

Teen mothers and schooling: lacunae and challenges

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While many girls who become mothers before completing schooling consider academic qualifications to be very important, they may not be able to succeed academically if the support they need to complete their studies is insufficient. Usually, instead of getting support, the teen mothers endure misunderstandings and pressure. The teen mothers may feel disempowered because they are 'othered' and consequently, they develop forms of resistance which in most cases may foster their failure as learners. Our aim was to find out how much support was offered to these girls to facilitate their schooling, thus making it possible for them to complete their education and become self-reliant. A qualitative research approach was employed to gather information for the study. Teen mothers, their educators, and parents were interviewed to gather information about the girls' schooling situation. The results showed that many teen mothers failed to succeed with schooling because they lacked support to avoid the numerous disruptions to school attendance.

Keywords: challenges; othered; schooling; South Africa; support; teenage motherhood

Introduction

As in many developing countries, teenage pregnancy is one of the major impediments to the educational success of girls in sub-Saharan Africa (Swainson, Bendera, Gordon & Kadzamira, 1998). Recent research in South Africa has shown that by the age of 18 more than 30% of teens have given birth at least once (Mahy & Gupta 2002; NRC-IOM 2005). Mokgalabone (1999:60) maintains that pregnancy is among the most serious causes of school disruption, particularly at secondary-school level. That is, in many cases the birth of a baby marks the end of schooling for the teen mothers (Grant & Hallman, 2006). Research shows that there are factors that influence whether or not a teen mother is able to continue schooling after the birth of the baby. Most of the factors depend on the girls' ability to manage logistics and finances associated with mothering and schooling simultaneously (Kaufman, Wet & Stadler, 2001).

While it is no longer common to bar teen mothers from continuing with their education, those who go back to school after the birth of their babies face a number of challenges as learners and that makes it hard for them to succeed with their schooling. Arlington Public School (2004) reports that adolescent mothers face difficulties and the girls experience undue pressure from parents, peers and teachers. On the one hand they receive very little support from school and their homes; while on the other they are usually misunderstood (Arlington Public School, 2004). In most cases the situation

of the teen mothers is worsened because the fathers of their children play no role in the children's upbringing.

Aim of the research

While literature about adolescent fertility and childbearing is commonly available, there is a dearth of research on the impacts of teen motherhood on the schooling of girls in the country and the rest of the continent (Mensch, Clark, Lloyd, & Erulkar: 2001; Eloundou-Enyégué, 2004). In response to this we aimed to find out how young teen mothers cope with schooling challenges, how the challenges come about, how the challenges are dealt with and how much support is offered to these girls to facilitate their schooling and ensure that they complete schooling and become self-reliant.

Rationale

This research was motivated by the fact that young teen mothers are in a crucial phase of their lives; they are experiencing the integration of "earlier identifications, abilities and opportunities offered by society" (Gouws & Kruger, 1994:83). This means the girls are at a time of heightened psychological risk (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), whereby the individuals are being emotional and intuitive and needing approval. In addition to the motivation, teen mothers and their children are two particularly vulnerable groups in society; their long-term life chances are interconnected. They are both at critical points in their lives, where their life courses may be shaped towards stability and productivity or towards poverty and dependency (Chevalier & Viitanen, 2001; Stephens, Wolf & Battert, 1999).

Teenage childbearing is often associated with numerous disruptions for girls when it comes to school attendance (Theron & Dunn, 2006). The girls need tremendous support to untangle the disruptions. Denying teen mothers the support they need to pursue education condemns them and their babies to the vicious circle of poverty and ignorance (Kunio & Sono, 1996). If society expects the girls to succeed with schooling, provision must be made for meeting the special needs of these learners. From this standpoint, we embarked on this project, examining the challenges which schooling teen mothers experienced.

Research questions

Evidence shows that 29% of 14- to 19-year-olds who drop out of school due to pregnancy are able to return to school by age 20, but only 34% of the girls complete Grade 12 (Grant & Hallman, 2006). We therefore pose questions about the challenges the girls face in pursuing their secondary school education in public schools. The underlying premise of the study is that adequate support to the teen mothers would enable most of the girls to stay in school and succeed in their Senior Certificate Examinations. Such an argument challenges constructions of, on the one hand, teen mothers as recipients of concerted support and, on the other hand, public schools and homes as envi-

ronments which should provide uncontested support to the girls. We posed the following questions:

- What challenges do schooling teen mothers face when they are pursuing their secondary school education? How do the challenges come about?
- How do public schools, parents and communities respond to the needs of teen mothers as scholars? Why are the teen mothers perceived as the 'other' and treated differently at school?

Theoretical framework

In order to understand the issues raised and find answers to the research questions, we employed the work of Pillow (2004), Mac an Ghaill's (1988) study of the "black sisters", and Foucault's (1978) notion of power and discourse.

Mac an Ghaill's (1988) study offers insights into concerns around the schooling of black young women. His work shows how the young women face schooling challenges due to social divisions which include class, gender and race. Mac an Ghaill's work foregrounds how to focus on young women's strategies of institutional survival that develop in response to the social division that pervades their schooling and their social lives (Mac an Ghaill, 1988). In other words, it provides an appropriate design which can be used to great advantage when studying schooling challenges faced by girls. Pillow (2004) offers an insight into how educational policy is affected by beliefs, values, and attitudes situated in discourses, which in turn impact on schools' responses which could create or limit the educational options of learners. This work also enlightened us on how discourses about teen pregnancy/motherhood are constructed, how the discourses work, and what educational opportunities the discourses may suppress or open up for schooling teen mothers. Underdevelopment in conceptions of power in the frameworks above led us to rely on Foucault's notion of power and discourse. The notion provided an insight on understanding the marginalisation of the teen mothers at school. The girls are usually marginalised due to discourses about teen pregnancy/motherhood which have developed in societies. According to Foucault (1989) power shapes the subject; but power is also what subordinates the subject. The shaping and subordination processes occur simultaneously. For Foucault, subject shaping and subjection takes place in and through discourse. Discourses rest on, and are responses to, power relations (Luttrell, 2003). The discourses work to ensure, regulate and control that which the institutions like schools want to contain. For instance, schools could marginalise teen mothers in order to deter the behaviour of getting pregnant before completing schooling.

Teen mothers as learners with special needs

While the situation concerning teenage pregnancy/motherhood and schooling problems is not often accounted for in Africa, it is widely accounted for globally (Pillow, 2004; Luttrell, 2003; McDowell, 2003; Chevalier & Viitanen,

2001; Ornstein & Levine, 1997; McGurk, 1993; Creatsas, 1993; Helge, 1989; Olivier, 1996; De Villiers, 1991; Van Vuuren, 1990). Examples of the few authors on the subject of gender and education on the African continent include Eloundou-Enyégué, (2004) who focused on pregnancy-related dropouts and gender inequality in education in Cameroon, Thody and Kaabwe (2000) who have highlighted the critical role of education and gender in Africa, and Leo-Rhynie (1999) who provided tools and sector-specific guidelines for gender mainstreaming.

Locally, Grant and Hallman (2006), and Mokgalabone (1999) showed that situations relating to pregnancies and schooling disturbances are inevitably associated with societal problems. The problems range from ignorance and moral collapse (Helge, 1989) to the sexual abuses of powerless female adolescents (McGurk, 1993), and lastly public ignorance about early menarche (De Villiers, 1991; Creatsas, 1993).

Pillow (2004) found that many teen mothers return to school because of their babies — they are determined to complete schooling for the sake of their babies. However, the girls' difficulty in coping with schooling is attributable to their babies, and also to the fact that educators and parents often give up on them and fail to take their plans seriously once the girls had children (Schultz, 2001:598). Research by the US Department of Education (1992) shows that both pregnancy and parenting are the leading reasons girls give for dropping out of school.

Continuing with schooling for teen mothers may sometimes prove to be an unyielding burden, more especially for those living in unstable home environments. It has been argued that:

Teen parents face an overwhelming number of difficulties. Parental and peer pressures are far more common than support and understanding. Mature, adult decisions are required of emotionally pressured adolescents. Managing to care for an infant and devoting adequate time to school work is a great challenge for the teen parents (Arlington Public School, 2004).

More pressing for these girls are the discourses that have been developed surrounding teen mothering and the effect that they have on their educational experiences, e.g. the discourse of education as a responsibility (Pillow, 2004). This discourse is based on the argument that obtaining an education is no longer a right to teen mothers but something that these girls owe the society if they are not to be welfare dependent and a burden to the taxpayers (Pillow, 2004).

In many situations teenage mothers are subjected to greater risks of socio-economic disadvantage throughout their lives than those who delay childbearing until their twenties. They are generally less educated and tend to have bigger families, and have higher levels of extra-marital unwanted births (McDowell, 2003). In addition, Chevalier and Viitanen (2001) argue that the negative impact of teen motherhood on various adult outcomes is not due to some pre-motherhood characteristics; hence policies aiming to encourage

a return to school and participation in the labour market may be an efficient way to reduce the long-term consequences of teenage pregnancy.

According to the Bill of Rights as contained in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA), Act 108/1996, Section 29 affirms that everybody has the right to basic education. Therefore, it may be improper to deny teen mothers to continue their schooling when they are ready to do so. In 2000 the Gender Commission on Gender Equity reported to the South African Ministry of Education that they had received a number of complaints from teen mother learners concerning the manner in which their schools had treated them. The teen mothers complained that their schools had not allowed them to attend classes because they were mothers (Ministry of Education, 2000).

Pillow (2004) describes the "discourse of contamination" that develops from the perception that the immorality of the teen mother would set a bad example to the student body at school, hence contaminating fellow innocent girls. On the same issue Wolpe *et al.* (1997) reported that some school committees in South Africa were often unwilling to allow the pregnant girls to continue attending classes for fear that they may influence other girls and encourage them to become pregnant.

The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) has worked since 1992 to promote Education For All through advocacy, concrete actions and policy reforms. In the mid-nineties, the Forum successfully lobbied the Ministers of Education in several African countries to change policies that excluded teen mothers from re-entering school. In Malawi, for instance, since 1995 teen mothers have been allowed by the Education department to continue their education after pregnancy (Monsen, 1998). However, it has been reported that the processing of applications for readmission often takes more than a year. This is, however, a setback for these girls who are already battling with community pressure to get married rather than to return to school because they are mothers.

Research method

We were interested in exploring the educational issues, especially concerns and challenges teen mothers as learners faced in the process of trying to complete their schooling. As such, we collected and analysed primary data using a qualitative approach. We opted for a qualitative approach as opposed to quantitative due to the exploratory nature of this research. Qualitative research is defined as "the use of qualitative data such as interviews, documents and participant observation data to understand and explain social phenomena" (Myers, 1997). According to Myers qualitative research methods are designed to help researchers understand people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live. In addition, Rubin and Babbie (1989) argue that the qualitative approach as an inductive approach is eminently effective in determining the deeper meaning of experiences of human beings

and in giving a rich description of the specific phenomena being investigated in reality.

Participants and sampling

Participants were drawn from four of the five¹ randomly selected high schools which were within a radius of 20 km from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in Cape Town where we are based. The sample consisted of three schools located in the townships and two in the suburbs. One of the two schools in the suburb was 100% African while the other was 80% white, with the remaining 20% made up of Africans and coloureds (this school claimed to have no learners who were teen mothering). Two of the schools in the townships were dominated by coloureds and the rest of the students were African; the third school was 100% African. The participants were sampled by picking equal numbers of names from the lists of names of teen-mother learners provided by the heads of schools. Although race was not the focus of this survey the all-African dominated schools had longer lists of names compared to the coloured dominated schools.

The teen mothers who had returned to school after giving birth to their babies were the main respondents. Ten teen mothers and four heads of schools (i.e. one head from each randomly selected school which had teen-mother learners) were individually interviewed. In order to identify schooling teen mothers, we contacted the principals of the randomly selected schools. Although our research had already been explained to them in letters from the Provincial Education Department, we introduced ourselves to them and once again explained to them what our research was all about. Then we asked for lists of names of teen mothers in their respective schools. From each list of names provided, we randomly selected an equal number of teen mothers. All the selected girls were contacted and we explained to them our research project. Then we asked if they would participate in the project as interviewees. The girls who agreed to participate in the research were given letters to their parents asking for their consent to interview their daughter on the topic we were working on. Consent from parents was necessary because the girls were minors. Out of 12 letters of consent sent to the parents, 11 were signed giving us consent to go ahead with the interviews. One girl withdrew from participating in this research.

Four Life Orientation teachers (the special teachers who are concerned with the welfare of the learners) were also included in the sample and were individually interviewed. In addition, all parents of the teen mothers who participated in the research were asked to be interviewed but only six agreed to do so. However, one parent withdrew from participating for personal reasons.

Data gathering and analysis

All the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. After completion of each interview, we transcribed the tape recordings. This transcription

process helped us to get closer to the data — we were able to think about what the interviewee was saying and how this was said. Then we read each typed transcript several times while listening to the corresponding audio tape to ensure accuracy of the transcription and to come to a better overall understanding of each participant's experience. This process of transcribing and listening also prompted additional questions for subsequent sets of interviews.

We used the "highlighting" approach according to Van Manen (1990) to uncover the thematic aspects of the teen mothers' schooling experiences. In this approach, we read the text several times and statements that appeared to be revealing about the phenomenon were highlighted. Themes were identified by highlighting material in the interview transcripts that spoke to the teen mothers' experiences. Then we selected each of these highlighted phrases or sentences and tried to ascertain what meaning was put forward in the highlighted material. After identifying the themes, we embarked on the process of recording the themes and describing how they were interrelated. Rewriting continued until we felt that the themes and the relationship between the themes were identified as accurately as possible.

Trustworthiness

In order to establish trustworthiness, the interview transcripts were taken back to the respective respondents and they were asked to verify if that was really how they had wanted to respond to the respective questions. Most of the respondents adhered to what they had said during the interviews. The few respondents who wished to change their responses did so, but the changes were semantics and choice of words used.

Similarly, coding of the raw data was done by two persons independently. There were obviously discrepancies on some codes and we worked together till we had reached agreement on 90% of the codes. Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that while check-coding aids definitional clarity, it is also a good reliability check.

Caution was taken to make sure that research participants were those that were knowledgeable and were close to teen mothers' experiences, the events, actions, process and setting — our concern in this study. This idea echoed Miles and Huberman (1994) where they posit that data from some informants were "better" than from others, especially when the informants knew the situation very well or had experienced it.

Ethics

Consideration was given to complying with ethical measures in the course of conducting research of this sensitive topic. In order to ensure the safety and rights of the participants, they were informed about the prevailing ethical consideration, for instance, informed consent, permission from the Education Department, rights of the participants and their parents, voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality (Berg, 1995). We obtained informed consent from each participant. This was obtained in writing, although oral con-

sent was sometimes acceptable after the participant had had the opportunity to carefully consider the risks and benefits and to ask any pertinent questions. The informed consent was an ongoing process. For instance, before switching on the tape recorder during interviews, we asked the participant if it was fine to use it. Sometimes during interviews, when respondents indicated discomfort in answering some questions by their body language, they were reminded of their rights and that they were not obliged to give information if they did not want to do so.

Privacy and confidentiality concerns were given the deserved consideration (Cohen & Manion, 1994). We were sensitive to not only how information was to be protected from unauthorized observation, but also if and how participants were to be notified of any unforeseen findings from the research that they may, or may not, have wanted to know. The ethical principle refers to the obligation on our part as the researchers to respect each participant as a person capable of making an informed decision regarding participation in the research study. We ensured that the participants had received full disclosure of the nature of the study, benefits and alternatives, with an extended opportunity to ask questions.

Results

From the transcription of the interviews it was clear that the support the teen mothers got from home and school was not enough to facilitate their schooling. As such they experienced many challenges. Support for schooling teen mothers was the main theme identified and this was divided into three sub-themes that included:

- Support from school
- Support from home
- Support from the community

Another theme identified was resistance to schooling teen mothers against 'otherness'. The girls manifested resistance through:

- Skipping school days
- Keeping pregnancies invisible

Support from school

The results of the interviews showed that the teen mothers did not get enough support from the school. They were not considered as learners with special needs. The lack of support at school could be seen in the following subcategories:

- Lack of support from teachers
- Lack of counselling to combat stigma attached to teenage pregnancy
- Misunderstanding and pressure from teachers and fellow learners

Lack of support from teachers

Teachers in most cases were not willing to go through the lessons the girls had missed due to motherhood. For instance, a teen mother could be absent

from school for days because she had to be with her baby in hospital. When she came back to class teachers would not help her making up the missed lessons. One Life Orientation (LO) teacher and a principal had the following to say, respectively, on this point:

... if it means missing out lessons, then the teacher will only tell her to consult her friends about what they have been learning when she was absent and if she has got questions she may ask the teacher but not that the teacher would go through the whole material again ... so they really miss a lot because they don't even start from the beginning ... and most teachers do not really feel sorry for a teen mother when she misses lessons because she was busy with her baby, because she is facing the consequences of her own behaviour.

and

... she could come back and say, sorry, I was with my baby in Red-Cross hospital so I couldn't come to school, and so I would not say alright then my baby we did this last week so, no! no! ... its her own business all I say to her is, listen we have done a lot the past week when you were not here, so ask other learners what we have done and try to do your best ... nothing is put in place.

Bloem (2000) argues that teachers may need professionals to come and inform them about handling teens and their situations, and they need in-service training to keep track of changes that the society is facing. The assumption is that teachers should help teens under such circumstances; unfortunately, some teachers consider the teen mothers' situation a private matter and none of their concern (Olivier, 2000). Because there is anecdotal information that some normal learners who miss school are assisted with the lessons they miss, we can conclude that teen mothers are in this case marginalized.

Lack of counselling to combat stigma attached to teenage pregnancy

The survey showed that teen mothers came back to school without going through any counselling to prepare them to deal with their stigma, parenthood, and schooling simultaneously. As such most of the teen mothers got overwhelmed by their situation in school and some failed to cope resulting in school dropout. All the teen mothers interviewed expressed concern that they had never been offered professional counselling on how they could get themselves ready to face their new situation:

... nobody offered counselling to me and even the teachers did not counsel me when I came back to school (Grade 10 teen mother)

... there was no counselling and I don't know anybody who could do that. No not even from the community or the school. (Grade 11 teen mother)

I don't know anything about counselling (Grade 10 teen mother)

According to the heads of schools, there was no provision of professional counselling to the teen mother as they were coming back to the school system after becoming mothers:

We don't have any provision of professional counselling as a school

... we don't have any counselling for these teen mothers

However, according to the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) policy of 2003 on managing learner pregnancy in public schools, "the learner must be considered to be a learner with special needs with access to counselling by professionals of the Specialised Learner and Educator Support (SLES) component with the Education Management Development Centre (EMDC)". According to the policy, the principal of the school should manage and co-ordinate the process. Despite the presence of the policy on managing learner pregnancy in public schools, education personnel remained ambivalent about organising services like professional counselling for the teen mothers. The principals seem to be too busy for co-ordination of the counselling to the girls. Another challenge here is that professional counselling in the public schools is not readily available because there are very few professional counsellors to cater for a large number of schools.

Misunderstanding and pressure from teachers and fellow learners

According to the findings of this study, teen mothers felt some teachers did not empathise with them and they were expected to perform and behave just like any other learner in their respective classes. 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 hadn't satisfied the class requirements. One of them expressed their concern like this (a Grade 9 teen mother):

... because my baby is crying all the time she doesn't want to go to anybody I don't have time to do my homework, teachers are nagging, I come to school the next morning sleepy, ... I wake up at night because she is crying constantly, teachers are nagging all the time in class, ... sometimes you feel like you have got all the world on your shoulders ...

In addition the LO teacher, in reply to the question whether her office received any complaints from the teen mothers about intimidation by their teachers and fellow students at school, said:

With teachers, we are people of different backgrounds with different characters and I cannot rule out such behaviour though they will not say it literally, but it also depends on the attitude of the child ... but sometimes we find out that the learners who are misbehaving or making unkind statements about the teen mothers are a few girls so we try to reason with them otherwise they make the learning process of these teen mothers a hell, because they are under pressure, they are not happy, they are lonely ...

Social science researchers and school personnel are of the opinion that teen pregnancy is linked with school delinquency and dropouts (Pillow, 2004:117). In addition, Lees (1987) reported that boys and girls verbally abuse 'othered' girls and their participation in class is equally unwelcome, and they are at best ignored or at worst ridiculed or put down.

Commentating on the girls who come to school while pregnant, the LO teacher said:

... when the girl continues coming to school she experiences a lot of intimidation ... and prejudice from both the learners and teachers

Pillow (2004:111) argues that “teen mothers are often described as and assumed to be ‘poor students’ or ‘incapable students’” Some media have portrayed the adolescent mother as “a failure — the ‘bad’ girl, who behaved uncontrollably, irresponsibly, and immorally” (Pillow, 2004:116). Nevertheless, only two of the interviewed teen mothers in this study indicated that they fell pregnant because they wanted to while for the rest it was either accidental or they were forced to have unprotected sex.

We also found that when a teen mother quarrelled with other learners, they usually picked on the teen mother’s situation as a mother. Sometimes this behaviour resulted in their discomfort when they were in the school environment and this affected their learning and collaboration with fellow learners. The principal at a school noted that:

... when girls get into a fight like petty arguments and if one girl knows the other has got a baby, sometimes would use that to hurt the girl ... other girls would make points, remarks about that ... we have already had these cases in the past.

In the same vein, teen mothers commented on gossiping and saying unkind things about them:

... some students would be talking to one another laughing and looking at me but when I come close to them they would stop talking so I knew they were talking about me because I have a baby ... so sometimes I feel left out, but there is nothing I can do I just have to ignore them (Grade 12 teen mother).

... sometimes it is like a fashion show when you walk down the corridors everyone is looking at you, you are really the centre of attention ... but this makes me feel out of place, but I can’t stop coming to school because I need to be educated so that I could support myself and my baby (Grade 10 teen mother).

... sometimes other students do tease me because I have a baby whilst at school ... (Grade 12 teen mother).

Arlington Public School (2004) argue that peer pressure is usually more common than support and understanding of the teen mothers. As such they really need mature, adult decisions if they are to cope.

Support from home

We found that teen mothers may fail to succeed with their schooling because the support they got from home was insufficient to see them through with their education. The lack of support from home can be categorised into the following themes:

- Parents attitude due to stigma attached to teenage pregnancy
- Communication breakdown at home
- Socio-economic status of the family

Parents' attitude due to stigma attached to teenage pregnancy

Some parents of teen mothers were reluctant to provide support to their daughters. They also did not understand what their daughter was going through as a young mother, such that the parents did not bother to help their daughter deal with her situation. Sometimes the parents distanced themselves from the girls because they felt ashamed that the community would look down upon the family because of their child's actions. A parent commented on her feelings:

I was so shocked to know that she was pregnant and embarrassed that my daughter got pregnant at such a very young age ... Sometimes I do help her with the baby but sometimes because I want to take a break from the baby then I just tell her to know what to do because that is what she wanted she just has to face the consequences ... she really has to learn a lesson that, that was a very bad thing to do ... sometimes I do not provide her with everything she wants because I still feel bitter with what she did.

In the same vein, a LO teacher confirmed that:

some parents would just ignore her needs for the baby and try to turn away from her only tell her that I did not make a decision for you to have a child so that is your responsibility you should know what to do, that is what you wanted ... and there are also some parents who when they discover that their daughter is pregnant, they come to report to school with the aim that the school should expel the girls, that is, the parent does this as a punishment to the girl.

On this issue, Pillow (2004:11) argued that "all teen mothers need help and support. They need the support that any mother parenting as a single-parent with limited income needs."

Communication breakdown

Sometimes parents favoured the siblings of a teen mother as a way of punishing her; and this usually resulted in a communication breakdown between the parents and the teen mother. This implied that there may have been nobody at home with whom to share her experiences at school. In replying to the question 'Does your daughter complain about mocking and bullying by fellow students and teachers?' One parent said:

I know she does face such problems but she cannot come to me to complain anything about that because she knows I would tell her that is what she wanted she just has to face the consequences ... so she keeps all that to herself ... and as a parent I cannot be going around pleading with people to stop harassing my daughter because she has a baby whilst very young ... she has already embarrassed me and I do not want people to be laughing at me all the time ...

Such parents did not want to be involved in the schooling of the teen mothers. Since the parents had given up on the teen mothers, they [parents] did not consider creating a sound educational environment at home for the girls as a priority. Consequently, the parents' inconsideration may have had a ripple

effect on the teachers' attitude towards the teen mothers. Since teen mothers did not have time to concentrate on their schoolwork at home, their teachers got annoyed with them. The teachers thought the girls did not complete tasks which should have been done at home because they were incompetent. The teachers labelled the teen mothers as shirkers or depraved because they did not obey the teacher's instructions such as completing homework. In most cases the teachers blamed the girls for their status and often gave up on them academically. Schultz (2001:584) narrates that "too often, pregnancy during high school is a signal for school personnel and families to abandon young women, designating them as school failures".

Socio-economic status of the family

It seems many teen mothers come from financially challenged families and the parent(s) cannot afford babysitting for the grandchild. The lack of support from the fathers of the children multiplies the challenges experienced by the teen mothers. When none of the relatives is available to look after the baby, the teen mother would be absent from school or would not be able to complete homework. A parent commented:

I look after the baby when she has to go to school ... but sometimes when I have to go out to work then she has to take care of the baby herself ... she has to stay home looking after her child. I don't have money to send the baby to a crèche or to hire a babysitter ... actually she is ... burdening me because I have three children to look after plus her baby ... but I don't have a husband, and her boyfriend denied being responsible for her pregnancy so he does not provide any support for the baby.

Similarly, most of the teen mothers interviewed indicated that they did not have time to do their school work at home because when they were back from school their relatives who took care of the children now wanted to be free from the babies and their families could not afford a babysitter. And as indicated by most of the girls in the study, the babies' fathers denied responsibility which meant the fathers did not provide either social or financial support for the children. In some situations it was worse because the girls did not have time and space to concentrate on their school work within the home environment. The struggles that the girls experience was narrated as follows:

it is not easy when you have a baby, when sometimes I want to do school work ... I don't have time ... so it is hard to find time ... I have to do the household chores, look after my baby ... and we are a number of us in my family but we all live in just one room so it is also hard for me to do my homework at night but during the day I am also busy with the household chores and the baby ... I cannot study at home because I don't have time and space ...but I also get tired by night ... sometimes I do not have time to do my homework ... sometimes the baby always wants to be with me so I just ignore the school work because I can't do homework when I am with the baby.

Pillow (2004:117) has argued that "teens most impacted by teen pregnancy

are young women who are already living in impoverished conditions prior to becoming pregnant". Most working class households are too poor to provide for their children's education and the indirect costs of sending them to school (Swainson *et al.*, 1998). The costs of school uniforms and fees and baby sitting for grandchildren, for example, have been argued by several studies to deter parents from sending girls to school. In addition, the need for girls' labour at home is considered one of the major constraints to girls' education whereby girls spend more time than boys on domestic chores, hence limiting time available for school assignments (Sey, 1997).

Support from the community

The communities in which the teen mothers lived had a big impact on their lives. Instead of supporting the teen mothers to complete their schooling, the communities discouraged the girls from attending school. The community usually treated the teen mothers as the 'other girls', those that have low morals. As such, the community did not like to see teen mothers learning together with peers in the same school or class. According to a LO teacher:

when they are discovered to be pregnant they are sent to me as a 'life skills teacher' ... then we tell the parent that we are not really supposed to chase this child away from school but at the same time according to the morals there are people who come from the township to school complaining that why do teachers allow learners with big tummies to come to school wearing uniforms ...

One of the areas of conflict between the teen mothers and the communities was on the culturally prescribed dress code of pregnant women. According to cultural values, pregnant women are not expected to dress in a way which emphasizes the growing body. Women, who contravene this dressing code, not only embarrass themselves, but rather embarrass the rest of the women folk with them. Teen mothers, by dressing in school uniform which by design emphasizes the growing body, contravened this code. Unfortunately, the schools emphasized that every learner must be in uniform when coming to school; changing the design of the uniform (for example, changing the uniform to a maternity gown which could be socially acceptable), disqualified the attire as a school uniform. As such the pregnant teens had to be in normal school uniform but this made them ridiculed on their way to and from school. In response to that many of the teen mothers dropped of school.

The emphasis of the discourse of contamination that develops around teenage pregnancy is another area of conflict between the teen mothers and the communities. One LO teacher narrated that:

actually some girls are reported that they are pregnant by other parents, because they are worried that if they are allowed to come to school, then what sort of message are they sending to their children who they are learning together with in class ...

Due to the fear of contaminating the other learners, the community forced the school to bar the teen mothers from attending school. The community forced

the school to expel the girls despite the managing learner pregnancy policy guaranteeing teen mothers a right to education in public schools. When the school complied with the policy and resisted the demands of the community to force teen mothers out of school, some community members found ways and means like intimidating the teen mothers on their way to and from school in order to prevent them from attending school.

Resistance to otherness

The teen mothers realized they had a responsibility to bring up their babies. Therefore, they had to be in school to get an academic qualification which could help them to get a job. However, schools influenced by the cues from society have in most cases 'othered' the teen mothers and perceived them as unfit schooling subjects. As such the girls felt oppressed. Anyon (1983) argued that

the interrelationship of accommodation and resistance is an element of the response of all oppressed groups and that such a process is manifested in the reaction of women and girls to the contradictory situation that they face. From the results of this survey, the teen mothers are manifesting their resistance in the following ways:

Keeping the pregnancy invisible

Because the society did not want to see the teen mothers with their big tummies going to school, and some pregnant girls were afraid and ashamed to be seen by their teachers and fellow learners, they resorted to hiding their pregnancies so that nobody could notice them and, therefore not treat them as an 'other girl' but equally. The girls perceived education as a passport to well paying jobs. A Grade 9 teen mother commented that:

when I was pregnant my belly wasn't showing big so not many people knew I was pregnant ... and I didn't stop coming to school because I know if get education I will be able to find a good job ... but it was hard for me to wake up in the morning ... so the few days I was absent from school was just like anybody falling sick, so when I came back it was just like normal because many do not know my situation.

Pillow (2004:134) commented that by keeping the pregnancies invisible until birth when the pregnant body stops fitting into the school, the girls support school practices of "pregnancy as a cold". Some of the girls she interviewed on this issue said that as students they felt like they had never had babies.

Skipping some school days and reacting to teachers' prejudices

Some girls got fed up with the nagging and prejudices of the teachers. As such they sometimes decided to stay away from school. One teen mother articulated her feelings on this matter:

... you feel like you have got the entire world on your shoulders ... so you break from school for a week or two ...

Teachers embarrassed teen mothers because they had prejudice against

them. The embarrassment which the teachers caused on teen mothers due to ridiculing in front of their fellow learners seemed to have a big impact on the girls. Some teen mothers got fed up and resisted the teachers' use of judgemental language in the presence of the fellow learners and spoke back to the negative remarks or attitudes they encountered. Unfortunately, the teachers usually misinterpreted the teen mothers' responses. As such the teachers interpreted the teen mothers as being problem learners who were not even worthy of empathising with. Luttrell (2003:18) observed that the regulation of "proper conduct" for "girls in their condition" (and the girls' resistance to this regulation) was a recurring source of conflict between the teachers and the teen mothers.

Conclusions

Teen mothers choose to continue with their schooling because they consider academic qualifications as a ticket to participating in the labour market. However, based on the results of this study, it may be argued that teen mothers lack support from their homes, schools and community for them to be able to complete their schooling successfully. And instead of getting support from the three environments, they get misunderstanding and pressure. This is really hard for these emotionally immature teenagers. Pearton (1999) argues that adolescents are mostly too young and emotionally immature when they first fall pregnant such that they need tremendous support to facilitate their schooling.

Because teen mothers are not getting enough support both from school and their homes it may be concluded that it is unlikely that these girls would successfully complete their schooling. Consequently, they cannot compete on the labour market for well paying jobs and as such the teen mothers and their kids will live in poverty.

It is unfortunate that some teachers do not understand the teen mothers' situation as learners and they are expected to perform and behave just like any other student in their respective classes. This may not be in line with the Western Cape Education Department Policy of 2003 on Managing Learner Pregnancy in public schools which indicates that, "the learner must be considered to be a learner with special needs". Their problems come when they have to miss classes because they have to take care of their babies, for instance, when they have to be with their babies in hospital for some time or if there is nobody at home to take care of the baby. While it could be argued that learners could miss school for various reasons, legitimate or illegitimate, and the responsibility rests with the learners to catch up with the rest of the class, some teachers are not willing to assist when the teen mothers are unable to make connections with existing knowledge just because they were busy with their babies.

While it may be assumed that the teachers would support and encourage the teen mothers to deal with their situation which makes them 'learners with special needs', the teachers themselves might be in need of guidance or

sensitisation with respect to how they can encourage and support teen mothers academically. That is, teachers may need some training on how to cope with teen mothers so that they do not make these students' lives worse because of their insensitivity.

Teen mothers as learners are also misunderstood and pressurised by their fellow learners. For instance, when a teen mother quarrels with the other learners, they usually pick on the teen mother's situation as a mother. This attack may result in their discomfort when they are in the school environment and their social interaction with fellow learners may be negatively affected. The social interaction is important according to constructivists, like Bruner, who argues that the teacher in the learning process is just a facilitator who encourages learners to discover principles for themselves and construct knowledge usually in collaboration with other learners (Bruner, 1966).

Therefore, there is a need to make the learning environment of teen mothers socially welcoming. That is, the Education department may introduce separate classes or schools for these girls, however, making sure that this does not exclude them from any right to acquiring education as is the case with normal learners in all public schools. Furthermore, this could also be optional to those who feel they cannot cope within the normal school. One way of making sure this separate schooling does not exclude the girls could be by offering quality education which will be comparable to their fellow learners in regular schools.

One advantage of having separate schools for teen mothers is that it would give them a chance of meeting learners who are in a similar situation and support and understand each other. This would also help to eliminate the community's idea of contamination. That is, there would be no fear from other parents when they see a pregnant mother going to school because she is separated from the so-called normal learners.

However, if these teen mothers are to continue learning in the regular schools then professional counselling should be readily available to them if they are to withstand the ridicule and prejudice from other learners and teachers. The stigma may further affect their vulnerable self-esteem and psyche. It is unfortunate that the counselling provided under the pregnancy management policy is not known by many learners who fall pregnant while schooling. This is a big blow for a teenager who is completely undeveloped psychologically (Nathanson, 1990).

From the results of the study, parents' attitude and the economics of the families the teen mothers come from have a great impact on their schooling. Some parents get angry with their daughter when she falls pregnant. In some cases, this anger results in communication breakdown for a long period between the two parties and when this happens the girl has no support from the parents. In cases like these, Taylor (1997) suggested that a mediator between the girl and her parents should be used.

Because the girl feels insecure, she might resort to other unhealthy behaviours like prostitution and drug abuse which means completely dropping

out of school. Nevertheless, in situations like these, parents too may need to go through counselling whereby they may be helped to accept the situation and to be able to support their daughter. This counselling may be organised by the school in collaboration with the Social Services within the community. The lack of funding for babysitting may result in girls not having time for school work hence leading to their failure in school or completely dropping out of school. This situation is common among the schooling teen mothers in the townships where many families are relatively poor. It may be helpful if the schools, in collaboration with the Social Services available in the communities, were to readily provide crèche or babysitting facilities to the learners. While such provision could aid the girls, it is likely that communities may not welcome the move because that would be seen as promoting teen motherhood. Therefore, there is need to sensitise the communities on the girls' rights to education, and also stress to the communities that education of the teen mothers will not only benefit the girls but also their babies and the community as a whole.

By keeping their pregnancies invisible, teen mothers avoid being 'othered' and as such they are treated just like any other learner both at school and at home. Because there is no room for prejudice from teachers and learners, their social interaction is not affected, and therefore, the collaboration with other learners in the process of learning is not affected. It may be argued that while keeping pregnancy invisible might be a very hard thing to do, the idea may be empowering and the learning process of the teen mother not socially affected. For some girls, it may mean that the people at school will never notice she is a mother; and this is what most schooling teen mothers would wish for.

However, skipping school days, as a way of resisting negative practices like ridicule and nagging from teachers because the learners has not been able to complete work due to lack of time, may not help the teen mother succeed academically. When a learner skips classes, it means she may not be able to get the knowledge her peers are getting by listening to the teacher and learning in a group. Because she misses a number of lessons it may not be easy for her to satisfy the requirements for one to succeed academically.

While the suggestions above may help teen mothers complete their schooling successfully, the best solution would be to find preventative measures to reduce the occurrences of teenage pregnancy. There is a need therefore to address all the learners in the schools to highlight the challenges which teen mothers are facing so that the still unaffected learners will become aware of the situation, in the hope of discouraging behaviours that lead to teenage pregnancies. Teen parenting is a serious problem in the African community and most children born to teenage mothers have very few chances in life due to the poverty they are born into. It would, therefore, help to encourage teen girls and boys not to have children before they are financially able to support themselves. There is also a need to make the youth realise that they expose themselves to risks of contracting HIV/AIDS if they engage

in unprotected sex. Reducing the number of teens who engage in unprotected sex would help in solving the problem and at the same time HIV/AIDS infections amongst the youth could be reduced.

In summary, we found that while schooling teen mothers consider academic qualifications to be very important, they may not be able to succeed academically if the support they need from school, home, and the community is insufficient or absent. All this happens because they are 'othered' and consequently the teen mother feels disempowered. While resistance may be beneficial to the teen mother, it may lead to their failure as learners.

Note

1. One of the randomly selected schools reported that the institution did not have any teen mothers registered at the school, at least at the time we were collecting data for this research

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