

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.*

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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 post natal 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

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