

Management of Pregnant Learners in Secondary Schools: Perceptions of Educators

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ABSTRACT Educators are faced with challenges of teaching pregnant teenagers in their workplace. This study aims to examine management of pregnant learners in secondary schools in the Vhembe district of Limpopo Province, South Africa. A qualitative research approach was used to investigate the phenomenon from the educators' perspective. The target population comprised of secondary school educators, school's management teams and school managers. Focus group interview schedule was used to collect data from the participants. Data was analysed thematically. The findings revealed amongst others the following: lack of skills to teenage pregnancy management. The following recommendations were made: Educators need to be well equipped with skills that will enable them to deal with pregnant learners in schools. The government should give educators in-service training on how to manage pregnant learners. Educators should also form support group structures in schools, clusters and circuit level where issues on learners' pregnancies can be addressed.

INTRODUCTION

Discrimination on the ground of pregnancy is explicitly prohibited by the South African Constitution. In terms of Section 9(3) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996 "*The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including ...pregnancy.*" Despite this strong legislative backdrop, SA's policy on teen pregnancy recently appears to have taken a step backward towards a more restrictive approach (Hubbard et al. 2008; Mutshaeni et al. 2015). Nkani et al. (2011) found that objections to pregnancy were based on moral ground, drawing from sexual stigma discourses. Policy was flouted and pregnant learners were excluded from school through the learners' code of conduct. The policy was blamed for being too permissive and was cited as reinforcement to moral decay (Runhare 2010). Provincial education officials believed that learner pregnancy policy should be punitive in nature to discourage permissiveness and that would also serve as a message that learner pregnancy is not something to "celebrate" (Governder 2007).

In a study by Runhare (2014), it was evident that there was inadequate knowledge of national policies by the participants: educators, parents, SGB members and members of the communities did not know nor had very little knowledge about the guideline on learner pregnancy management. SGB members and educators op-

posed the policy as it was against their cultural values (Runhare 2010; Nkani et al. 2011). Educators indicated that they have heard but not seen the pregnant learner management policy (Runhare 2010). Stakeholders at school level, particularly the school principal made informal observations to ensure that pregnant learners are not expelled from schools.

According to Runhare (2010), mainstreaming of pregnant learners was seen as rewarding unacceptable behavior. Complaints were made by some community members in the school leadership that pregnant learners caused school indiscipline, increased rate of school girl pregnancies and generally lowered the standard of the school where learners were enrolled at the time.

In 2007, Department of Education (DoE) provided a framework for the management of school girl pregnancy as follows:

- ♦ Pregnant girls have a right to education and cannot be expelled from the school on account of pregnancy.
- ♦ Guidelines for the management of pregnant learners were provided to avoid compromising the learning environment for other learners.
- ♦ The responsibility of caring for the child to be for both the girl mother and the boy father. It is not a maternal but a parental responsibility.
- ♦ Inclusive approach to education. Pregnant learners are learners with barriers to learning.

- ♦ The DoE is committed to the provision of educational opportunities for learners who experience barriers to learning or are at risk because of DoE's systems' inability to accommodate their special learning needs to safeguard the educational interests of a learner.
- ♦ A learner who is pregnant or is aware that another learner is pregnant must inform the school immediately.
- ♦ Pregnant learners must provide the school a record of health clinic attendance on a regular basis.
- ♦ There is a need to sensitize pregnant learners that there is no medical staff to handle the delivery of babies, potential trauma and health risks at school.
- ♦ Schools should avoid unfair discrimination in the form of hate speech and harassment against pregnant learners. On the other hand, pregnant learners must be made aware that some school community members might not accept their situation.
- ♦ Parents and guardians must ensure that tasks and assignments are done during the pregnant learner's absence are completed and returned to the school for assessment.
- ♦ Educators should offer support, ensure there is a climate of understanding and respect to encourage pregnant learners to continue with their education.

From the foregoing, it is of importance to seek the views of educators on the management skills that educators have in managing pregnant learners in schools.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study adopted a qualitative approach. Using qualitative approach, gave researchers a leeway to explore the intricate aspects of meaning attribution. Qualitative enquiry was deemed appropriate for the purpose of this study for the following reasons (Worthen et al. 1987: 50): "It is generally conducted in natural settings; it utilises the researcher as the chief instrument in both data-gathering and analysis and It emphasises thick description, that is, it obtains real, rich and deep data which illuminate everyday patterns of action and meaning from the perspective of those being studied. In this study, it relates to the management of pregnant learners in schools by educators". The study seeks to establish situation on the ground by describing the participants' views.

Study Sample

The target population for this study was all teachers in the Vhembe District of Limpopo. Purposive sampling was used, with a sample size of 8 teachers, 9 members of the School Management team and 3 school managers drawn from 1 rural primary and 2 secondary schools in the Vhembe district, Vhumbedzi Circuit (Limpopo Province of South Africa). In purposive sampling' sampling units are selected for a specific purpose on which the researcher decides (Holloway et al. 2010). Teachers and school management teams were targeted because they are directly involved with the management of learners. Focus group interview schedule was used to collect data from the participants. A series of verbal questions were posed to the participants in a face to face situation such that the participants were able to share many features on their everyday lives that include management of pregnant learners in schools.

Data Collection Methods

Focus group interview schedule with structured open ended questions was utilized. Focus group data were recorded verbatim using a tape recorder. The researchers tried to capture exact phrases and statements made by participants when taking notes. Careful consideration was taken to maintain control in conducting the group interview to ensure that notes taking should not interfere with the discussion. It was important for the researchers to make sure that notes were complete and usable in the event the tape recorder stopped working. Furthermore, control was maintained to ensure that there was no dominant group or individuals and at the same time. The researchers tried to play a neutral role. As indicated by New York State Teacher Center (2008), it is important to use information recording technique that: capture all of the essential information, collect information in an unbiased manner, put statements made during the focus group into proper context and try to capture nonverbal behavior of group participants.

Data Analysis

Data from the focus group was transcribed verbatim from the tape recording, analysed and discussed to identify sub categories, categories and key themes. Analysis was done guided by

eight steps of Techs open coding method (Cresswell 2009).

Measures to Ensure Trustworthiness

As data were collected and analyzed, researchers employed member checking to ensure that the researchers' interpretations of the data were shared with the participants. Krefting (1991) suggests that member checking, which is where the interviewee plays an active role in being part of the process, in bringing in his/her own meaning or interpretation of the data, is a form of triangulation and thus minimizes researcher bias (Cresswell 2003). It was therefore planned that the teachers should be given the opportunity to review the data and make comments and/or changes where they felt it was necessary. In such peer review, the data are given to impartial colleagues who may have experience of the qualitative methods, and the research findings are then discussed (Krefting 1991). The focus group meetings were designed to serve this purpose.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, human beings were used as subjects. Whenever human beings are the focus of the investigation, ethical implications must be looked closely (Leedy 2006). For the purpose of this study, the following ethics were taken into consideration: Permission to conduct research was sought from The Department of Education in the Limpopo Province, parents and the principals of the schools. Participants in this study were involved on an entirely voluntary basis and their anonymity was assured. Protection from harm: The participants were not exposed to undue physical or psychological harm meaning that there was no risk of losing life, limb or would they be subjected to stress, embarrassment and loss of self-esteem. The participants were informed of the nature of the study to be conducted and be given choice of either participating or not participating. Participants were requested to fill in the consent form to confirm their willingness to participate in the research. Participants' right to privacy were respected. No names or any form of identification was used. Anonymity of the information gathered was upheld.

RESULTS

All the participants felt that it was not right for pregnant learners to be at school as they were not trained in managing pregnancies and they were afraid that should anything happen to a pregnant learner they would not know what they should do.

Lack of Skills to Teenage Pregnancy Management

Participant 6: *"I think it is not right for pregnant learners to be at school...because teachers are not trained as to how to assist pregnant learners. If something can happen to them it is going to be chaos. We... We don't know what the complications may be when they are at school and we don't know how to help them."*

Mpanza (2006) also had similar findings; educators were not comfortable with highly pregnant learners attending school. They complained about lack of experience and showed that they (educators) did not know what to do in times of emergency as they might harm both the mother and the child if they tried to help.

Participants also found offering extra classes to pregnant learners after school as an aid for catching up was not an option. Educators expressed that the issue of teaching them after school not beneficial as pregnant learners were cited as always tired because of the physical changes and the growing babies in their bodies.

Another emerging theme was common transport. Many learners in the rural areas experience problems reaching their local school due to lack of transport facilities or poorly developed and maintained roads and the distance between their homes and the school. Most of the learners from the research schools commuted for more than 10km to and fro home to school. Although learner pregnancy is a problem in the SA schools, the number of pregnant learners at a school at one time in one class is very limited. Thus, it is unlikely that the majority of non-pregnant learners would agree to be delayed after school because of a few pregnant learners

Participant 2: *"Pregnant learners are always tired...they sleep in class and the afternoon classes is just a waste of time, it does not benefit them."*

Participant 3: *"The government has offered learners from the nearby village a bus...so the*

idea of teaching these learners is not possible. Most of the learners in the bus are not pregnant they cannot be delayed to go home because of few pregnant learners...it may cause havoc."

Participant 6: *"We are already overburdened by the work load and the curriculum which is always changing....uhh...we cannot also play the role of midwives...the government is expecting too much from us...we are no trained."*

Similar comments were made by Hubbard et al. (2008) that the policy's reference to special afternoon or evening classes for pregnant learners was not realistic as their number at a school at any time is very limited and they were not always from the same grade.

DISCUSSION

The study found that pregnant learners need support and encouragement from their educators, it is however unfortunate that some educators consider pregnant and mothering teenagers' problems as private matters and none of their problems (Chigona et al. 2008). Educators felt that the training they received in their pre-service training did not adequately prepare them and have insufficient time to deal with learners' social problems. Bloem in Chigona et al. (2008) argued that there is a need for educators' in-service training through professionals so that educators could be more informed and knowledgeable as to how to handle teenagers and their social problems. Matshotyana (2010) findings showed that although educators were not trained to deal with learner pregnancy, they were more concerned with the safety of the pregnant learners and that there was no programme and the schools had no capacity to support pregnant and parenting learners. Jali in Matshotyana (2010) indicated that it was very difficult for educators to deal with pregnant learners. Educators were avoiding situations where pregnant learners might go into labour while in the school premises (Matshotyana 2010) as they were not well equipped to deliver babies (Chigona et al. 2008; Abbas 2009; Matshotyana 2010).

It is the negative attitudes of some learners and educators which persuade young girls that they are not wanted (Chigona et al. 2008; Abbas 2009; Boulden 2011; Mutshaeni 2015). Some schools feared that having pregnant learners and young mothers in their schools might give the

school a bad name and they fail to encourage pregnant learners to stay (Hubbard et al, 2008; Abbas, 2009; Runhare 2014). Teen mothers and pregnant learners need support from their educators. In a study by Matshotyana (2010: 88), participants indicated that their schools did not provide enough support; they indicated that:

"..they need adequate support from the school which includes; emotional support (love and sympathy), learning and educational support, support for optimal health, nutrition education and professional referrals, support for confidentiality and absenteeism".

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that educators were not willing to go through the lessons that the girls have missed and that educators cannot manage pregnant learners in schools because they are not trained

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings of the study the researchers make the following recommendations:

- ♦ Educators need to be well equipped with skills that will enable them to deal with pregnant learners in schools. The government should give educators in-service training on how to manage a pregnant learner.
- ♦ Educators should also form support group structures in schools, clusters and circuit level where issues on learners' pregnancies can be addressed.
- ♦ Pregnant learners should be made aware that not all people in the school community will be readily to accept them. So, learners need to be prepared that they will face some hostility from some of the learners and some of their educators.
- ♦ The Department of Basic Education should provide schools with at least one health worker who will be able to cater for the needs of pregnant learners.

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