

Socio-educational Challenges of Pregnant Students and Student Mothers

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ABSTRACT Both pregnant students and student mothers face many challenges. Their problems are often intensified by the fact that in many cultures women are expected to subordinate their needs and desires to those of their children and families. The objective of the research was to determine the socio-educational challenges of pregnant students and student mothers. It further had the purpose of making recommendations to provide support in this regard. Relevant literature was reviewed and an empirical study was conducted in which both interviews and observation were used to explore the experiences of a sample of six purposefully selected adult students at a Teachers' College in Zimbabwe. Results indicated that lack of support from teaching staff and college administration, inadequate resources and limited support from peers were noted as the main challenges. Recommendations were formulated to assist student mothers and pregnant students with the necessary support which is essential to create a caring learning environment for these students.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, large numbers of pregnant students have failed to write their examinations because they gave birth during the examination period and had to take their examinations the following year. In November 2010, for example, a pregnant student failed to do a music practical examination because she gave birth on the eve of the examination day. No arrangements were made to enable her to take her examination after giving birth. Given that in most African cultures women are expected to subordinate their needs and desires to those of their children and families, students with infants have to grapple with the roles of motherhood and studentship (Lynch 2008; Chabaya et al. 2009; Kramer and Lancaster 2010).

Although their engagement in educational endeavours is a noble effort to secure a safe and prosperous future for themselves and their children, it is often contrary to tradition. This view is also emphasised by Okeke (2004), who contends that women's educational achievements in Africa are not supported by social policies. According to the Statutory Instrument 81 of 1999, the principal of a teachers' college in Zimbabwe has been vested with authority to permanently or temporarily expel, exclude or remove a student from the college premises if, in his opin-

ion, the student's physical health makes it undesirable for her to continue with her studies. Expelled or lactating students with infants have to rejoin college after weaning their babies. However, the advent of a new policy that allows pregnant students to go on maternity leave for three months ushers in an era of hope for pregnant and lactating adult students in Zimbabwe (Murape 2010).

A literature search showed very few results of empirical research with regard to challenges faced by pregnant students and student mothers in Africa. In the context of conflicting cultural norms and values, a systematic investigation was needed to understand the problem in order to make recommendations for the necessary support. This article reports on research findings into the main socio-educational barriers experienced by pregnant students and student mothers. A literature study was conducted to foreground this study within the relevant body of interdisciplinary knowledge on the socio-educational challenges of pregnant students and student mothers. A qualitative enquiry was furthermore used to explore the socio-educational experiences of a sample of six purposefully selected adult students who were, at the time of this research, in their third and final year of study. Data was gathered by means of semi-structured interviews and observation. In conclusion, rec-

ommendations were formulated to support the affected students as well as to college management on how to create a supportive environment conducive to their learning.

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In the United States of America, the Hearing Testimony (2010) reported that there had been a 70% student mother drop-out rate from New York City schools in the 21st century, caused by a lack of support from different sectors of society. According to Bullen et al. (2000), this lack of support was partly due to stigmatisation. In Australia, the Women's Employment Education and Training Project found that such social stigmatisation could cause a woman to have a negative self-image which tends to limit her future options. Furthermore, Bullen et al. (2000) point out that this realisation led the British Social Exclusion Unit to recommend that the Department for Education and Employment consider the particular needs and attendance requirements of student parents in the study programme. Moreover, Luttrell (2003) concurred that pregnant students are not even accepted by their own peers, especially by boys. In her study, Luttrell (2003) observed that pregnant girls were discriminated against in nearly every institutional function; for instance, they had to sit at their own table during meal times. Since mutual respect and acceptance among students is one of the conditions for successful learning (Brosh et al. 2007), such a situation will clearly hamper pregnant girls' educational progress.

To crown it all, in many cultures young mothers who choose to engage in other activities such as employment and study, do not get society's approval. Magwaza (2003) indicates that such women were made to feel guilty, while Pillow (2006) echoes the same sentiments when she points out that society expects mothers who fail to fulfil ideal mothering duties to feel guilty. The realisation of these effects has led the Zimbabwean community to expect female students to complete high school and tertiary education before starting a family (The Saturday Herald 2010), although this might often be in conflict with cultural norms and values (Kramer and Lancaster 2010). However, Kambanji (2010), who agrees with this point of view, argues that the psychosocial issues that pregnant students and stu-

dent mothers have to deal with make it undesirable for girls to fall pregnant while studying.

Seen as such, in many cases the fear of being labelled incompetent or incapable causes some students to refrain from seeking support from academic staff members (Lynch 2008). When students fail to talk about important issues salient to their academic well-being (Crous et al. 2000; Hybels and Weaver II 2004), learning becomes a struggle and chances of academic excellence or achievement are stunted (Reece and Walker 2003; Sekgobela 2008).

The primary task of education is to assist students in actualising their potential (Elias and Merriam 2005). To realise their educational goals, student mothers need a supportive environment in order for them not to experience depression (Canterbury Christ Church University 2010; Jeyendra et al. 2013). Depressed students cannot realise their full potential themselves in their studies. In support of this sentiment, Walklin (2002) indicates that for a meaningful interpretation of the learning situation the student should be mentally and emotionally stable.

The objective of this research study was to determine the socio-educational challenges of pregnant students and student mothers. This article presents the empirical findings of the socio-educational challenges faced by pregnant students and student mothers at a teacher training college in Zimbabwe. In order to help this group of students to succeed in their educational pursuits, it was important to understand their situation from their own perspective.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study a qualitative exploratory design was used, enabling us to get an in-depth understanding of the socio-educational challenges faced by pregnant students and students with infants at a teachers' training college in Zimbabwe. Qualitative research has the advantage of uncovering the lived experiences of individuals by enabling them to interpret and attribute meaning to their experiences and in the process construct their worlds (Merriam and Simpson 2000).

The participants were selected through purposive sampling methods (Babbie 2004; De Vos et al. 2005). The sample consisted of three pregnant students and three students with infants in their third year of study. The inclusion criterion for the students with infants was that they were

breastfeeding their babies who were younger than one year old. Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and observation. Through the interviews we were able to listen to participants' stories and thereby capture the deep meanings of their lived experiences (Marshall and Rossman 2006). The participants were observed during lecture time and outside lectures. We believe that triangulating data-collection methods increases the reliability and validity of the collected information (De Vos et al. 2005).

Ethical measures that guarantee trustworthiness were upheld; therefore, permission to carry out the research was sought from the administration of the teachers' training college. Participants were furnished with accurate and complete information on the goal and procedures of the investigation. They were aware that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the research. Code names were used to ensure the participants' anonymity.

Data analysis was done through the coding of transcribed data and field notes (Punch 1998; De Vos et al. 2005). Through coding, data in this study was reduced into manageable forms and patterns and themes were identified.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the semi-structured interviews and observation, the following main themes, namely support from peers, lack of resources, lack of support from faculty and college administration emerged. While the themes of support from peers and lack of resources focused more on students' social challenges, the themes of lack of support from faculty and college administration related more to educational challenges. The emerging themes are discussed next.

Support from Peers

The narratives of pregnant participants (P1, P2 and P3) and participants with infants (F1, F2 and F3) show the value of a supportive socio-educational environment. Without the support of their classmates in the academic arena, the students with babies would have found it almost impossible to proceed. They tended to benefit and survive in the academic sphere when other students understood their situation and offered

appropriate and timely assistance. Consequently, their situation became difficult when support was withheld or denied.

The minimal support the pregnant students and student mothers got from their classmates contributed considerably in assisting them to attain their goals. Participant P1 said she passed the examinations because of discussions with her classmates. This study, like similar studies before it (Reece and Walker 2003; Brosh et al. 2007), found that adult students benefit greatly from collaborative efforts. Participants felt that in some instances they would not have made it were it not for the group discussions. Besides discussions, support came in different forms as is evident in Participant F2's narrative. She said: *"Other students help me ... sometimes they explain to me what they learned in lectures and they bring information on what is wanted. Yesterday they prepared a chair and a table for me for the exam because I could not come in the afternoon."*

From this statement and from the observations it was evident that students with infants sometimes missed lectures. This was found to be true for both pregnant students and students with infants. When students missed lectures, other students gave them lecture notes to copy, but they rarely offered explanations. Participant F1 had the following to say: *"I ask for notes from friends ... if I don't get someone to explain, I just reproduce them. However, sometimes the lecture notes are not clear."* The participants felt that their fellow students' gestures of goodwill enabled them to do the course. Generally, all the participants seemed to appreciate the different kinds of assistance offered by fellow students as this eased their situation in one way or the other. Participant F2 felt that her classmates were considerate. She remarked:

"If I tell them I will be able to come for discussions at 7 p.m., they will wait for me."

Lack of Resources

Mendes (2009) states that students are less likely to enjoy family support during and after pregnancy, but Prinsloo and Du Plessis (1998:16) describe the family as "the place where needs are filled through concrete and tangible ways". The empirical findings in the current study showed that the family abandoned this supportive role, leaving the students on their own for

most of the time. The participants needed resources such as money but in most cases their families could not offer these. Except for Participant F3, the other two participants with infants had problems in providing enough food for the baby and the baby minder. This is clear from Participant F2's comment: "... *the person I leave the baby with wants to eat ... the baby needs to be clothed and fed. It troubles me.*"

Mendes (2009) confirms that this is a problem by stating that without suitable child care it is very difficult for a young mother to embark on further education and training. For all the participants with infants, the baby minders' wages were a cause for concern. Pregnant participants seemed to have fewer problems with finances. They could survive on meagre resources.

Lack of Support from Teaching Staff

Most participants felt that their lecturers made life difficult for them. Lecturers failed to offer appropriate guidance and support, thereby negatively impacting on these students' endeavours to achieve their intended goals. Participant P2 explained: "... *some lecturers are rather difficult, they do not understand. They say ... bring a letter from the doctor which says you are pregnant, though the pregnancy is evident.*"

Lecturers' lack of empathy led Participant P1 to think that lecturers connived against her because she was pregnant: "*Sometimes I begin to think that lecturers sit to discuss me ... at some sort of a kangaroo court ... because I am pregnant ... I have had so many re-writes. Even some of the comments they pass make me unhappy.*" In such instances, the student had to design strategies that enabled her cope with the situation. Despite her negative experiences with some lecturers, P1 resolved to persevere. She said: "*With regard to college work one needs to be resolute. Sometimes lecturers' comments are very painful ... I get so affected that I spend the whole day miserable. At times when I meet the concerned lecturer, I panic.*"

When responding to a question on lecturers' attitudes towards students with infants, Participant F2 remarked: "... *not about me but when some lecturers come for lectures and notice someone missing, they make comments such as 'Is she still breastfeeding the baby?'*" The participant was not sure whether the comment was sarcastic or not. The participant felt that such a

comment meant that the lecturers did not appreciate the student's needs.

Lectures often intimidated, ridiculed and belittled these students through their comments and actions. This did not contribute to creating a positive self-concept in the students. According to Crous et al. (2000), a student actualises his or her potential when the self-concept is congruent to the student's potential. Since the self-concept is determined to a large extent by cultural values and the community one comes from (Hybels and Weaver II 2004), the support of teaching staff and the administration goes a long way to dispel cultural myths that discourage women to actualise their potential in avenues other than motherhood. It is believed that the participants' chances of success could be enhanced if lecturers showed care and concern for them. Positive comments could assist the development of self-confidence, self-respect and feelings of adequacy.

Despite problematic relationships between students and lecturers in many cases, most participants (four out of six) got an average score of between 60% and 69% as their final mark at the end of their third year of study. One student (F3) failed a subject and she had to repeat it and one got an average mark between 50% and 59%. This means that five out of the six students succeeded despite their circumstances and that they would probably perform even better in a favourable environment. In this regard, both Tight (1996) and Brosh et al. (2007) concede that the educational context determines the nature of adult learning.

Participants' narratives indicated that student-lecturer relationships were not amicable. Lecturers were portrayed as being insensitive to the needs and situation of students with infants. Instead of supporting these students' efforts through positive comments, they were blunt to the extent of telling participants that it was their choice to be students and mothers at the same time. In this study, participants feared their lecturers so much that they did not have the courage to seek assistance and panicked when they met their lecturers.

Lack of Support from College Administration

The college in this study provides all adult students with hostel accommodation and pays electricity and water bills from the students' col-

lege fees. Pregnant students and students with infants are not catered for although they pay fees like the rest of the students. Five out of the six participants felt that the college authorities were treating them unfairly. Although the authorities were aware that these students were not allowed in college hostels, they made them pay fees that were equal to those of other students. Participant F1 stated: "*The College wants fees equal to what the other students pay plus the food hamper. They say they don't know that we stay outside the hostels.*" She felt that if participants' needs in terms of shelter were met, they would have more time to concentrate and remain focused on their main goal, which was academic success.

From the participants' narratives it was clear that the college administration did very little in terms of supporting them. All six participants felt that although the administration was aware of pregnant students and students with infants among its student population they refused to give them the necessary support. Although some students with infants had been offered free accommodation in vacant college workers' houses, others were left to rent rooms. Of the six participants, only F2 had free accommodation but paid electricity and water bills. She explained: "*The admin gave us a place to stay ... we don't pay rent, we only pay for electricity and water.*"

All the participants were doubtful as to whether the administration could do anything to alleviate their plight in support of their learning efforts. While other participants had accepted the status quo, F3 felt bitter. She felt that pregnant students and student mothers were concerned that no support could be expected from the college administration. She said: "*Which admin? The college administration can do nothing for us.*" She highlighted an incident which intensified her negative feelings about the college administration: "*If you go to the admin with your problem ... they will scold you saying, 'Why do you have babies when you want to come to school?'*"

Since they expected no assistance from their college administration, the participants had to depend on their own resourcefulness. The participants admitted that they would sneak into the female hostels for group discussions with their fellow students while some pregnant students stayed in the hostels without the knowledge and consent of the authorities, as indicated by P3.

Based on Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, Mwamwenda (1995) identified physiological needs such as shelter, food, water, sleep and rest as basic to human survival. When these needs are satisfactorily catered for, motivation is promoted. However, the college administration in this study did not address the needs of these students. Participants were worried because they did not have sufficient funds. Since funds are essential to the acquisition of food and other basic necessities, their shortage distracted student mothers' attention from their studies. One of the participants pointed out that when she was hungry she abandoned her studies in search of food. Moreover, there was a tendency to be preoccupied with thoughts of what would happen if one fails to secure enough funds.

Besides physiological needs, the pregnant students as well as those students with infants also had psychological needs, namely safety, security, love, belonging and self-esteem. Like physiological needs, these needs largely depend on the support and guidance of other people for their fulfilment (Mwamwenda 1995). The administration of the college did not provide the necessary support; therefore they did not meet these students' needs.

CONCLUSION

When pregnant students and student mothers are expected to subordinate their needs and desires to those of their children and families, they are forced to grapple with the conflicting roles of motherhood and studentship. If society fails to assist and support these students, they often have to cope with anxiety, guilt, anger, stigmatisation, isolation and low self-esteem. To add to the complexity of the conflicting roles of studentship and motherhood, students are often expected to abide by cultural beliefs which glorify and idealise self-sacrificing motherhood.

The aim of this article was to report on the main socio-educational challenges faced by pregnant students and student mothers. Both the literature and the empirical studies revealed that these students experience numerous challenges due to conflicting demands of their roles as students and mothers. The main socio-educational challenges focussed on a lack of support: support from the students' lecturers, the college administration, the students' families and their peers to a certain extent. Although the results showed

that the students were very dependent on support from their peers, it was clear that such support was not always available or sufficient.

In spite of the challenges they faced, these students persevered and all except one managed to obtain their teaching qualification. This shows that in spite of all the challenges, they were determined to actualise their potential in avenues other than motherhood. They adopted coping strategies which were at times contrary to standing college policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were formulated to provide support for student mothers and pregnant students:

- ♦ It is recommended that these students be encouraged to communicate with staff members and the administration whenever they face educational or personal problems that are likely to affect their academic work. However, this will only be possible if and when lecturers' attitudes towards pregnant students and students with infants are changed.
- ♦ College administration, in conjunction with the relevant departments and the responsible authority, should develop a symbiotic working relationship whose focus is to ensure that resources are pooled to create a supportive learning environment for these students.
- ♦ Relevant policies addressing issues of absenteeism and late assignment submissions, among other things, which are currently left in the hands of individual lecturers and students, should be put in place by the management of the academic institution.
- ♦ The college administration should further establish an office for counselling pregnant students and students with infants.

At this stage it should be pointed out that, as stated before, this study was exploratory in nature and cannot be generalised. However, it is believed that the results will provide important information to the relevant authorities, regarding socio-educational challenges of pregnant students and student mothers attending higher education institutions in Africa and beyond.

The efforts of students who are also mothers to secure a safe and prosperous future for them-

selves and their families through the acquisition of a professional qualification, though it might not be culturally acceptable, is a noble deed in contemporary times. A new era that defies the cultural expectations of motherhood has dawned.

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