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Pregnant girls and young parents in South African schools

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Abstract

Since the promulgation of the South African Schools Act in 1996, it has become illegal to exclude pregnant girls from school. Influenced by feminist research, policy has sought to assist pregnant girls and young parents to continue and complete their schooling on the understanding that having children often terminates school-going, limiting future employment and work opportunities. This focus seeks to examine how the new policy has been understood and implemented. The authors focus on the views and experiences of principals and teachers, as they are the authorities at school with the responsibility for ensuring that the policy is implemented. The paper draws on qualitative data collected by a larger study on being and becoming a parent at a diverse group of schools in KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape Province. The authors investigate the extent to which schools' responses to pregnancy and parenting reflect and/or reproduce normative gender roles and practices with respect to schooling and parenting in contemporary South Africa. The paper also shows that despite familiar stereotypes about young parents and pregnancy both teachers and principals take their educational responsibilities seriously. They do care and do try to help. But many teachers are judgmental and moralistic, particularly in response to young girls.

Keywords: schools, pregnancy, young parents, teachers, South African Schools Act

Introduction

It has been more than a decade since the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 forbade discrimination in schools on the basis of pregnancy. However, while the law is clear that such learners cannot be turned away from school, it is less clear about how schools should deal with pregnant learners and learner-parents. Emerging out of a larger qualitative research project on the responses to and experiences of pregnancy and parenting in South African schools, this paper focuses on views presented by teachers and principals - the school authorities. These views, we argue, are articulated and negotiated against the backdrop of SASA, the specific social context of schooling and cultural definitions and interpretations of pregnancy and parenting in school.

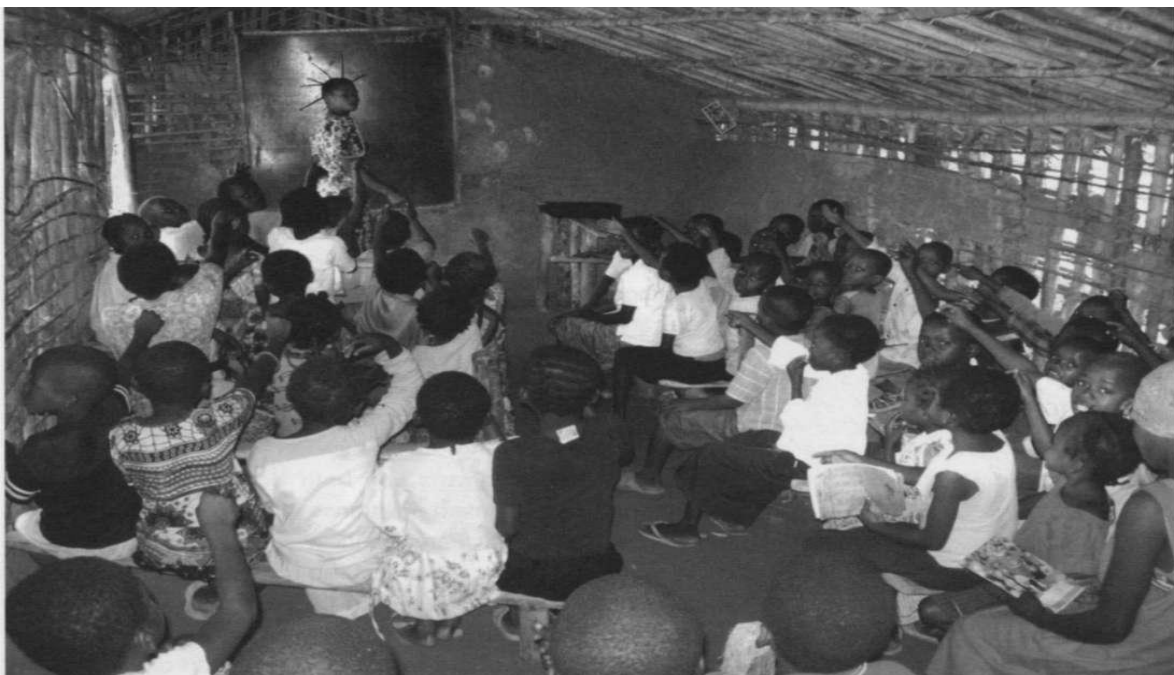
Anecdotal evidence suggests that the law has been unevenly implemented, sometimes because it is not properly understood and sometimes because schools disagree with it. Media coverage suggests that many schools are failing to comply with the Act, despite having had over a decade to develop responses to its provisions (M Makiwane and L Danie, Teen pregnancies slip through sex syllabus gaps', *Cape Times*, 4 Oct 2007; S

Ndlovu, 'Expulsion of '3 pregnant pupils to be investigated', The Mercury, 8 May 2008).

Drawing from interviews conducted with principals and teachers located in selected schools in the Western Cape (WC) and KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), we argue that principals and teachers interact with policy, make meaning of it, reject and negotiate it. The rights to schooling for pregnant girls and learner-parents do not automatically translate into better school access, more positive school experiences or support. Rather, schools' responses to the policy and how they translate it into practice are arguably shaped by the historical and current constructions of pregnancy, parenting and (teenage) sexuality.

Scholars (Kruger, 2006; Macleod, 2003) have illustrated the way in which early pregnancy and parenting have been pathologised by invoking moralistic arguments in which teenage sexuality, indeed any sexuality outside of a marital, nuclear family context is considered deviant and taboo. The missing place of young fathers in this literature is also noted (Richter and Morrell, 2006) with 'differential portrayals of males and females' (Macleod, 2006:34). Also, the 'double standards' highlighted in research on heterosexuality (Shefer, 2003) may result in more acceptance of early male sexuality while female sexuality is responded to in more punitive ways.

This paper explores the ways in which teachers and principals respond to these issues particularly against the backdrop of enabling policy environments that address educational advantage for all learners, including pregnant learners and young parents.



The South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 forbids discrimination in schools on the basis of pregnancy

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Methods

This paper emerges out of a larger project on being and becoming parents in school that included data collection in selected schools in both KZN and the WC. The larger project incorporated both qualitative and quantitative methods and targeted school principals, teachers, male and female learners.

The analysis presented here is based on individual and group interviews with principals and teachers from diverse schools in the two provinces. A total sample of 83 - ten school principals and 73 school teachers (mostly life orientation and guidance counsellors) - were interviewed in KZN and Cape Town schools. The 6' participants from KZN were drawn from two former white schools, two former coloured schools, two former Indian Schools and two township schools.

In Cape Town, the 22 participants were drawn from three former coloured schools and one township school. While schools are no longer racially segregated, all retain some mark of their former raced and classed origins. Former white schools are largely middleclass in ethos and learner population but racially integrated. The former coloured and Indian schools in KZN are home to African, coloured and Indian students, whereas township schools provide exclusively for African, working-class children.

The extent of pregnancy and parenthood among learner populations differs markedly. In township and rural schools, rates of pregnancy and early motherhood appear high, though national figures are dropping (Panday and Makiwane, 2008). Health Systems Trust's (2008) figures for 2006 show that a total of 9.4% of all teenagers have ever been pregnant, while the same figure was '1.9% in 2003.

Of the 9.4% teenage mothers in 2006, '0.2% were African/black, 6.4% coloured and 2.2.% Indian. This means that some schools confront a problem of some magnitude while, for others, teenage pregnancy is an exception or rarity.

Study participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and that their names would not be associated with the data. Instead, pseudonyms for both schools and individuals were used in transcriptions and reporting on results. Participants were further assured that data would be securely stored and that no one but the researchers on the team would have access to them. All participants were fully informed of the aims of the research, participated on the basis of informed consent and signed a consent form.

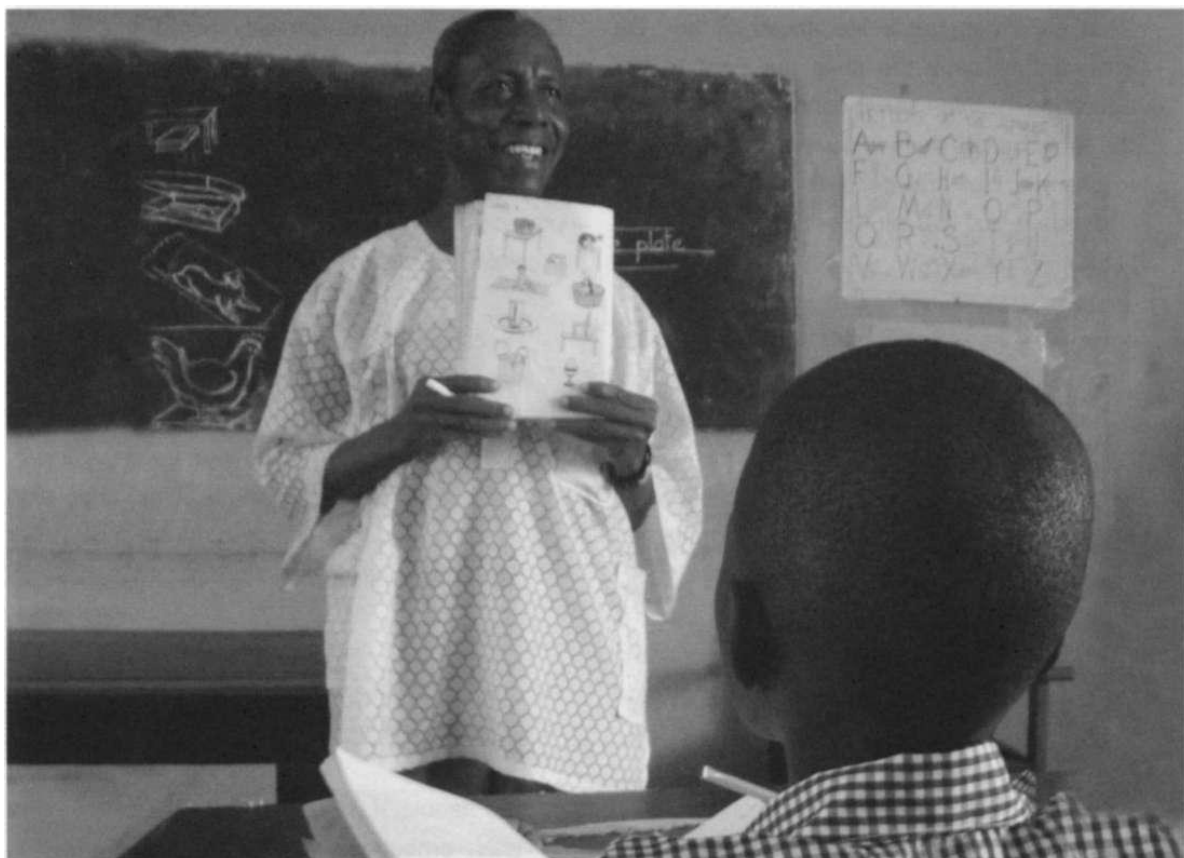
Interviews and group discussions usually lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to guide the interviews. It included a focus on participants' understanding of current policy and legal context of school-going pregnant and parenting learners, their perceptions of how they are meeting these requirements, their attitudes towards and perceptions of pregnant and

learner- parents, their experiences at school and the challenges and difficulties they face.

Principal and teacher's responses

Hostilities: reproducing gender and sexual inequalities

Reflecting the moralities of their own socio- historical contexts, most of those involved in this study were unenthusiastic about admitting and supporting either pregnant or learner-parents in their schools: '[N]one of us really want them at school... if we could say there's a special school for those who are pregnant... they must go there... be taught there and they can all look after their babies there together' (Mrs Gravett, Munster Girls, KZN) If others were less blunt, there was a universal lack of enthusiasm for accommodating pregnant learners in school, with the requirement that they be admitted to school largely understood as a government initiative foisted upon schools.



Most teachers and principals show lack of enthusiasm for accommodating pregnant learners in schools

In KZN, the principal of Nehru High, Mr Naidoo, half-heartedly accepted pregnant learners: 'I don't advise them being at school'. But he reported that others were even less accommodating: 'The one school in the area, the principal turned away these children because they were pregnant'. 'A better route to go,' declared Mr Naidoo, is to 'have the baby, sort out all your problems and come back... the following year'.

Despite this, most principals seemed resigned to the changes embodied in the SASA. As Mr Zondi, principal of Dingiswayo High, KZN, remarked: 'It is not a pleasant thing' but 'we have no option but to accommodate them because the policy says so'. Likewise, Mr Kusa, principal of Lilian Ngoyi, KZN, recalled that during apartheid, pregnant learners were 'chased away' but 'now one has to transform'.

Reflecting similar tensions between continuity and change, teachers drew attention to the ways in which legislative reforms have challenged them to reflect on their own praxis. Acknowledging the gendered and (hetero)sexual inequalities that the SASA aimed to eradicate, teachers observed that:

'That child has got a life ahead of her. Do we want to deny the child the right to her education? ...We cannot continue maintaining the same beliefs that we always had-we need to change, too, and become accommodating and adapt to the situation.' (male teacher, Nehru High, KZN)

Other teachers, however, found it difficult to override their own beliefs around generational hierarchies, reproduction and gender. Discomfort was usually expressed as concern for the welfare of the learner, around the stigma attached to the school and over the 'poor' role modelling pregnant and learner- parents provided or a combination of these.

Teachers found it difficult to override their own beliefs around generational hierarchies, reproduction and gender

A few, like Mrs Zondi at Maputo Secondary (WC), were deeply uncomfortable with the visible evidence of young women's claiming of their heterosexual and reproductive rights: 'I don't think it's wise to have learners being pregnant at school. First and foremost they're supposed to be children. What precedent are they setting?' As Mrs January, principal, Gladstone Secondary, observed, 'teachers have complained to me personally that they do not feel comfortable teaching women as opposed to girls'.

These negative responses were partly manifested in the absence of special policy provisions for pregnant and learner-parents. While Mr Singh explained that ' We don't have a policy because we don't have a major problem with pregnancy' (principal, Gopi High, KZN), others suggested the policy vacuum was connected to understanding challenges facing pregnant learners precisely as problems confronting learners rather than schools.

As Mr Zondi observed, 'we don't have a school policy about them because... we are mainly concerned with normal school going learners' (principal, Dingiswayo High, KZN). In the Western Cape, Mr Willemse similarly noted that in 'our school we don't have a specific policy or written policy' (principal, Southside Senior Secondary, WC).

For pregnant learners, the absence of formal policy translates into transgression of the SASA and practices that continue to undermine young women's access to education relative to young men:

'In cases where they must have contact, they can make appointments with the teacher and in the admin building they have personal inputs-to prevent them from going into the classroom... They can also come when the school population has left and have access to teachers.' (Mr Taliep, principal, Richmond High, WC)

The challenge, reported Mrs Gravett, is not to ensure that pregnant learners obtain equal access to education but to:

handle it so the pregnancy causes the least embarrassment to the other pupils... what we try now is as soon as they are showing too much to wear school uniforms, we put them into civvies and I suggest it that if they want to rest at home they can rest at home, but otherwise they can attend school in civvies.' (principal, Munster Girls, KZN)

At times such measures verged on the punitive, re-inscribing the gendered and sexual inequalities that the SASA (and the Constitution) aimed to challenge:

'We have a sanction in our school policy - always tell the parents about this - if the girl becomes pregnant she is denied access to the Matric farewell, more a preventative strategy than a punitive one. That is because it is a must for children so it's a blackmail equal to prevent pregnancy. So we stick to our word, they will miss the farewell as that is their punishment.' (Mr Taliep, principal, Richmond High, WC)



In many developing settings, becoming a parent marks the end of schooling.

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While this punitive approach is obviously inappropriate, it should be understood in the context of the current policy on HIV prevention of the South African Department of Health, where schools are key sites for prevention messages such as 'Abstain, Be Faithful and Condomise' (Baxen and Breidlid, 2004). Given this, punishing girls who have clearly neither abstained nor practised safe sex makes some sense as an (authoritarian) response to high levels of HIV infection, while simultaneously undermining policies aimed at improving pregnant learners' access to education.

Principals and teachers seemed far more welcoming of learner-parents. The principal of Richmond High in the Western Cape emphasised that he 'focused on getting them back into the school system'. While in his school a pregnant learner must leave, she must also 'return as soon as she is healthy. She must resume her schooling'.

Yet, their attendance presents schools with new sets of apparently undesirable challenges. Even the most accommodating of schools couldn't countenance the presence of babies on school premises, compelling primarily female learner-parents to make individual arrangements for child care:

'We cannot allow you to breastfeed here... we had instances where... some of the family members bring the child to the school and now the mother must breastfeed in front of other children. You know, we try to discourage that kind of practice... So we try to ask parents to make practical arrangements, you know, to bottle-feed the child... in the afternoon, early morning and afternoons. (Mr Willemse, principal, Southside Senior Secondary, WC)

Understanding pregnant learners as requiring medical expertise also underpinned unenthusiastic responses. 'The law is saying that we must keep them at school whilst not making provisions for such children', explained Ms Dube (teacher, Dingiswayo High, KZN). 'We are teachers. We are not nurses. So if they say we must keep them here when... the... child has to go for labour what do we do?'

The principal of Gopi High, Mr Singh, agreed, arguing that '[n]o, we don't provide any services, we don't treat pregnant women as different from any other learner. This is an educational institution and we'd like to treat it as such. It's not a clinic'.

Schools tend to understand pregnancy and parenthood as a personal rather than a social problem

The pathologisation of pregnancy further fuelled these anxieties and reinforced gendered inequalities in access to education: 'If she falls sick, if there are problems... there are no midwives here... a pregnant person is unpredictable. There is no one who would be able to assist you here in school,' said Mr Kusa, principal, Lillian Ngoyi High, KZN. However, as Mr Zondi, principal of Dingiswayo High in KZN argued, 'you can't throw away any person... throw a person into a dustbin because she is pregnant. You know, life goes on and these people must not be thrown away'.

When pregnant learners become mothers, the gendered challenges shift yet again. 'What is lacking,' explained MrGcalecka, 'is that when they are back... we only expect [these young women] to run the race, to continue as if nothing has happened' (principal, Maputo Secondary, WC).

Schools tend to understand pregnancy and parenthood as a personal rather than a social problem. Alongside narratives that stigmatise and pathologise pregnancy, this means that school authorities are neither expected to nor expect themselves to do much more than simply admit pregnant and learner-parents.

School responses to these learners tend to reinforce privileges and inequalities built around gender, with particular experiences mediated by class, race and the strength and flexibility of familial support networks. While signs of change are evident, schools continue to generate fairly hostile environments for pregnant and learner-parents.

Gender, race and class in pregnancy and parenting

Teachers and principals recognised the social context of pregnancy and parenting:

'Mostly, these kids in our schools are victims of the taxi drivers, working fathers... It is very, very rarely that you would have a school boy who has impregnated a school child... most girls fall vulnerable to the taxi drivers because it's the taxi drivers that take them to school.' (Mr Zondi, principal, Dingiswayo High, KZN)

'... the problem starts in our families, our background... in black schools, the majority of learners... are coming from poor backgrounds... There is no educator that is trained... educators have to be trained for that particular task and make sure that the background of our learners is taken into consideration because sometimes they fall pregnant because they are being abused in their homes.' (male teacher, Dingiswayo High, KZN)

In township schools, the spectre of poverty, gender inequalities and the social context through which sexuality is lived (at times through coercion and sexual abuse in homes) are embedded within the sexual and reproductive experiences of many township girls.

Rather than simply targeting pregnant schoolgirls and learner-parents for intense social recrimination, principals and teachers situate the issue within complex networks of social processes through which vulnerability and the position of girls as 'victims' of taxi drivers and sexual abuse is highlighted.

But girls are not simply victims. They are sexual agents and engage in consensual (and coercive) sexual activities with older men. However, such relations are socially embedded and vulnerability to sexual relations with older men and pregnancy must be considered in the context of sexual relations.

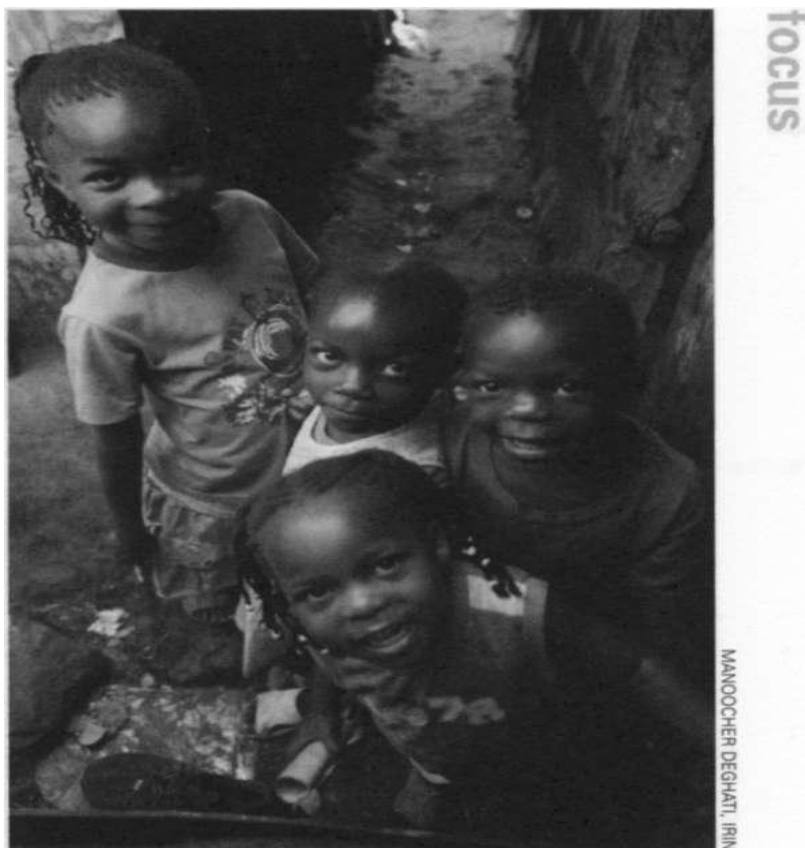
With limited training, teachers are expected to deal with pregnancy and parenting without recognition of the social context of vulnerability:

'There are challenges because these learners are not attending school and they have to take their children to the clinic now and again... if there is no one to look after the child, the mother has to stay at home and look after her child. These are the challenges we face, but particularly absenteeism.' (female teacher, Maputo Secondary, WC)

African schoolgirls are particularly under pressure. In a context of fragmented family structures, where parents are either absent or working and living in urban areas and where schools offer no support for childcare, they bear the burden of baby care and their school work suffers, although not all African school girls experience the same difficulties.

At Lily Girls High, a former white middleclass school, a different view prevailed about African schoolgirls:

'The black girls are far more used to looking after babies and even from a tiny age they have got a baby. But some have a gogo. Gogo doesn't seem to work, so mom and dad are working and, if there is a baby, granny just gets laid with the baby and the child carries on as she likes.' (Mrs Goodson, principal, Lily High School, KZN)



Young women's access to education is often undermined when they fall pregnant

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Drawing on social and cultural interpretations of pregnancy and parenting amongst African girls, Mrs Goodson highlights the prevalence of pregnancy amongst African girls and, in doing so, reproduces racial and cultural stereotypes. The existence of family support structures and gendered traditions of care do, however, provide some African girls with the ability to return to school.

A missing element in much research around pregnancy and parenting in South Africa is that of fathers (Richter and Morrell, 2006). SASA's provisions concerning pregnancy and parenthood are generally understood as referring exclusively to mothers. Fathers are not specifically included in any school practices regarding pregnancy and parenthood and are seldom identified and treated as 'a problem' or an 'inconvenience' in the ways that pregnant girls and young mothers are.

In our study, many fathers remained invisible with both teachers and principals claiming that fathers were out of school and older. Where fathers were acknowledged, the various views remained embedded within gendered notions of responsibilities that both acknowledged and reproduced inequalities. At Lilian Ngoyi, the principal, Mr Kusa, stated that 'most of the time it is the girls... that are affected... whereas the boys are always free, are always free.'

At Nehru High, teachers were particularly scathing of these gender inequalities, with one female teacher stating:

'...the boys getaway... and I don't think that this should happen. I think that the boys should also face the consequences. Normally the boy goes strutting around like a proud peacock - nothing is said about it and society does not look at him as if he has done something bad - all the blame is heaped upon the girl and that is wrong.'

Bringing in fathers and ensuring equality of responsibility was seen to be key in ensuring success for young mothers, as Mr Kusa stated:

'... some fathers just see themselves as the provider. They would provide the finance. They would provide whatever is needed and the mother's task is now obviously to... look after the child until the child sleeps and there are times when she must get on with some homework. I feel that the father should balance his academics and not let the mother's academics suffer, because they both were involved in making the child.'

However, while overwhelming evidence shows that girls suffer disproportionately in being and becoming a parent with greater burden in working class contexts, young fathers suffer, too, remaining peripheral in strategies to embrace parenting and parenting in schools:

'You know what's so sad is that these boys may very well have needs that other learners do not have, but we as teachers do not zero in on this because we feel that it isn't our problem... I had a kid last year who was a father. He worked on weekends to support his kid and he didn't come back to grade 12. He left in grade 11. And he failed grade 11 as well... he seems to have had similar problems as the females.' (female teacher, Fountain Secondary)

At the same school, another female teacher stated:

'... the boy may be experiencing just as much emotional trauma because he has got to provide for the girl... and at times the boys are actually far more traumatised... which forces the boy to go out and get a part-time job... those are the things that we don't really focus on or are aware of... and I think some boys do take it very seriously.'

Mrs Andrews recognises the plight facing young fathers in dealing with a breadwinning status attached to being a father, negotiating the demands of school as well as the cultural pressure to provide in line with the illusory but powerful requirements of fatherhood.

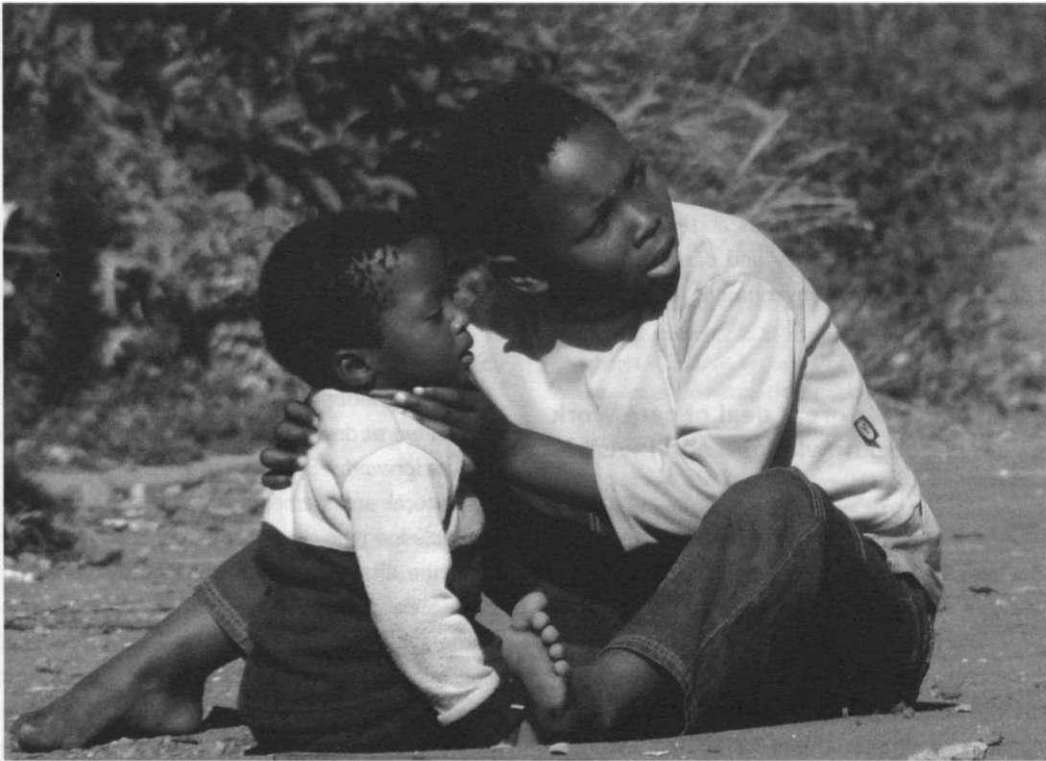
Importantly, while young fathers take fatherhood 'seriously', very few teachers or principals recognise this. Neither do they assist young fathers. Most teachers seem oblivious to the existence and needs of young fathers (unless they have been a young father themselves).

Enabling environments: Ethic of care

Despite the evidence thus far illustrating the negative association with schooling, many teachers and principals affirmed the right of pregnant learners to attend school, citing the significance of education for the wellbeing of the child:

'... there are reasons why policy has changed... human rights comes into play. That child has got a life ahead of her. Do we want to deny the child her right to education? ...My perception has also changed from the days that I was in school. I will now be more understanding and accepting.' (male teacher, Nehru High, KZN)

'I think everybody has a right to education... With the pending motherhood... it is essential that the mother acquires some level of qualification in order to provide for the child.' (female teacher, Vespa Senior Secondary, WC)



Schools understand pregnancy and parenthood as a personal rather than a social problem.

Highlighted here are changing views that draw positively from the new policies that enable the continuation of schooling notwithstanding pregnancy and parenting. Changing policies, the foundation of a human rights discourse emanating from the Constitution, are changing the perceptions of teachers and principals. These changing perceptions are deeply embedded within complex emotions felt in response to cultural definitions of pregnancy and parenting:

'They are close to my heart. It is wonderful to be pregnant. They are spoilt in class, but there are challenges and responsibility. The pain they go through... some are keen to be married and think a wonderful life awaits them, but it might not be. So my heart goes out to them.' (Female teacher, Maputo Secondary, WC)

'I actually pity them. I really pity them just (/) being a mother myself. I know how difficult it is to raise children.' (female Teacher, Southside Secondary, WC)

Importantly, it is female teachers whose identification as mothers as well as knowledge of the 'pain, difficulty, challenges and responsibility' associated with pregnancy and parenting enable a sensitive and caring environment for the girls in their schools.

Female teachers do a great deal of care work which is unacknowledged and invisible

In earlier work, Bhana et al (2006) have argued that despite the extreme demands placed on teachers, female teachers do a great deal of care work which is unacknowledged and invisible. In the context of school girl pregnancy and parenting this is true, too.

At Silver stream, great care was taken to prevent pregnant girls' risk of infection with contagious diseases:

'... when it comes to exam time... we make special provision not to let the learner write in the class, rather one of the offices because... you expose them to other learners who might have contagious diseases like measles or chicken pox... I have to be responsible... for the pregnant learner.' (Mr Willemse, principal, Southside Senior Secondary, WC)

Resuming schooling after pregnancy was supported and showed changing attitudes:

'We encourage them to resume their schooling and I have also changed... Many years ago I used to get very uptight about it, now I am focused on them getting back into the school system. We respond to them in a very supportive way... The parents are surprised that I am so easy with it. I let them know that "I am here to support you and the child throughout". So it's a friendly, supportive response.' (Mr Taliep, principal, Richmond High, WC)

Such supportive responses create an environment that enables young parents to have better experiences:

'... when the parent or the learner or the teacher informs us about the pregnancy, I then give the learner a letter to ask the parents to come in so that we sit down and chat about, you know, the way forward... So we try to ask parents to make practical arrangements around, you know, to bottle-feed the child, that the mother breastfeed in the afternoon, early morning.' (Mr Gcaleka, principal, Maputo Secondary, WC)

Highlighted here is the importance of support not only from the schools but the school's initiative in bringing in the families of learner-parents to address the practicalities of parenting in negotiating academic life. Recognising that dealing with a child is not easy, teachers showed care in respecting the right of learners to parent.

Mr Taliep (principal, Richmond High, WC) drew attention to the physical impact on learners who are mothers, referring to breastfeeding, illness and the ability of the learner-parent to negotiate sleep deprivation as well as the realities of everyday caring with the demands of schooling. He explained that:

'I will give them time to go to the clinic. The child must know who the mother is. I insist that they have as close an interaction with the child as possible. Bearing in mind that they have tests to write... I would like them to deal with the child's needs.'

Combining the child's needs with that of the learner-parent shows the enabling and caring environment that some schools foster.

Conclusion

South Africa has seen, in the South African Schools Act of 1996, a major and significant policy initiative to assist the educational prospects of pregnant girls and young parents. In many developing settings, becoming a parent marks the end of schooling and reduces work opportunities and later life opportunities. Young girls generally suffer the most from school exclusions and prejudice. Young fathers remain largely invisible.

Schools have taken cognisance of the policy initiative without always adhering to its provisions. In addition, they have not always embraced the spirit of the law. Some schools are sympathetic and supportive, but most do not welcome the extra burden of dealing with issues of parenthood amongst learners. They tend to regard pregnancy and parenthood as challenges for individual learners rather than for the schooling system as a whole. This places the burden of pregnancy and parenthood onto the learners themselves and generally onto girls rather than boys. Moreover, schools justify their failure to implement the law by employing gendered moral discourses that perpetuate gender inequalities.

Notes

1 This project is funded by the South Africa-Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD), grant number 05/45. The project is titled 'Children and parents. Children as parents' and Robert Morrell is the principal investigator.

2 In this paper we use these categories as they were used historically by apartheid and as they are still used for purposes of redress. While we eschew the use of such terminology, they still have explanatory value and mostly serve as markers of difference in the contemporary context.

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