

## The Scholastic Performance of Adolescent Pregnant Learners

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**KEYWORDS** Teenage Pregnancy. Adolescent. Child Bearing. Academic Performance. Teenage Mothers

**ABSTRACT** Teenage pregnancy is a common public health problem worldwide. This is a problem that affects nearly every society, developed and developing alike. The primary aim of this study is to investigate the scholastic performance of adolescent pregnant learners. This study utilised a mixed methods approach. Surveys as well as interviews were used to collect data from the respondents. The target population for this study was senior phase (Grades 7-9) pregnant and non-pregnant girls and their educators. From the target population of all senior phase learners in Limpopo, 87 grade 7-9 learners (pregnant learners, non-pregnant learners, boys with/without pregnant girlfriends, between the ages of 10-15 years and older and 6 educators were selected from 1 primary and 2 secondary schools in the Vhumbedzi Circuit of Vhembe District in Limpopo province of South Africa. Stratified random sampling and purposive sampling were utilized. Data collecting procedures comprise of both quantitative and qualitative research instruments such as self-designed questionnaires and focus group schedule. The results showed that pregnant learners do not perform well scholastically. The study recommended that Learners should be made aware of the consequences of early pregnancy on their educational achievement through health and sexual education.

### INTRODUCTION

Teenage pregnancy is a common public health problem worldwide (Dangal 2005; Runhare et al. 2014; Barmao-Kiptanui et al. 2015). This is a problem that affects nearly every society, developed and developing alike. According to Dangal (2005), it is one of the key issues concerning reproductive health of women not only in developing but also in developed countries.

As they mature, young people are increasingly exposed to reproductive health risks such as sexual transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy (Mashigo 2009). Mashigo (2009) went on to say that these risks do not only hamper their education but minimizes their chances of participating meaningfully in the reconstruction and redevelopment of their country. Young girls need good decision and goal-setting skills to enhance their future and the development of their country. A teenage girl needs to participate as sexual being that has the ability to make choices and express love and intimacy consistent with own values (Males 1993a).

Education is central to the development of young people as it prepares them for the world of work and for life (Panday et al. 2009). Panday et al. (2009) went on to say that young people spend longer periods in education as part of their natural course of development; sexual experimentation and maturity coincide with their

schooling. For the unlucky few, the experimentation results in unplanned pregnancy (Panday et al. 2009)). As long as the public and policy makers harbour beliefs that schools can devise magical solutions to teenage pregnancies, measures necessary to reverse the increasing failure of adults at both personal and governmental levels to meet their obligations to ensure youth well-being will continue to suffer (Males 1993b).

Child bearing among teenagers has grown in significance as a social construct and to represent one of several indicators of burgeoning adolescent delinquency, sexual permissiveness and moral decay (Runhare et al. 2014; Barmao-Kiptanui et al. 2015). It is common knowledge that youth often jeopardise their health by engaging in behaviours with serious short- and long-term consequences such as substance abuse and sexual risk behaviour that can result in HIV and unintended pregnancy. Jehovah's Witnesses Official Web Site (2004) cites teen pregnancy as an epidemic. The tragic proportions of this problem are best seen when the impact of a pregnancy upon one frightened teenage is considered (Jehovah's Witnesses Web Site 2004). According to Jehovah's Witnesses Web Site (2004), teenage pregnancy involves a number of complex social and emotional issues and this will deeply impact not only on herself but also her family and loved ones.

Each year, almost one million teenage women- 11percent of those aged 15 become pregnant, representing 20percent of those who have had sexual intercourse (World Population Awareness 2000). The nation's children are its future workers, citizens and leaders (American Psychological Association 2011). Education remains the major tool by which people become empowered. Analysts are warning that our society is being hit by a pregnancy tsunami (Ramphela 2011). Every year in the South African schools, thousands of learners become pregnant (Boulden 2011). Most schools allow pregnant learners to continue attending classes as long as they can, making young girls with bulges under their uniform a common sight (Khumalo 2011).

It is common knowledge that historically as well as culturally, sexuality of teenage girls has been both acknowledged and celebrated. The modern day bombardment of teenagers by media and advertisers with highly sexualized images of themselves creates and reinforces messages that teenage girls are sexual beings and successful teenage girls will be seeking and having boyfriends (Jewkes et al. 2008), while ignoring the consequences of irresponsible sexual activities. Some youth seemingly do not grasp the connection between sex and pregnancy (Jehovah's Witnesses Web Site 2004).

The South African schools are also beset by the problems that plague schools globally, like violence, drug abuse and teenage pregnancy (South Africa Web 2009). Pregnancy is amongst the major concerns that pose a serious threat to gains achieved in public schools thus far (Panday et al. 2009). The analysis of Education Management Information System data on teenage pregnancy shows an increase in learner pregnancies between 2004 and 2008 in SA. Limpopo is amongst the three SA provinces with a concentration of learner pregnancies (Panda et al. 2009). Media reports claimed a dramatic increase in the number of SA school girls falling pregnant and this has sparked a national debate (Irin/PlusNews 2010). The SA Basic Education Minister, Mrs A.M. Motshekga said the education system is showing signs of reduction in the high levels of pregnancies (Africa News 2009). Citing the results of a recent study on teenage pregnancy, the minister said the country's teenage pregnancy has dropped further as a result of measurers deployed since 2007 to tackle the menace, which threatened the quality of educa-

tion (Africa News 2009). Teenage pregnancy undermines the Department's efforts to ensure that girl children remain in schools, in order to contribute towards a quality life for all, free of poverty (Panday et al. 2009).

Despite the reported decline in teenage fertility rates, the high proportion of teenage pregnancy in SA remains a serious public health issue (Markham et al. 2009) and has increased in all race groups except Indians (Makiwane et al. 2007). Makiwane et al. (2007) suggest that overall fertility has been accompanied by a shift in child bearing towards younger women. Teenage pregnancy is not a challenge facing only the Department of Education, it has become a tragedy for public and private sector partners including schools, media, health care providers, religious institutions, community leaders and more important, parents and the learners themselves (Dangal 2005; Panday et al. 2009).

Although many studies (Mpanza 2006; Chigona et al. 2008; Panday et al. 2009; Matshotyana 2010; Runhare 2010) have been conducted on teenage pregnancy in SA, the issue of scholastic performance of pregnant learners has not received sufficient attention. Furthermore, fewer studies have addressed the effects of teenage pregnancy on the performance of learners. Thus in this study we aim to empirically research the scholastic performance of younger adolescent pregnant learners.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

A research design is a plan of what data to gather, from whom, how and when to collect the data and how to analyse obtained data (BJA Center for Program Evaluation and Performance Measurement-Glossary 2010). Empirical research design can be divided into two broad categories: quantitative and qualitative research design. This study utilised a mixed methods approach. Triangulation of methods means mixing both qualitative and quantitative styles of research and data for a fuller or more comprehensive study. The researchers preferred to use triangulation because it leads to an enriched explanation of the research problem. Triangulation can provide insight of the underlying research problem which cannot be attained from one approach (de Vos et al. 2002). According to

Moody (2002), the two types of methods have different, complementary strength and when used together can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Surveys as well as interviews were used to collect data from the respondents.

### **Research Methods**

This study followed the mixed methods approach, that is, it was conducted from a combined qualitative and quantitative approach. The two methods were utilized concurrently.

### **Population**

After determining the unit of analysis, the researchers have to define the population of interest. For the purpose of sampling, population has a specialized meaning. Brynard et al. (1997) refer to population as all objects, subjects, phenomena, cases, events or activities which a researcher wishes to research in order to establish new knowledge. The target population for this study was senior phase (Grades 7-9) pregnant and non-pregnant girls and their educators.

### **Sample**

From the target population of all senior phase learners in Vhumbedzi circuit 87 grade 7-9 learners (pregnant learners, non-pregnant learners, , between the ages of 10-15 years and older and 6 educators were selected from 1 primary and 2 secondary schools in the Vhumbedzi Circuit of Vhembe District in Limpopo province of South Africa. Stratified random sampling and purposive sampling were utilised. The stratified random sampling was used to select learners; the strata were based on learners' grade level variable. Purposive sampling was used to select pregnant learners using the pregnant learner register found at schools. A focus group of senior phase educators who have direct experience of teaching the same learners before and during their pregnancy was also selected through purposive sampling. The educators were from the 3 schools. Their role as educators brings them into contact with issues related to the scholastic performance of adolescent pregnant learners and makes them valuable key informants on the subject.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data collecting procedures comprise of both quantitative and qualitative research instruments such as self-designed questionnaires and focus group schedule.

### ***Quantitative Research Instrument***

The questionnaire was designed and piloted to 20 learners to ensure items were unambiguous and easily understood by respondents. After feedback was received, difficult items were reworked. The design of the questionnaire was informed by the research questions because the researchers wanted to address them. The self-administered questionnaire was completed by 87 respondents (pregnant and non-pregnant girls) from three schools (1 primary and 2 secondary schools).

### ***Qualitative Research Instrument***

Focus group interview schedule with structured open ended questions was utilized. One researcher conducted the focus group interview. Teachers were requested to assemble at one school where the focus group interview was conducted. Focus group data was recorded verbatim using a tape recorder. Six educators from one primary and two secondary schools were interviewed. The researchers chose focus group discussions because educators share the same characteristics as regards to the scholastic performance of learners. Issues surrounding their performance before and after they fell pregnant and all aspects relevant to the topic were discussed. In this study, focus group served as a guide to ensure if the results from the two methods converge and support one another (Kruger in de Vos 2002), thus giving greater credibility to the findings.

### **Data Analysis**

The quantitative approach was utilized when the scholastic performance of pregnant learners was appraised through the questionnaire using Attitude Scales: Likert-type. The quantitative data (data collected through questionnaires) were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 21. Qualitative data (data from the focus group) was transcribed ver-

batim from the tape recording, then translated from Tshivenda to English by a colleague from media studies department, analysed and discussed to identify sub categories, categories and key themes.

**Quality Assurance Techniques**

*Qualitative Techniques*

*Assessing the Validity of Qualitative Research*

Quality indicators for qualitative research are dependent on the approach and purpose of the study (Mertens 2010).

*Trustworthiness of Qualitative Data*

Credibility (internal validity) in this enquiry, credibility was addressed by utilizing member checks and peer debriefing and triangulation. The researchers summarised what has been said and asked if the notes accurately reflect the educators’ views and drafts of the research report was shared with the educators for comment.

*Member Checks and Peer Debriefing*

Member checks involve the researcher seeking verification with the respondent groups about the constructions that are developing as a result of data collected and analysed (Mertens 2010).

*Transferability (External Validity): Thick Descriptions and Multiple Cases*

In this study, the researchers provided sufficient detail to enable the reader to make such judgment. Extensive and careful description of time, place and context were given and thus, the finding of this study could be transferred and generalised to similar situations.

**Quantitative Techniques**

*Triangulation*

In this study, the researchers used mixed methodologies, that is, the use of survey data with focus group interview to establish validity through similar conclusion. This methodology can claim a high level of internal validity as data were collected in the natural setting that reflected the reality of their life experiences and thus

are more accurate than more contrived or laboratory settings. According to Morse and Richards in Laws et al. (2006), internal validity could be eroded by the reactivity of respondents lying, omitting relevant data or misinterpreting their claims. However, members of the focus group in this study were chosen randomly from the sampled schools and did not know each other. The degree of anonymity helped the members to state their true opinions and feelings which clearly improved validity in this study.

**RESULTS**

The following section focuses on results:

**Section A: Quantitative Data**

*Cross Tabulations:* pregnant and non-pregnant learners within:

Cross-tabulations revealed that there is a significant difference between the pregnant and non-pregnant learners rating of failing to pay attention in class (Chi-square=10.132; p=.002; p<0.05). The majority 68.8 percent of pregnant learners indicated that they fail to pay attention in class as opposed to 20.7 percent of non-pregnant learners (Table 1). Panday et al. (2009) concluded that the realisation of an early pregnancy may put too much stress on the teenage girl. Increased stress from fear of parents, embarrassment, and guilt may distract a pregnant learner from concentrating in class.

**Table 1: I fail to pay attention in class**

	Percentage	
	Yes	No
Pregnant	68.8	31.2
Not pregnant	20.7	79.3

The analysis shows that pregnant learners experience difficulties in doing their homework as compared to non-pregnant learners. There is a significant difference in the learners rating of this item Chi-Square=9.504; p=.003; p<.05. Looking at the relationship of being pregnant and problems in completing homework assignments among pregnant learners, the expected likelihood of experiencing difficulties in doing their homework was significant, 62.5percent pregnant learners as opposed to 17.2 percent of non-pregnant learners (Table 2). Pogoy et al. (2014) also

found that, low performing students took the role of taking care of their children and gave the financial responsibility to their husband. They managed their failure by putting things right in taking the great responsibility of rearing their children.

**Table 2: I do my homework with ease**

	Percentage Percentage	
	Yes	No
Pregnant	62.5	37.5
Not pregnant	17.2	82.8

Difficulties with finishing assignment on time were associated with pregnant learners. The significant difference might provide evidence that pregnant girls are less connected to school unlike their non-pregnant peers. The vast majority of pregnant learners were significantly having problems finishing their assignments than non-pregnant learners (Chi-square=11.939; p=.001; p<.005) (Table 3). The results echoed those from past research where it was found that teen pregnancy compromised educational outcomes among pregnant learners (Chigona et al. 2008; Panday et al. 2009; Bhana et al. 2010; Runhare et al. 2014).

**Table 3: I finish my assignments on time**

	Percentage Percentage	
	Yes	No
Pregnant	30.5	69.5
Not pregnant	82.7	17.3

Non pregnant learners were significantly less likely to indicate that their level scores have dropped than pregnant learners (Chi-square=13.599; p=.000; p<.005) (Table 4). A vast majority of non-pregnant learners 93.1 percent indicated their level scores were not affected compared to 43.8 percent of pregnant learners. Previous research showed that pregnant learners often miss classes and their school attendance is irregular (Marcy 2003; Chigona et al.

**Table 4: My level scores have dropped**

	Percentage Percentage	
	Yes	No
Pregnant	56.2	43.8
Not pregnant	6.9	93.1

2008; Panday et al. 2009; Runhare 2010; Matshotyana 2010; Runhare et al. 2014), this might be the attribute to the dropping of their level scores.

A vast majority 68.8 percent of pregnant learners indicated that their overall school performance have dropped compared to 20.7 percent of non-pregnant learners. There is a significant difference of the overall school performance of pregnant learners compared to the overall performance of non-pregnant learners. The two variables differ significantly (Chi-square=10.132; p=.003; p<.005). This association between pregnancy and the deterioration of overall school may be the results of many disruptions of pregnant learners' schooling. Chigona et al. (2008) concur that educators were not willing to go through the lessons that the girls had missed was assumed that some educators considered pregnant and teen mothers' as none of their concern (Table 5).

**Table 5: My overall school performance has deteriorated**

	Percentage Percentage	
	Yes	No
Pregnant	68.8	31.2
Not Pregnant	20.7	79.3

## Section B: Qualitative Data

Qualitative data were analysed under the following themes:

### **Theme 1: Scholastic Performance of Pregnant Learners Deteriorates**

From the discussions with the focus group, underachievement of the scholastic performance of pregnant learners was the main theme. All the participants expressed that pregnant learners were not performing well. The scholastic performance of pregnant learners was said to have deteriorated as compared to their performance before they were pregnant. Some of the participants' state:

Participant 4: "Comparing their performance before and after, the overall performance decreases"

Participant 6: "Pregnant learners are generally not performing well, more especially those who are experiencing it for the first time, It... (pause) seems as though they are frustrated"

Past research supports this finding. Chigona et al. (2008) concluded that teenage pregnancy is one of the major hindrances to educational success of a girl child. Aras et al. (2007) found that lower academic success and educational level were associated with pregnancy.

The deterioration of pregnant learners' scholastic performance emerged from the following categories: lack of concentration, absenteeism, and inactiveness.

***Theme 2: Pregnant Learners Scholastically Perform Poorly as Compared to Non-pregnant Learners***

Pregnant learners experience more feelings of guilt about their sexual activities than those teenagers who are sexually active but not pregnant. They are more impulsive and anxious and have more emotional problems. As compared to pregnant learners, non-pregnant learners were said to be performing far much ahead scholastically. Pregnancy is a learning disability, thus being pregnant can cause a learner much emotional turmoil which is detrimental to learning.

## DISCUSSION

The study found that the scholastic performance of pregnant learners was affected. It was found there are many factors which contribute to the deterioration of the scholastic performance of pregnant learners. Their school behaviour was one of the major indicators in their academic achievement. It was found that the majority of pregnant learners fail to attend school regularly which may have an adverse impact on their scholastic performance.

### **Lack of Concentration**

When a learner becomes pregnant, there is lack of concentration. Their ability to concentrate is impeded by frustrations, stress (caused by lack of support from the father of the child, parents and the community) and negative feelings making it more difficult to learn and succeed scholastically. It is common knowledge that one cannot learn if one is not in the right state of mind. A frustrated learner can be easily discouraged to continue with whatever task she is involved with because she might feel that it is stressful trying to concentrate on school work

while pregnancy itself is the source of frustration and stress. More so, pregnant learners might not want to do their assignments and homework because they are not focused since they are not on the right state of mind.

Increased stress of pregnant learners can cause pregnant learners to behave in a manner that can negatively affect their scholastic performance abilities. Constant worry about their damaged career plans, trying fruitlessly to come up with solutions to their problem self-blame and regrets. In their process of trying to understand their situation, pregnant learners are distracted from their school work.

This is in line with previous research (Basch 2010) which found that if their ability to concentrate is distracted by negative feelings, it was more difficult for them to learn and succeed in school.

### **Absenteeism**

The relationship between classroom absenteeism and the scholastic success has been well documented. All participants in this study cited that school absenteeism was rife in pregnant learners and that it posed problems in their scholastic performance. The scholastic performance gap between pregnant and non-pregnant was the result of irregular attendants in pregnant learners. Pregnant learners often absent themselves from school for health check-ups in clinics. Sometimes they missed school because of ill-health as their body is constantly changing. Learners who missed class on a given day lagged behind in their school work. This study revealed that those who were always present in class outperformed pregnant learners who were constantly absent from schools in their tests.

Participant 6: *"There are differences in scholastic performance since those who are pregnant will often... absent themselves from school, those who are not pregnant are always at school and are always being taught so they perform well."*

Participant 5: *"Pregnant learners frequently absent themselves from schools because they are embarrassed ....they may be simply lazy or tired or depressed ...may also suffer illnesses related to pregnancy."*

This is also supported by previous research, Yahaya et al. (2009) concluded that students who were absent from class significantly performed

lower on their tests. According to Yahaya et al. (2009), students who attend class regularly benefited from learning activities designed to facilitate their acquisition of knowledge and that excessive absence from class results in poor academic performance. Weideman et al. (2007) also found teenage pregnancy was found to be one of the reasons for absenteeism. Marcy (2003) also found that pregnant learners miss too much school because of swollen feet, tiredness, depression, embarrassment, the school not meeting their needs and their grades were slipping.

### Cohabitation

When a pregnant girl moves in with her partner while still at school, she is faced with a dual responsibility, one of a live-in partner and of being a learner. A girl in a cohabitating relationship might find adjustment to new lifestyle and/or the realization that the boyfriend is not dedicated in maintaining their relationship may be an overwhelming experience to a pregnant learners. Financial strain might also be another debilitating factor that might add to the woes of a teenage making it impossible for her to concentrate on her school work.

Participant 2: *“The girl moves in with the boyfriend and...now they live as husband and wife. The girl now has a dual duty that of a learner and performing her duties as a wife and this makes her school work suffer. Homework is no longer done properly and she is now failing her tests and may end up dropping out of school.”*

Mollborn (2010) also found that cohabiting was typically a disadvantage for teenage parents and was associated with elevated rates of school drop outs. Matshotyana (2010) have similar findings, pregnant learners needed to cope with the new tasks related with parenting and studying at the same time and the financial difficulties they experienced is a great concern. The demands impact on the learner to fully engage on her school work and are likely to have less or no time for her study, miss classes and might not finish her assignments on time.

Pregnant learners were more likely to be lower in their scholastic performance as compared to non-pregnant learners. Through the statistical crosstabulations, when comparing pregnant learners with non-pregnant learners it was found that Non pregnant learners are active, have less

worry and actively take part in the learning process. They have self-confidence while pregnant learners suffer from lack of confidence. Lack of confidence is an attitudinal barrier that can make a pregnant learner nervous about going to school, fear of being laughed at, fear of failure and fear of not being able to keep up with the rest of the class. Non pregnant learners are motivated. Since non pregnant learners are not worried about the uncertainty of their future they are sure of their future plans and they know what they want in life, Non pregnant learners unlike pregnant learners see the benefits of learning.

Participant 2: *“Non pregnant learners are much active, have less worry, participate in class, have future plans and are not intimidated unlike pregnant learners.”*

Participant 5: *“Pregnant learners looked as though ....err...they are overwhelmed by guilt, anxiety and suffer from emotional turmoil within while non-pregnant learners seemed to be less worried even though they may be sexually active...more so their guilt maybe the cause in their academic failure”*

### Non-Pregnant Learners Concentrate in Class

Participant 5: *“Sometimes they are... (pause) not certain whether they still want to go to school or they intend staying at home, worried about the father of the child not accepting responsibility...you may also find that the parents, more especially the father wants her to go and stay with the father of the child who is also rejecting her... (laughs) so you find the learner is stressed, depressed and inattentive in class because she is constantly regretting being pregnant.”*

Recent research provides compelling evidence for the causal role that teen pregnancy play in the educational setback that plagues a girl child. Young girls are not emotionally or psychologically fully developed to be able to deal with the harsh realities of life and the responsibilities of a family. The level of stress which may be the result of being rejected by the baby's father or by the parents especially the father is a major setback in their educational attainment. In contrast non pregnant learners know what they want in life and they have achievable goals: they are focused, concentrate, participates in group discussion, take part in extramural activities which is conducive to the learning and teaching process.

## CONCLUSION

Based on empirical evidence, the study concludes that the main findings of this enquiry are the results of many hardships that a pregnant girl who choose to stay in school during her pregnancy faces. Pregnancy is always seen as an example of moral decay and ill society. Therefore, the burdens that come with pregnancy are too much for the school girl to play a dual role which is, being a learner and responsible parent at the same time. Ultimately, the study has proved that teenage pregnancy has a negative influence on the performance of learners.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Learner pregnancy is becoming more and more of a social problem in the SA schools. The problem is not only prevalent in secondary schools, but also in primary. The following are the recommendations to address the findings of the study:

- ♦ Although this may suggest more workload to educators, there is need to have extra lessons for pregnant learners.
- ♦ Educators should also form support group structures in schools, clusters and circuit level where issues on learners' pregnancies can be addressed.
- ♦ Learners must also be made to be aware of the consequences of early pregnancy on their educational achievement through health and sexual education
- ♦ The Department of Education should also provide schools with pregnant learners' user friendly facilities in schools, a school counsellor or one trained educator.

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