa (Maphoti, Tladi & Kgole, 2014; Matlala, Nolte & Temane, 2014a, b). In 2010, the province had the highest number of pregnant learners followed by KwaZulu-Natal province while in 2009, Limpopo province had the second highest number as compared to other provinces in the country (Department of Basic Education, 2011; Department of Basic Education, 2012). Four interviews were conducted in the Capricorn district while one was conducted in the Sekhukhune district of Limpopo province.

Ethical consideration

The ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the Department of Health Studies at the University of South Africa. All parents participated voluntarily and gave informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by explaining to participants the importance of not mentioning the names of their daughters, the names of the schools and those of the teachers so that data could not be linked to specific participants.

Data collection

Data was collected in July 2013 by conducting semi-structured interviews each of which lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The researcher asked participants to clarify and elaborate on some of the answers given, and as May (2011) puts it “enter into a dialog with the interviewee”. The following two central questions were asked followed by probing questions which were guided by each participant’s response: 1) what are your experiences of having a pregnant daughter attending school?, and 2) what can be done to facilitate social support for pregnant learners attending schools?

All semi-structured interviews were audio-taped using a voice recorder with the permission of participants. Grove, Burns and Gray (2013) recommend that semi-structured interviews should be conducted at a quiet place which is safe and convenient to participants. As such, two interviews were conducted at participants’ places of work with one during lunch time and the other just before leaving the office at the end of the working day, two in their homes and one at a convenient place outside the home as the participant was attending a social function in the village.

Data analysis

The author transcribed all interview recordings verbatim and used Tesch's open coding process described in Creswell (2014) to analyse the transcripts and requested a colleague to independently confirm the transcripts and the codes. The codes and transcripts were then sent to an independent coder and a meeting was held to reach agreement between the author and the independent coder.

Trustworthiness

Credibility, dependability, transferability and objectivity were used as strategies to establish trustworthiness of the study (Mabuza, Govender, Ogunbanjo & Mash, 2014).

Results and Discussion

The findings are presented and discussed in five themes which are: identifying the daughter was pregnant, pregnant daughter continuing to attend school, provision of social support, interaction with teachers and progress with school work.

Identifying the daughter was pregnant

Some parents discovered on their own that their daughters were pregnant while others were told directly by their daughters. The reactions of parents following the discoveries were of disappointment, shock accompanied by fear, acceptance as well as refusal to get involved in the education and health needs of their daughters anymore. Some parents wanted to inform the teachers about the pregnancy of their daughters, but some of them were informed by their daughters that teachers were already aware, while some went to the schools to inform the teachers themselves.

This is what one parent said, *"I discovered on my own that my daughter is pregnant, I discovered one day that she has silver stripes, these days pregnancy is not easily visible because kids can cover themselves, so one day I saw her in passing that she has silver stripes and I confronted her. I asked her how she at 19 years can have silver stripes when I, her mother, don't have them at 47 years. She tried to explain but I could see that she was pregnant. I realised that she was pregnant and then I started to feel disappointment realising that her exam results are going to be bad."*

Another parent said, *"Ok, for the first time, the day I realised that she is, that my daughter is pregnant I was like shocked and scared, and what I did, I went to the school and speak to the principal"*. Another stated, *"She told me directly during*

the second month, I then said there is no problem; a child who stumbles should not be killed. So I told her that she is not the first to fall pregnant while attending school and that she should not do abortion”.

The findings are similar to those of Mpanza and Nzima (2010) who also found that pregnant learners did not disclose their pregnancies to their parents. Some pregnant learners in the study could not inform their parents that they were pregnant as according to Soon et al. (2013), there are sociocultural barriers that prevent teenagers in South Africa to communicate with their parents about sexual and reproductive health (SRH) issues. The findings are further supported by Kennedy, Bulu, Harris, Humphreys, Malverus and Gray (2014) that cultural taboos make it difficult for teenage girls in the South Pacific region to discuss SRH issues with their parents. Parental judgement and intimidation as well as immaturity are some of the obstacles to parent-child communication in families which is necessary to promote health (Meschke & Juang, 2014). The finding that few mothers in South Africa communicate with their children about SRH (Leser & Francis, 2014) could explain the finding in this study that some parents were told by their pregnant daughters that they were pregnant.

Pregnant daughter continuing to attend school

Some parents wanted their pregnant daughters to continue attending school while others wanted them to drop out. A parent who wanted her daughter to continue attending school said: *“What I was interested in was to see her attending school and not dropping out”*. Another said: *“I told her that she has to continue attending school and continue with school activities like other learners, not to change her approach to schooling just because of being pregnant.”*

Another parent who wanted pregnant learners to continue attending school suggested that pregnant learners be separated from other learners who are not pregnant by means of having a special school for pregnant learners as a way to show disapproval of their behaviour by saying this: *“these days many learners are pregnant, so if they have their own school the community will see that this side we have learners who are virgins while that other side we have learners who are parents already”*.

All learners in South Africa, including those who are pregnant, have a constitutional right to education (South Africa, 1996) and parents are aware of this right (Vandeyar, Runhare, Dzimirri & Mulaudzi, 2014) as one parent said *“They cannot be expelled, these day our government says young girls should be educated. Let them go on with school”*. The suggestion to isolate pregnant learners could be due to the fact that some communities in South Africa frame teenage pregnancy as a moral problem; as such it is shamed and punished (Bhana, Morrell, Shefer & Ngabaza, 2010). Another reason could be that teenage

pregnancy is stigmatised because these pregnancies occur outside of marriage in societies which still regard marriage as the only institution within which sexual intercourse, pregnancy and childbearing should occur (Yeboah, 2012; Ekefre et al., 2014; Mashishi & Makoelle, 2014).

Some parents felt that pregnant learners should drop out of school as a way to punish them, to protect them from harm and to protect other learners from the bad influences of pregnant learners. A parent said: *“I am saying when a learner falls pregnant she should be disciplined by saying she must stay home. Otherwise she will know that even if I fall pregnant I will continue with schooling, fall pregnant again and even get child support grant. So they (school management) should stop them from attending school and make them stay at home... they will come back once they have delivered”*. Another stated: *“She did not pass the exams and the following year she wanted to go back to school and I refused because she was still pregnant”*. A parent who felt pregnant learners would influence other learners negatively said: *“When a learner is pregnant at school she becomes a bad influence on other learners; a pregnant learner should not go to school”*.

A parent who felt pregnant learners should be prevented from continuing to attend school to protect them from harm indicated: *“immediately when you realise that your child is pregnant as a parent you must just stop because it is going to be a difficult situation at school, for her to be on a safer place she must just remain at home, until she delivers and then stay at home the rest of that year”*.

Similarly, Shefer, Bhana, Morrel, Manzini and Masuku (2012) found that teachers in selected KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape schools were concerned about the health and safety of pregnant learners who continued to attend school and as such the teachers expelled pregnant learners as soon as their pregnancies were visible. According to Ngabaza and Shafer (2013), a Department of Education in one province of South Africa states that parents of pregnant learners must enter into written agreements with schools where their daughters are attending that pregnant learners attend schools at their own risk. These written agreements indemnify schools against any pregnancy related injuries or accidents that pregnant learners may get while at school. Ngabaza and Shefer (2013) then suggest that parents should discuss with teachers the continuation of schooling by pregnant learners, taking into account the opinion of nurses and doctors regarding the health and safety of these pregnant learners. The health and safety concerns of parents in this study are supported by Benelam (2011) who found that physiological changes occur in the body during pregnancy and these changes result in laxity and hypermobility of joints which make them prone to injuries.

Some parents were concerned about the ability of teachers to identify and manage complications related to pregnancy and the possibility of labour occurring during school hours; as such, they felt uneasy when their pregnant daughters were at school. One parent said: *“I did not feel comfortable wherever I was as I was afraid something might happen to her while at school. I was always unsettled wherever I was. As a parent you feel unsettled, you ask yourself about the distance from school to the home, you are worried, worried, always worried that something can happen.”*

Dilemmas related to pregnant learners

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2010) defines dilemma as a problematic situation in which a person has to make a very difficult choice between things of equal importance. If pregnant learners continue attending school they will complete their schooling, but at the same time it holds health risks for them and creates a burden to teachers. If on the other hand they stay at home, the health risks are less and teachers are relieved of the burden, but the learning of pregnant learners is fragmented. Secondary school learners are teenagers and studies by Lopoo (2011) and James, Van Rooyen and Strümpher (2012) indicate that pregnancy in a teenager is classified as a high risk condition.

Allowing pregnant learners to continue attending school was seen by some parents as putting additional workload on the teachers. A parent stated: *“When one is pregnant, there are some complications, and so it is to give the school a burden. We are burdening the schools with our pregnant children. The first stages are dangerous... dizziness, vomiting, and all such things. Another parent who felt that it was both unsafe and a burden to teachers said: “It (the school environment) is not good for a pregnant person... and it has never been and it will never be. In some cases the baby turns or something can break and then blood flows at school...and then it becomes a mess. It is not the teachers’ duties to take care of such things, they are taught to be teachers to teach children to read and write and understand what the school is teaching them, not to be pregnant”.*

Another parent described her experiences of the time her school-going daughter was pregnant this way: *“it was difficult for the teachers as well maybe... to have such a child in a school because somewhere somehow that child sometimes she is moody, today she is happy, tomorrow she is moody, you don’t even know exactly what to tell her or to say to her”.* Vandeyar et al. (2014) concur with the findings of the current study that the presence of pregnant learners at school creates a burden to teachers by quoting a participant in their study who said that pregnant learners created a burden to teachers and should therefore be expelled from school.

Progress with school work

Some of the parents who allowed their pregnant daughters to continue attending school indicated a concern about the impact of pregnancy on the school progress of their pregnant daughters. A parent concerned about the impact of pregnancy on her daughter's school progress stated: *"That pregnancy is affecting her studies because she is tired most of the time."* Another added by saying: *"it happens while we were expecting that she will progress with education; she does not focus anymore in class as she now focuses on her pregnancy. I feel disappointment realising that her exam results are going to be bad. She was just lazy with everything she was doing."*

The findings of this study are supported by a study conducted in KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape provinces amongst secondary schools by Clowes, D'Amand and Nkanu (2012) which found that teachers raised concerns about the poor academic performance of pregnant learners which would affect the Grade 12 pass rates of their schools. Pregnant learners, according to the above study, are reported to be performing poorly because they fell asleep in class, took time off to attend antenatal clinics and to deliver their babies while there were no sufficient measures to help them catch-up. Vandeyar et al. (2014) concur by revealing that pregnant learners "cannot fully concentrate on their academic work because of psycho-social instability that include feeling ashamed, embarrassed, burdened, isolated, self-incapacitated, hopeless, confused, unconcerned and discouraged at school". Ramathuba (2013) further concurs with the findings of the current study by quoting a pregnant learner who participated in a study and said: *"You are always tired and make others sleep at school."*

Provision of social support

Mattson and Hall (2011) define social support as an exchange or interaction between people involving verbal and nonverbal communicative process that aims to improve an individual's feelings of coping, competence, belonging and esteem. They point out that social support has the following types: emotional support, esteem support, network support, tangible support and information support. In this paper social support is discussed as access to healthcare services, emotional support, and supervision.

Emotional support

A parent who was satisfied about the support that educators gave to her daughter during the time she was pregnant said: *"I cannot say she was treated badly; she was having a lot of support from most of the teachers, my understanding on that is because they are also parents like me."* Another parent said this about a particular educator who supported her daughter during pregnancy: *"When that*

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teacher does not see my daughter at school for some days she will call me, when she doesn't see her for about two days she will call me and ask where my daughter was".

Access to healthcare services

Parents mentioned that their pregnant daughters had access to healthcare services and this is what one said: *"if she has problems I would rush her to the hospital even if it was at night so that the following day she can attend school without having problems, and if she is admitted in hospital I need to ensure that she gets a letter that I can take to the school"*. Another said: *"she would ask for permission and they did not have problems, she would just ask them permission to go for treatment and treatment is usually once a month. It was not a problem"*. A parent indicated that teachers were supportive to her daughter by assisting her to catch-up with the lessons she missed while attending antenatal clinic by saying: *"when she missed classes due to going to the clinic they would tell her what lessons she had missed and assist her to catch-up"*.

Some parents felt that access to healthcare could be improved if pregnant learners were attended to by health professionals at their schools instead of attending antenatal clinics outside the school. Mohlabi, Van Aswegen and Mokwena (2010) found that school health services have collapsed in many provinces of South Africa. As such, the needs of parents in the current study for the revival of school health services are genuine.

A parent who supported the need for onsite healthcare indicated: *"maybe they (school management) can invite some of the nurses during the week. They know that those kids are too small so if maybe the nurses are invited to the school they will be able to see when these girls will be in labour... so I think the best way is to invite the nurses to schools maybe once a week to come and check how far she is. So the nurse will check and give the girls days to stay at home, maybe 5 days before she can give birth, she can stay at home or be sent to hospital"*. Another who shared the same sentiments said: *"they should get a doctor at every school; each school should have a doctor's office for checking...now that they allow these learners to continue attending school, every school should have a doctor, a doctor and may be a nurse to assist the doctor as well to guard against such things."* Another added: *"There should be a nurse and a clinic or else when a learner is pregnant she should drop out of school and stay at home"*.

Supervision by family members

This category discusses the role of parents and other adult family members in ensuring that pregnant learners attain health as they continue with their school attendance. Supervision means to be in charge of something and make sure that

everything is done correctly and safely (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010).

A parent related how the school told her to supervise her pregnant daughter this way: *"what they did was only to call me and inform me that when she is seven months you must come and be with your daughter in school. You must be there until she finishes and you go with her because when she is sick we can't do anything, we are not doctors and nurses here in school. And then I started to send her sister to go with her to school at seven months, because her sister has completed high school, she would sit outside the classroom until they finish, and she would be with her during break and come back home with her afterschool. It went on like that until she goes into labour, labour pains started on a weekend and schools were about to close."* Another said: *"that teacher told my daughter that there is going to be a period when your parents are going to be expected to accompany you to school as there are no nurses and doctors at the school who will attend to you when you have pregnancy related complications"*.

Some parents agreed with the schools' expectations of parental supervision while others disagreed. A parent who agreed with that expectation said: *"the adult person accompanying her should be the one to attend to her and clean up the mess and take her to where they keep sick learners and ultimately call the ambulance. I agree with this practice."* Another said: *"I felt comfortable because her sister is older and she had a cell phone which I loaded with airtime and I told her that she should call the ambulance as soon as she hears her complaining of pains because I too would call the ambulance if I was with her. I am not a doctor; even if she was with me I would still call an ambulance when she starts to report pains."*

A parent who disagreed with the expectation of the school for the parents to supervise their pregnant daughters during school hours said: *"That practice is not good where they say a parent should accompany her daughter to school, the parent has many other things to do, and even if she is unemployed she has a lot of other things to do in the house. There should be a nurse and a clinic or else when a learner is pregnant she should drop out of school and stay at home"*.

Maputle, Lebesse and Khoza (2015) indicate that parents who accompany their pregnant daughters to school for the purpose of supervision experience social and economic hardships. Other parents who were opposed to the expectation by the schools for parents to supervise their pregnant daughters during school hours felt the responsibility to supervise pregnant learners should be given to female teachers. A parent said: *"a teacher can take care like a nurse"*. Another parent who felt female teachers should use their experience of being mothers said: *"teachers are parents, so maybe somehow they can help her. I think if they see any problem I think they can help her and after that they can contact me."*

Accommodation without unfair discrimination

Accommodation without unfair discrimination is a form of social support in which some schools made arrangements that pregnant learners be treated differently from other learners who were not pregnant, but such treatment would not disadvantage the pregnant learners. Some parents in the study indicated that schools accommodated their pregnant daughters without unfairly discriminating against them.

One parent said: *“No, they did not say to her you are a learner just like other learners. When she missed classes due to going to the clinic they would tell her what lessons she has missed and assist her to catch-up”*. Another parent indicated that the school treated her daughter like other learners who were not pregnant. The parent said: *“I never heard her complaining that they ever hurt her, she was being taught like other learners, she was not special, she was not being discriminated against, and she was just like other learners in the class. Teachers were just doing their role of teaching learners. She never complained to me about anything related to the school”*.

Another parent shared her experiences of how her pregnant daughter was accommodated after missing some examination papers due to giving birth this way: *“Friday morning I went to school and told the principal that I came to request that my daughter be allowed to continue with examination on the remaining subjects. Then the principal said he will call the examination committee and will explain to the committee that the child’s parent came and so forth and so forth.... I waited at the school and the principal called the exam committee, they discussed and did not have a problem with the request. The principal came back to me and informed me that the committee said she can continue with the exam. He asked when will she be able to come and I said she will come next week Tuesday”*.

Interaction with teachers

Some parents experienced positive interaction with teachers while others experienced negative interaction. Some parents felt that they had a joint responsibility with teachers to support pregnant learners. Thus, they initiated the interaction process while others waited for the teachers to initiate the process. Parents related their experiences of interaction with teachers in various ways. A parent who initiated interaction with teachers said: *“I went to inform her LO (Life Orientation) teacher. Another said: “what I did, I went to the school and speak to the principal and what the principal said to me was that I cannot say this child mustn’t come to school but the only thing that you can do as a parent, you must make sure that on the last month this child mustn’t come to school”*. A parent who felt that teachers should initiate interaction with parents said: *“I*

never went to talk to them (teachers); I waited for them to talk to me because it is this daughter who is at school and interacting with the teachers”.

Some parents experienced negative interaction with teachers relating to their pregnant daughters who continued to attend school. This is how a parent related her experience: *“At school they did not say anything. They don’t talk to parents, they don’t communicate with us. When my child was pregnant, the school never said anything to me. The problem with schools is that they don’t tell us parents anything about our children; it is as if they say parents will see what to do”.* Another parent did not interact with teachers about her pregnant daughter as she felt that her daughter should take responsibility for her own pregnancy. This is what she said: *“I did not bother to go to see her teachers at school as I said to her that she decided she wanted to be a parent so she had to fulfil that role. I told myself that she now has a child and feels she is an adult so I let her handle everything herself related to going back to school. I actually gave her a test: if you are serious about going back to school you have to go and talk to the principal alone but if you are not you can remain here at home”.*

Recommendations

It is recommended that school health services be implemented to support the increasing number of pregnant learners in secondary schools. Parents should interact with teachers to support pregnant learners so that learners can attain education and give birth to healthy babies. School health nurses should be appointed to facilitate social support for pregnant learners by coordinating the activities of all health and education stakeholders. A model to facilitate social support to pregnant learners, driven by a school health nurse will assist to address the challenge of pregnant teenage learners in South Africa.

Conclusion

The study revealed that some parents discovered on their own that their school-going daughters were pregnant while others were told directly by their daughters. Some parents found it necessary to notify and interact with teachers about their pregnant daughters while others did not find it necessary. Not all parents felt that pregnant learners should be allowed to continue attending school as others felt they should be expelled to punish them, protect them against harm and to protect other learners who were not pregnant against the negative influence of pregnant learners. Parents were requested by the teachers to accompany their pregnant daughters to school and some parents felt that school health services should be revived to take the role of supporting pregnant learners during school hours. Parents indicated satisfaction with the support given by teachers to pregnant learners.

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