

## Educational Participation and Achievement of Teen Mothers: The Case of Vhembe District of the Limpopo Province, South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** This paper explores the educational participation and achievement of teen mothers in South Africa with specific reference to the Vhembe District of the Limpopo Province. The paper is based on a study that investigated school attendance at school and academic performance by teen mothers in the Vhembe District schools. The sample consisted of sixty teenage mothers, eighteen teachers and six principals who were purposively selected. Qualitative research design was used to collect rich descriptive data of teenage mothers on their experiences and attitudes of the phenomenon under investigation, namely, teenage motherhood. Data were collected using in-depth and focus group interviews. The data were analysed thematically by identifying and expanding significant themes that emerged from the informants' perceptions. The paper revealed that teen motherhood has a negative effect on school attendance and academic performance because of multiple responsibilities that hinder concentration on schooling. From the results of the study, this paper recommends that learners should focus more on their studies in order to avoid delays in school completion and dropout due to pregnancy and teen motherhood. It is also recommended that government introduces a new method of disbursing child support grants which do not cause school absenteeism among teen mothers.

### INTRODUCTION

Teenage motherhood is a world problem that affects the social, health and economic status of teenage mothers, whether in the developed or developing countries (National Research Centre for Women and Families 2001; Millers et al. 2014). Teenage mothers are often unprepared for parenthood. The social and economic consequences of early childbirth are profound (Chigona and Chetty 2007). They drop out of school and take up low paying jobs and, in some cases, never complete their education.

Globally, 15 million women under the age of 20 give birth, representing up to one-fifth of all births, and 529,000 women die due to pregnancy and childbirth-related complications every year (Dev Raj et al. 2010).

This social problem is widely documented (United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2001); National Research Centre for Women and Families (NRCWF) 2001; Treffers 2003; Mayor 2004). In many industrialized countries such as Britain and USA teenage pregnancy and parenthood (regardless of mental status) have in recent years been identified as social

and public health problems that need to be confronted without delay (UNICEF 2001). Treffers (2003) pointed out that worldwide rate of teenage pregnancy range from 143 per 1000 in Sub-Saharan African countries, compared to 2.9 per 1000 in South Korea and Japan. In Africa, it is estimated that most teenagers either engage in early sex, get pregnant or married by the age of 19 and this results in their educational loss (UNESCO 2013; Southern African Development Community [SADC] Secretariat 2013). The educational attrition among pregnant and parenting teenagers in most developing nations is worsened by inadequate policy measures or lack of political will to include them in formal schooling (Runahre and Vandeyar 2011; Runahre and Hwami 2014; Grant and Hallman 2006).

Teenage parenthood has come to be regarded as a significant disadvantage in a world which increasingly demands an extended education, and in which delayed childbearing, smaller families and career for women are increasingly becoming the norm (UNICEF 2001). More than 30 percent of 19 years old girls are reported to have given birth (Kaufman and de Wet T Stadler 2000). Figures from the statistics of South Africa show

that in 1 year more than 17000 babies are born to mothers who are 16 years and younger. Of that number, 4000 babies are born to mothers who are under 14 years (Human Science Research Council 2012). Among many topical issues in the print media are young people who are giving birth at an early age. Freeman (1993) suggests that the cause of early child bearing in South Africa are many including, for example, youth unemployment, poverty, poor education, single parenthood as well as substance abuse.

The objective of this study was therefore to determine factors that influence school participation and performance of teenage mothers. Literature has shown that unintended childbearing is one of the main problems facing society today and it comes with many challenges for example, single parent, economic dependency, drop out and poverty.

This study was more informed by the liberal feminist theory which stresses the liberation of women through the democratization of institutional policies in the broader society and education as the main avenue to achieving this objective (Stromquist 2005; Subrahmanian 2005). The theoretical framework of this study interrogates the ways in which the lives of women are shaped in society and attempts to provide an understanding on how such beliefs and values can be understood in trying to address issues for the emancipation of women, as well as how social justice can be achieved in society. Liberal feminists believe that through the provision of equal educational experiences for both sexes a genuinely equal society can be developed (Crudas 2003).

Education is a fundamental human right for all children, including girls who fall pregnant while at school (Chigona and Chetty 2008). Yet, in many areas of their lives, girls' prospects for education may be diminished because of pregnancy, motherhood and gender discrimination. In terms of the South African Bill of Rights, Section 29 of the Constitution, everyone has a right to basic education (Chigona et al. 2007). This Bill (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996) was made to eliminate any discrimination against sexes and also to promote gender equality.

### **Statement of the Problem and Purpose**

Teen motherhood is one of the widely documented problems facing societies in the world in

general, and South Africa in particular (Campion 2012; Grant and Hallman 2006; Chigona and Chetty 2007, 2008; Runhare and Vandeyar 2011, 2012). The consequence of early reproduction was also supported by one of the South African ministers of Basic Education, Motsekga, in a United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) country report, in which she indicated that the high proportion of unintended teenage pregnancies in the country remains a serious social problem (Panday et al. 2009). Due to teenage motherhood and other contributing variables, which include prior poor school performance, domestic responsibilities and being a primary child care giver, school dropout usually result from teenage pregnancy (Meekers and Udjo 1999; Manzini, 2001; Grant and Hallman 2006; Runhare 2010).

In view of the above, the main purpose of this study was therefore to explore the educational participation and achievement of teen mothers in Vhembe District of South Africa. In particular, the study investigated how the teen mothers coped with the double responsibility of motherhood and schooling and how this could affect their educational outcomes.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

In this paper, qualitative research method was used to collect rich descriptive data of teenage mothers on their experiences and attitudes of the phenomenon under investigation, namely, teenage motherhood, participation and performance in education. As described by Babbie and Mouton (2001), qualitative research was appropriate, in this study, because it was more suited to the exploration, description and understanding of the experiences and attitudes of teen mothers towards learning.

### **Sampling and Sampling Size**

The sample of this study was made up of sixty teen mothers, eighteen teachers and six principals from six schools in the Vhembe District (that is, ten teen mothers from each school). The population that sample was drawn from was the teenage mothers from grade 8 to 12 at six schools from Vhembe District. The learners from these schools come from surrounding villages

and were exclusively black. Purposive sampling method was used to select study participants who were directly affected by the phenomena of teen motherhood and schooling. In purposive sampling, the researchers use judgment about which respondents to choose, and selects only those who best meet the purposes of the study (Bailey 1992; McMillan and Schumacher 2006). Participants for this study were therefore selected because of being teen mothers who were attending school at the time the study was conducted because the researchers wanted to find out about they coped with school work in their situation.

### **Data Collection**

Focus group interview were conducted in the Vhembe schools during school hours when learners were on break or during free periods from the cluster of six schools by the researcher. Focus group interviews enabled teen mothers to share their experiences and to reach some kind of consensus about the problem. Focus group interview provided opinions and attitudes from the subjects' point of view (Du Plooy 2002). Focus group discussions were done with selected people, that is, ten teen mothers from each school. Two focus groups per school were done, consisting of five members per group. Follow up comments and questions that were informed by research objectives were made and asked respectively to ensure understanding of emerging themes which were not covered by the schedule. Permission was sought from the participants to audio-tape interviews and notes were also transcribed and where necessary translated from Tshivenda to English by a language expert.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed thematically by identifying patterns and themes in the data and drawing certain conclusions from them (Mouton 1996). Data analysis in qualitative research is an ongoing, emerging, or non-linear process. The main aim was to end up with the key themes that describe the essence of study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Mouton (1996) indicates that every research should be ethically sound in order to protect the

participants from any physical or psychological harm and treat participants respect and dignity. Ethics clearance certificate was issued by the University of Venda Ethical Committee.

Permission to collect data from schools was sought from the District Manager, Circuit Managers and the principals of the schools through written letters and submitted at the Department of Education at the Vhembe District. Learners were engaged in small talk, in order to make them comfortable, and to feel free to answer questions. Parents signed informed consent form on behalf of learners before participating in the study. Permission was granted to me both verbally and telephonically and also through written letters by the District manager. Participants were made aware of the use of audiotape. Creswell (2013) stipulates that a critical issue in every research is that the participants should grant informed consent before participating in the study. They were also informed about voluntary participation and that they were free to terminate participation in the study without fear of being punished. Confidentiality was also carefully observed and upheld during both the data collection and processing.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Factors Militating Against the Educational Participation and Achievement of Teenage Mothers in Vhembe District Schools**

Teenage parenthood has come to be regarded as a significant disadvantage in a world in which there are increased demands for an extended education, and in which delayed childbearing, smaller families and careers for women are increasingly becoming the norm (UNICEF 2001; UNESCO 2013).

Mensch et al. (2001) maintained that although literature addressing adolescent fertility and childbearing in the developing world is large, few studies focus on the prevalence of schoolgirl pregnancy and its relationship to prior school experiences and subsequent educational attainment. In many developing countries like South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and others, teenage pregnancy is regarded as one of the major barriers to schoolgirls achieving educational success (Department of Education 2010; Chigona and Chetty 2007; UNESCO 2013; Southern African Development Community [SADC] Secretariat 2013; Runhare and Hwami 2014).

A South African study by Chigona and Chetty (2007) revealed that teenage fertility is, in fact, the result of a complex set of varied and inter-related factors, largely related to the socio-conditions under which children grow. These factors were found indicate that:

- ♦ When young girls dropout of school early, often because of economic barriers and poor school performance, they are at significantly heightened risk for early pregnancy;
- ♦ When girls grow up in residential areas where poverty is entrenched, they are at risk of experiencing an early pregnancy; and that
- ♦ When both parents, and in particular the mother, is present in the home, the risk of early pregnancy is decreased.

From this study, the following themes derived from the factors contributing to educational participation and achievement of teenage mothers.

### **Theme 1: Child Grant Support**

Child support grant was one of the themes that emerged in the study. A lot of people like teachers and principals were against the child support grant that teen mothers were receiving from government because it makes their work difficult.

At Musina Municipality, one of the principals at school 6 indicated that,

*“The numbers of teenage mothers are increasing in my school because every year I have a lot of girls who have given birth.”*

He further said that some learners fall pregnant because they believe that having a child will help them alleviate poverty through the provision of a child support grant. “

The above observation was also supported by principals from schools 3, 4, 5 who also maintained that, in their schools classes are full of learners who have given birth and also those who are still pregnant. They further said that schools have problems during the days and which grants are being issued because learners go away and come back the following day.

### **Theme 2: Child-headed Households and Children without Parental Supervision**

The child-headed households are commonly defined as households where all members are

less than 18 years (De Witt and Lessing 2010). Child-headed households are identified by Burman (1992) as the major contributors to teenage pregnancy and teen motherhood. As a result of poor or no parental guidance and control, children engage in sexual activities at a very young age. This is confirmed by Mfono (2003) who conducted a study on teenage pregnancy and his results revealed that teenage pregnancy is high among child-headed households. As a result of such situations, the majority of the participants of this study who were teen mothers indicated that it was very difficult to cope with the situation of being in a child-headed household and schooling. Looking after a child and managing school work simultaneously is extremely difficult. One of the teen mothers stated that it was very difficult for her to manage the two responsibilities because her situation was totally different from other teen mothers. During a focus group conversation, the teen mother from school 1 narrated that:

*I was on my own due to the fact that my parents passed away and I was the eldest of them all. We were four and I was 15 years. It was very difficult to study. My siblings were also young, and, therefore, could not assist me when I wanted to study. I made a plan that, I should put this child on my back so that, she can sleep, then I will start reading.*

Such revelations is in concurrence with an earlier study by Thompson cited in Alla (2009) who also observed that teenage pregnancy is associated with poor high school performance and decreased earnings in life. In the same vein, Mpaza (2006) maintains that once the baby is born, the teenage mother needs more time to look after the baby. Much of the responsibility is carried out during the night, and this creates problems for a teenager, and prevents her from doing her homework and studying. The effects are that the teenage mother will fail to concentrate in the classroom because she would be tired. Consequently, she will perform badly and fail and according to Grant and Hallman (2006) there is close relationship between teen motherhood and grade repetition, failure and school dropout.

### **Theme 3: Stigma, Labelling and Rumours About Teenage Mothers**

The majority of teen mothers indicated that teachers and school administrators scorned them

and made them feel unwelcomed at school. Teen mothers said if they came to class and other learners were making noise, the teachers would say it was the pregnant girls who were making noise. Such treatment by many of the teachers, consequently embarrass the pregnant learners and lessen their desire to come to school.

According to the findings of this study, teen mothers felt that they were not given full treatment by their teachers. The teachers and fellow learners put a good deal of pressure on them without really understanding what the girls were going through. For instance, teen mothers were sometimes ridiculed in front of classmates whenever they failed to meet the class requirements.

One student had this to say:

*“Mm..... I was reminded of being a mother by the teacher and I was told that I should not think that I am very special because of my situation. Therefore I ended up responding back very badly towards the teacher and, at that moment I was also crying (Teenage mother 6 from school 4).”*

In this situation a learner would no longer feel comfortable in class because of the fear that the teacher will be against her because of her bad responses and it makes the learner not concentrate and perform very well. In tandem with this, several studies on Sub-Saharan African communities indicated that schools are not hospitable, lack strategies and policies to accommodate pregnant girls and teenage mothers and that traditional the African value system on sexuality were major hurdles to the educational participation and opportunity for girls who could fall pregnant while at school (Grant and Hallman 2006; Chigona and Chetty 2007, 2008; Runhare 2010; Runhare and Vandeyar 2011, 2012; Vandeyar et al. 2014; Runahre and Hwami 2014). A study by Runhare (2010) at formal South African and Zimbabwean schools revealed that school-based education stakeholders such as school principals, community representatives in school governing bodies (SGBs), teachers and mainstream learners were ill-equipped to mainstream pregnant and parenting teenagers in formal schools because of socio-cultural and traditional governing variables on marriage and motherhood.

#### **Theme 4: Negative Effects of Teenage Motherhood on Academic Performance**

One of the teen mothers said that her performance was good in the past before she became

pregnant, but later deteriorated due to social problems teen mothers encounter at home, in the community and at school. The teen mother, from school 3 explained her ordeal in the following manner:

*After having a baby it was worse than when I was pregnant because now the baby has added to the workload. During study time, I could not focus because the child needed my full attention. When the child cried and I would have to take care of the child and time would be moving. At that time I would be tired and sleepy resulting in me not doing anything. Consequently, i repeated grades, Mm..., it was very difficult indeed.*

Likewise, the majority of the other teen mothers in school 4 indicated that their school performance changed drastically after giving birth. Looking after the child and doing school work are two different things and they both need attention. Teen mothers found that they were failing tests and exams, and this resulted in them to repeating grades. The other thing is that, they did not have enough time to discuss school work with their peers because after school, the children needed their attention. It was apparently clear from what the majority of the teen mothers who were enrolled at all the six schools that it is very difficult to cope with the situation of teen motherhood and schooling. One of the teen mothers said that it was very difficult for her to manage the two things that is a baby and school work, because her situation was totally different from that of other teen mothers in that she did not get much support from her parents and siblings with baby care. Some of the participants said that *“it is very difficult for them to participate and also perform well in school due to pressure of having a baby since the baby needs attention once she returns home from school to relieve her mother who looks after the baby while I am at school”*. All these duties face one person, and it is very difficult for such a person to cope with the situation. Teen mothers therefore found their situation to drastically affect their academic performance. Earlier studies by Chigona and Chetty (2007, 2008) and Grant and Hallman (2006) collaborate that inadequate parental support made it almost impossible for pregnant and parenting school girls in South Africa to complete schooling, while studies by Runhare (2010), Runhare and Vandeyar (2011, 2012) and Runahre et al. (2014) found the school envi-

ronment to be hostile for girls who chose to continue with formal education after falling pregnant.

Teen mothers also said that they are teased and given names by their peers for being teen mothers. This stresses them and they lose focus. They further said that having a baby when they were still teenagers made life difficult, and that this could destroy their future. Mpanza (2006) pointed out that falling pregnant while still at school or at an educational institution generates a set of problems for which the teenagers have to find a solution. He further said that poor academic performance leads to poor employment and financial prospects, which, in turn, may have detrimental effects on all the other aspects of the life of the mother and her baby. Thompson (2009) argues that teenage pregnancy is associated with poor high school performance and decreased earnings in life. Mpaza (2006) maintains that once the baby is born, the teenage mother needs more time to look after the baby. Much of the responsibility is carried out during the night, and this creates problems for a teenager, and prevents her from doing her homework and studying. The effects are that the teenage mother will fail to concentrate in the classroom because she would be tired. Consequently, she will perform badly and fail.

The majority of teen mothers indicated that, it is very difficult to look after a child and themselves, and also to focus on their studies. They further said that when a child is sick, one has to focus on the child and forget about the studies. One cannot concentrate on whatever is taught in class because one would be thinking about the sick child at home.

#### **Theme 5: Teen Motherhood as Cause for Dropping Out of School**

The results revealed different views from the respondents regarding dropping out of school.

One teen mother from focus group 3 in school 4 explained this scenario it in this way:

*Our performance has deteriorated significantly compared to the past before we get pregnant when we used to score high marks. Now; it is an embarrassment because our grades have fallen below those who perform badly in the class.*

This is indicative that teenage mothers are often unprepared for parenthood and they drop

out of school even before they give birth. According to HSRC (2005) although many girls who fall pregnant hope to return to school and the policy permits this, they find it hard as they have to take care of their children and this interferes with their studies. The findings, thus, revealed that, teenage childbearing is often associated with numerous disruptions for girls, especially when it comes to school attendance. The girls need tremendous support to deal with the disruption (Theron and Dunn 2006). This means that teen parents face an overwhelming number of difficulties. Parental and peer pressure are far more common than support and understanding. Managing to care for an infant and devoting adequate time to school work is a great challenge for teen parents (Arlington Public School 2004).

As an illustration, one teen mother from focus group 5 in school 3 and 6 explained that:

*Our performance has deteriorated significantly compared to the past before we get pregnant when we used to score high marks. Now; it is an embarrassment because our grades have fallen below those who perform badly in the class.*

Related research studies in South Africa by Grant and Hallman (2006) and Hof and Richters (1999) revealed that pre-pregnancy school participation and performance were influential factors for teenage mothers who dropped out of school. In both studies, pregnant and former pregnant learners, whose performance had been poor before pregnancy, dropped out of school more than those who performed well academically. Grant and Hallman (2006) further concluded that, rather than pregnancy being the cause of school drop-out, it was the poor school participation by teen mothers which resulted in them falling pregnant and then dropping out of school.

Pregnancy and dropping out of school in fact, share many common social and economic antecedents, (Lloyd and Mensch 1999) the most of which are poverty and poor academic performance. They further contend that rather than pregnancy causing girls to dropout, the lack of social and economic opportunities for girls and women may result in unsatisfactory school experiences, poor academic performance, and the endorsement of early motherhood.

These extracts indirectly show how teenage motherhood has interfered with their develop-

ment. Given the opportunity, it seems that they would first pursue the educational careers and then consider having more children in future.

### CONCLUSION

From the results of the study, this paper concludes that while from a feminist perspective, education is one key avenue for female liberation from male domination; it may not open all the doors of success for a bright future of teen mothers because of the many hurdles they face in the home, community and school. The double responsibility of teen motherhood and schooling was found by participants of this study to be too heavy to bear. The paper therefore established that the importance for teen mothers to continue with their studies to improve their lifestyles is obvious, but the opportunity to achieve this goal is almost impossible. Clearly, the study revealed that teenage pregnancy and motherhood result in poor academic performance due to the pressures associated with being a schooling young parent. The main factor that leads to deterioration of academic performance is that teenage motherhood comes with many responsibilities which make it difficult for these learners to concentrate on their school work. From the study, it seemed that even the child grants that teen mothers receive from the government are not making the situation any better because of allegations that teen mothers absent themselves from school during days when they receive the grants.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, this paper therefore recommends that all education stakeholders such as parents, school management, teachers, the schooling teen mothers themselves and other learners be assisted with prevention and coping strategies on teenage pregnancy. Since child support grants seem to have a negative impact on schooling, a new method of issuing child support grant could be introduced, such as making payments through the school, awarding those who improved their academic performance and attendance. It is also recommended that parents should talk to their children about sexuality issues to make teenagers aware of the difficulties of being a teen mother while at school. Thus, the concept of 'Education First', which

implies avoidance of or abstinence from sex, could be a childhood saving slogan to young people. It is thus also recommended that the only route towards a thriving society is that of inculcating the love of education to our offspring. This will undoubtedly reduce the number of teenage pregnancies in communities, if the youths become mindful of the need to first pursue their educational aspirations before anything else.

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