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Policy commitments vs. lived realities of young pregnant women and mothers in school, Western Cape, South Africa

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Abstract

Reproductive rights in South Africa continue to be undermined for young women who fall pregnant and become mothers while still at school. Before 1994, exclusionary practices were common and the majority of those who fell pregnant failed to resume their education. With the adoption of new policies in 2007, young pregnant women and mothers are supposed to be supported to complete school successfully. Notwithstanding these new policies, there are incongruities between policy implementation and young women's lived experience in school. This paper explores the experiences of pregnancy and parenting among a group of 15 young women who fell pregnant and became mothers while attending three high schools in Khayelitsha township, a working-class community in the Western Cape of South Africa. Qualitative, in-depth interviews, conducted between 2007 and 2008, highlighted two key areas of concern: continuing exclusionary practices on the part of schools, based on conservative interpretations of policy, and negative and moralistic responses from teachers and peers. Such practices resulted in secrecy and shame about being pregnant, affecting the young women's emotional and physical well-being and their decisions whether to remain in school during pregnancy and return after having the baby. Further attention is required to ensure appropriate implementation of policies aimed at supporting pregnant and parenting young women to complete their education successfully.

Young South African women who become pregnant and parent whilst in school continue to experience negative responses from their schools and communities, who see them as a moral threat.^{1,2} Notwithstanding these popular views, the South African government, through its human rights framework, has undertaken to promote all young people's rights to education through the South African Schools Act 108 (1996),³ including young women who may fall pregnant and decide to parent while at school. The Act, which derives from the South African Constitution, emphasises that educational opportunities must be provided for all learners, abolishing the exclusion of pregnant learners from mainstream learning.

In 2007, the National Department of Education, drawing from the Schools Act, also implemented guidelines on managing pregnant young women in schools.⁴ One of the central guidelines specifies that learners may "request or be required to take leave of absence...to address both pre and postnatal health concerns...No pre-determined period is specified for this purpose since it will depend entirely on the circumstances of each case" and that "learners as parents should exercise full responsibility for parenting and that a period of absence of up to two

years may be necessary for this purpose” but that “learners should not” (p.22)⁴ return in the same year that they left to have the baby. This has been interpreted differently by some schools resulting in exclusionary practices for pregnant young women. Moreover, research shows that many of those who leave school for an extended period do not return; rather, for every year spent at home, there is a higher chance of them not returning and an even higher probability of subsequent pregnancies.^{5,6} The way in which policies related to pregnancy and parenting at school may be misinterpreted, resulting in exclusionary practices, has similarly been illustrated in the United States⁷ and in Namibia.⁸

After a comprehensive South African national report⁶ on pregnancy at school in 2009, the National Department of Education shifted focus to call for prompt resumption of schooling after a baby is born to encourage retention.⁹ Since then, the situation has improved slightly but remains uncertain as many schools continue to lack clarity regarding day-to-day support and management of pregnant learners and mothers.^{10,11} Inconsistencies in policy implementation have not only been associated with misunderstanding of the policy but related also to individual schools’ negative responses to or rejection of the policy and its intentions altogether.¹² Research has shown that while some educators are willing to assist pregnant learners, they are hindered by their own attitudes, lack of skills and clear enough guidance on how to do so.¹³ Schools reportedly continue to engage in exclusionary practices by creating a hostile environment, forcing some pregnant adolescents out of school,^{2,14} thereby denying their constitutional right to education. In this context of unclarity, together with continued moralistic and negative responses to young pregnancy and parenting, young women’s equal right to education may be undermined.

For example, in 2010 a school in Limpopo ordered pregnant girls to leave class during an examination.¹⁵ In another instance in 2012, a pregnant learner was expelled from school just before she sat for her mid-year exams.¹⁶ Further inconsistency with policy was shown in 2012 when the principal of a school insisted that parents remove their daughter from school as soon as her pregnancy was evident, and the young woman was only allowed to resume school the following year resulting in an unnecessary and unwanted loss of school time.¹¹

A number of other provisions to assist young mothers in school are, however, also in place. One is the state social policy which provides a Child Support Grant (CSG) to children in poor households. Initially, the grant catered for children from birth to seven years of age. It was then revised over the years to include children up to 15 years old. Although some scholars consider the Child Support Grant to be a perverse incentive,¹⁷ it does provide a minimal benefit to young mothers in school.

The Life Orientation Programme is assumed to be a further resource in South African schools to support young women and men who are parents. This programme is intended to provide: “guidance, life skills education, health promotion, physical development and movement, environmental education, citizenship and human rights education and religion education” (p.314).¹⁸

Yet, research indicates that pregnant school girls and those with a child continue to encounter fear and discomfort in their interaction with educators^{19,20} and indeed Life Orientation classes have been shown to be a particular site of discomfort and shame for them as they in some instances feel victimized by educators and peers.²⁰

Experiences outside school further undermine the learning experience for young women who get pregnant and parent while in school. In their social circles, in line with social norms and gender power imbalances, the bulk of child care and parenting is placed on young mothers and their families,²¹ which restricts the time they can spend on studying. Further, in their communities and their schools early pregnancy and young motherhood continue to be stigmatised.²² In some cases, this is aggravated by being deserted by their baby's father.²³ In contrast, the presence of family support, financial and practical, plays a key role in shaping a more positive and successful outcome in the experience of school-going mothers.²⁰

The study

This paper reports on some of the findings from an academic study conducted in the Western Cape of South Africa from 2006 to 2010, among a group of young mothers at three secondary schools in an economically disadvantaged community that is perceived to have a high rate of teenage pregnancy. The larger study aimed to document the experiences of this group of learners through their subjective narratives and to assess the extent to which the policy commitments to their learning were being effectively applied. This paper focuses specifically on their descriptions of the responses of their teachers and school authorities, the challenges these posed for their experience of education, and the factors in the school context that continued to undermine the successful implementation of national policy goals, including responses that might undermine their remaining in school and their access to a positive and constructive education.

The study was framed within a feminist, qualitative methodological approach with the aim of challenging gender and other forms of social inequality.²⁴ Fifteen young mothers were drawn which fall within a radius of 2–4 km of each other in the Cape Town metropole. Khayelitsha was convenient and appropriate with respect to issues of access and trust for the researchers, particularly since the first author had been a contract teacher in one of the schools and had previously worked closely with pregnant and parenting learners, which assisted her access to the schools and participants. Convenience and snowball sampling were employed in selecting and recruiting the young mothers. All of them were at the time of the research both in school and parenting at least one child of their own. Their ages ranged from 16 to 20 and their children were aged three months to four years. All of them lived with one or both their parents or another family member at the time of the study (Table 1).

Exploring issues of pregnancy and motherhood is potentially a sensitive area of research, as it is interwoven with women's sexuality and intimate relationships. All appropriate ethical considerations were applied at all stages of the research process. After obtaining permission from the relevant Department of Education to carry out the research in the schools, permission from the schools was obtained. The principals introduced the researchers to the Life

Orientation teachers in all three schools, who assisted in recruiting willing participants. Participation was on the basis of written, informed consent and participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and freedom to withdraw from the study at any point. Three or four life-history interviews were conducted with each participant, focusing on their pregnancy and experience of parenting while in school. Interviews were conducted during school hours at times convenient to each participant. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted on the narratives.

Implementation of the policy in schools

Informed by the national policy framework, the Western Cape Education Department's policy²⁵ on managing learner pregnancy in both general and further education and training institutions emphasises two alternatives which can be pursued by schools. These options appear to imply very different levels of commitment and care on the part of the schools, which may be reflected in the differing responses described above. One of the two options is that pregnant young women can remain at school as long as it is medically advisable and when they leave school to have the baby, can obtain learning materials and support from the school. The other is that if they withdraw from school for the duration of the pregnancy they need to take own responsibility for their continued education (2.1.4b).²⁵ In both options, emphasis is placed on liaison between her parents and the school, i.e. the school is expected to discuss with the parent(s) the period she should be absent from school, based on a doctor's certificate with which the school should be furnished. The policy also stipulates, however, that principals are "accountable to all learners' right to quality education and this includes enrolled expectant learners or learners who are parents". Furthermore, it states that the school must enter into a written agreement with the parents or guardians of the concerned pupil which states that pregnant learners attend school at their own risk, and indemnifies the school against any pregnancy-related injury or accident. Moreover, the concerned learners are warned not to expect any exceptions regarding adherence to the school code of conduct (2.1.4.e).²⁵

Thus, although it can be said that all three schools are operating within the framework of the Department's policy, the points of emphasis that guide their actual implementation clearly differ, as do the implications for the young women and their education.

The exoneration of schools from responsibility for any mishap that may befall pregnant adolescents, while understandable, may also leave them feeling vulnerable and inadvertently promote feelings of exclusion. Not wanting to be responsible for pregnant adolescents may also lead school heads and teachers to believe it is in the school's interest to encourage them to stay home, even though Department policy also says: "It is essential for the learner concerned that her education should continue with as little disruption as possible..." (2.4.2).²⁵ This is further complicated by the expectations placed on teachers. Whilst the learner is expected to take charge herself of keeping up with the schoolwork, teachers are equally expected to ensure that continuous assessment is maintained whether the learner is in or out of school (2.4.3).²⁵

Table 1. Demographic information on participants at time of study (n=15)			
Name^a	Age	Child's age	Home circumstances
Tumeka	19	5 months	Lives with both parents
Thembisile	18	4 years	Lives with mother but usually alone with baby
Lee	16	14 months	Lives with both parents
Masi	16	12 months	Lives with mother, father deceased
Lethiwe	18	2 years	Lives with uncle, parents in the Eastern Cape
Nikiwe	18	2 years	Lives with elder sister
Nozibele	16	5 months	Lives with mother
Liziwe	16	7 months	Lives with both parents
Lolo	18	3 months	Lives with father, mother deceased
Thobeka	19	15 months	Lives with mother
Noma	19	3 months	Lives with mother
Sharon	18	13 months	Lives with father
Phathiswa	16	5 months	Lives with both parents
Tiny	18	16 months	Lives with mother
Sive	20	3 years	Lives with mother

a Pseudonyms have been used throughout the paper.

How the three schools in the study differed

The interviews revealed that the schools were managing learner pregnancy as outlined in the Western Cape Education Policy. Although the schools were in the same neighbourhood, however, they implemented the policy differently. In one school, pregnant learners were sent home as soon as the pregnancy was evident. This resulted in them concealing their pregnancy so that they could remain in school longer. In the second school the Life Orientation teacher would monitor their pregnancies and advise that they leave school at 6–7 months and they could then return after delivering. In the third school, the only expectation was that parents inform the school of their daughter's pregnancy, and thereafter learners decided when to leave or return to resume studies.

Inconsistencies in policy implementation within schools have been highlighted by others as an impediment in the education of pregnant learners and young mothers.^{10,11} The leeway for schools' differing interpretations of the policy has left schools exposed to manipulation by everyone involved, that is, pregnant learners, their parents, teachers and even the larger community.

Policy in the service of exclusion

Some young mothers in our study felt that the handling of pregnant young women was fraught with favouritism and injustices, as teachers tended to protect those close to them whilst sending others home “early”. Noma, for example, was told to leave school because her pregnancy was showing.

“I decided to be stubborn... I was six months pregnant then and that would have meant that I would be out of school for a full term. I was not going to do that ... so I bluntly told my teacher that I was not going home. I would only go during the final month ... There is no policy that stipulates that we should leave at six months. It is at the discretion of whichever teacher has cornered you.” (Noma)

Noma did remain in school until her baby was born and returned as soon as she was able. Her baby was three months old at the time of the interview. In this situation, it is encouraging that a young woman had such a strong understanding of her rights within the context of this policy, and could assert them. Yet, for most of these young mothers from disadvantaged communities such confidence and understanding may not be readily available.

“The biggest problem with being pregnant in class is that you feel guilty. It is as if you have done something wrong and you deserve whatever comes your way. As a result, you always keep quiet and suffer in peace or drop out of school on your own if you cannot handle the heat.” (Lolo)

“I was too embarrassed to face my class... so I quickly dropped out of school on my own before many people even noticed I was pregnant.” (Tumeka)

In fact, most of the young women said they had preferred to stay in school as long as they could, but they felt they needed to hide their pregnancies and keep them a secret. Their reports suggest that exclusionary practices began as soon as a pregnancy became evident. This contributed to them trying to disguise their pregnancies. Sharon described how she spent most of her time attempting to avoid the attention of pupils and teachers who, she believed, had been tasked with ensuring that pregnant learners left school.

“A few weeks from closing for the April holidays, I was cornered by one of the lady teachers, Ms G, as I came down B block stairs. She demanded that I come to her office that same day, which I did not do. I decided to take the risk and dodge her for the remaining two weeks to the school holidays. I had to skip her lessons and attend those where I knew I would not be bothered. A few days later, we met again, accidentally, and she confronted me. Again, I apologised sincerely and promised to visit her office after school that day, which I did not do either. I successfully managed to dodge her until the end of the term ... I later delivered during the term break.” (Sharon)

Although the girls recognised that school authorities believed they were enforcing national policy, they felt that the policy was interpreted in the most conservative ways by their schools, ways that tended to disadvantage them. They said that the school authorities legitimated their actions by saying they had to protect pregnant learners from possible accidents that might jeopardise their pregnancy whilst in school. They argued, however, that if

the policy was to genuinely protect their rights in school, then they should be allowed to remain in school and only leave when they felt it necessary or when it was time to deliver.

“The truth is that no one wants to stay at home really; I would say that affected learners do not welcome the idea (of being sent home) because it means disruption to their schoolwork. I believe that being sent home is unfair practice. Why did they allow us to attend school (pregnant) in the first place?” (Noma)

Although the three schools concerned are in the same neighbourhood, they were implementing the departmental policy completely differently. Thus, Thobeka’s experience was completely different to Sharon’s. While acting in Thobeka’s favour in some ways, her school’s response may have indicated a benign lack of care about her needs:

“Generally, teachers ignore pregnant learners. They have no business with them. They just want your parents to come and report that you are pregnant and that is all. You leave school when you feel like it. Most pregnant girls do not leave at all. Some deliver after school and continue the next day as if nothing has happened and no one cares really.” (Thobeka)

Returning to school as young mothers

Further challenges for young mothers that emerged in this study were to do with the moral, cultural and social stigmatisation of young women who are pregnant and become parents.^{12,14} Returning to school after having given birth to a child appears to be particularly difficult not only in terms of balancing the load of being a parent and a learner, but also because their experience of the school environment was fraught with challenges, from a lack of empathy for them as parents to open hostility in some cases. Whilst acknowledging that there were teachers who did care, participants claimed that a number of educators believed that they belonged at home with their children:

“The general attitude is that if you have a child, stay at home and avoid being at school, as you are a bad influence on other children.” (Sive)

Previous research corroborates this belief among some teachers, while others support pregnant learners and young mothers in school.²⁶ The young women in this study shared many examples of teachers’ moralistic and critical responses to them. Life Orientation lessons in particular emerged as a site of ostracism.

“In LO (Life Orientation) lessons we discuss pregnancy issues – like when should people get pregnant and the dangers of teenage pregnancy, etc. And it is during these lessons that pregnant learners and mothers are brought to shame.” (Sive)

On the other hand, they also described positive experiences of such lessons and of teachers who showed sensitivity and offered support.

“I remember the other male teacher who taught me LO, he used to understand me so well. Any time teenage pregnancy was mentioned in class I would tense up but the teacher quickly picked it up

and he spoke to me. I was very sensitive and guilty all the time. At times, I would leave class as soon as the discussion started because I could not stand it, but the teacher talked to me and I felt really better and accepted that I was indeed pregnant and I had to face it.” (Tiny)

“...The biggest problem I have is that I have no one to help me with the baby on Saturdays so I cannot attend [extra lessons]. One of the male teachers had said that I should bring the baby along but make sure that he does not scream and disrupt others. I thought about it but I was embarrassed, you see. Up to now, I do not have the courage to attend with the baby.” (Lolo)

Over and above the imposition of moralistic attitudes, a lack of support for their role as parents was also reported by some participants. While they did not expect teachers to deviate from their core obligations, the intolerance some of them expressed towards young mothers attending school was experienced negatively by the participants, and, as had happened also while they were pregnant, again encouraged secrecy and duplicity for different reasons. As young mothers they indicated that they frequently had to use deception in order to stay out of trouble in order to attend to their children’s needs, for example:

“Really, people get absent. If the baby is sick, they pretend to have been sick themselves, that is what happened to me the other week. I had the letter from the clinic but I told the teacher that it was me who had been sick because I had missed a test, when it was actually my child.” (Tumeka)

They also reported incidents in which their own peers made it uncomfortable for them through negative remarks.:

“My classmates made snide remarks like ‘tsho tsho’ (it serves you right) ... it is usually whispers and gossip but you can easily tell when you are the object of gossip.” (Phathiswa)

“I have noticed that some learner parents get insulted about their motherhood over small incidents like wrangling over a chair or refusing to open a window ... for insignificant misunderstandings you are told that you are behaving that way because you had a baby too early...” (Lee)

Internalisation of stigmatising remarks was also significant in relation to their ability to engage successfully at school. Some reported they were not “brave enough to stand up to the heat” and left school early in their pregnancies to escape the negative responses, which had an impact on their later performance and success.

Challenges from peers and teachers at school are exacerbated by young women’s own ambivalence towards their pregnancies and parenting and their own internalised feelings of guilt and shame. Buying into the dominant moralistic discourse that they had erred served to legitimate the discriminatory and insulting comments they had to cope with from their peers and teachers. It was also apparent that they had no protection, nor indeed felt able to expect any, from actual bullying, even though this is outlawed constitutionally in educational institutions. The extent of the negativity they experienced in the school environment along with their own internalised discomfort and fear of humiliation clearly forced a number of

them out of school earlier and possibly for longer than they would have preferred, with potential impact on their future careers.

Despite all these challenges, all 15 young mothers were still in school at the end of the study. However, Tumeka was contemplating dropping out of mainstream schooling due to financial hardships, in order to work during the day, still continue with school in the evenings and be able to assist her parents in looking after her child.

Conclusions

Notwithstanding the positive responses from a few teachers, the climate at all three schools appeared to be one that was largely intolerant of displays of young women's pregnancies and parenting role. This created a context in which these young women did not feel free and comfortable enough to admit they were pregnant and had additional needs as parents while they were still at school. Consequently, they had to function in a context of secrecy, duplicity and fear of disclosure and rejection, which undermined their ability to be successful students as well as parents.



Young mother receives medication to treat her baby's bacterial infection, Lesotho, 2009

The findings of this study highlight a gap between the policy intentions of schools to provide a supportive environment for pregnant and parenting learners and the lived experience of such learners. This conflict infringes on the rights of young pregnant women and mothers to equal

education as called for in the South African Schools Act. It is important that measures are put in place to support and reinforce the policies, which not only ensure a more strategic and thoughtful application of the policy, including attention to ironing out ambiguities and contradictions in implementation, but that also challenge ongoing negative attitudes towards pregnancy and parenting in learners. Teachers should be trained in supportive measures, and guidance on dealing with pregnant learners should be made available. Educators' judgemental attitudes and stigma from peers should be discouraged. Life Orientation classes should be used as a platform for this purpose. As one of the participants in this study illustrated so well, it is also an imperative to ensure that pregnant and parenting learners are not only familiar with and understand the policy but also feel entitled to receive a full and supportive education.

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Résumé

En Afrique du Sud, les droits génésiques des jeunes femmes enceintes et qui deviennent mères alors qu'elles fréquentent encore l'école continuent d'être compromis. Avant 1994, les écolières enceintes étaient souvent expulsées et la plupart ne reprenaient pas leurs études. Avec l'adoption de nouvelles politiques en 2007, les jeunes femmes enceintes et mères sont supposées être aidées à achever leurs études. Pourtant, il y a des incohérences dans l'application de la politique et l'expérience vécue par les adolescentes à l'école. Cet article étudie les expériences de la grossesse et de la maternité dans un groupe de 15 jeunes femmes qui sont tombées enceintes et devenues mères tout en fréquentant trois lycées dans la township de Khayelitsha, une communauté ouvrière du Cap-Occidental, en Afrique du Sud. Des entretiens qualitatifs approfondis, menés entre 2007 et 2008, ont dégagé deux principaux domaines de préoccupation : la poursuite des pratiques d'expulsion par les écoles, sur la base d'interprétations conservatrices de la politique, et les réactions négatives et moralisatrices des enseignants et des camarades. Ces pratiques ont incité les jeunes femmes à cacher leur grossesse ou en avoir honte, influençant leur bien-être physique et psychologique, ainsi que leur décision de rester à l'école pendant la grossesse et d'y revenir après la naissance. Davantage d'attention est nécessaire pour garantir une application appropriée des politiques de soutien des jeunes femmes enceintes et devenues mères pour qu'elles terminent leur scolarité avec succès.

Resumen

Los derechos reproductivos en Sudáfrica continúan sufriendo en el caso de jóvenes que quedan embarazadas y pasan a ser madres mientras aún están en la escuela. Antes de 1994, las prácticas excluyentes eran comunes y la mayoría de las jóvenes que quedaban embarazadas no concluían sus estudios. Con la adopción de nuevas políticas en 2007, se supone que se brinde apoyo a las jóvenes embarazadas y madres para que terminen sus estudios. No obstante, existen incongruencias entre la aplicación de las políticas y las experiencias que viven las jóvenes en la escuela. En este artículo se exploran las experiencias del embarazo y la maternidad en un grupo de 15 jóvenes que quedaron embarazadas y pasaron a ser madres mientras asistían a tres preparatorias en la municipalidad de Khayelitsha, una comunidad de clase obrera en el Cabo Occidental de Sudáfrica. En entrevistas cualitativas a profundidad, realizadas entre 2007 y 2008, se destacaron dos principales áreas preocupantes: la continuación de prácticas excluyentes en las escuelas, basadas

en interpretaciones conservadoras de las políticas, y respuestas negativas y moralistas del profesorado y pares. Dichas prácticas propiciaron un ambiente de secretos y vergüenza en torno al embarazo, lo cual afectó el bienestar psicológico y físico de las jóvenes y sus decisiones en cuanto a permanecer en la escuela durante el embarazo y regresar después de dar a luz. Este asunto requiere mayor atención para asegurar una adecuada aplicación de las políticas destinadas a apoyar a las jóvenes embarazadas y madres para que logren terminar sus estudios.