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P U B L I S H I N G

Research Article

Resilience of Pregnant and Parenting Learners to Pursue Educational Aspirations Within a Stigmatising School Setting in Rural South Africa

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Abstract

This study was premised on the increased demand for enrolment of pregnant and parenting learners (PPLs) at ordinary or conventional schools in South Africa due to the democratisation of access to education after the 1994 democratic dispensation. The study investigated how pregnant and parenting schoolgirls were resilient to continue with their educational aspirations at formal schools despite the social challenges that they faced in the school, family and community environments. A qualitative case study design was employed, and for confidentiality of the study participants, a face to face key-participant individual interview was the main data gathering instrument. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to select a total of 8 PPLs, 4 learners from each of the two schools who were either pregnant or had given birth at the time of data gathering to express their coping strategies within a formal school setting. Study results revealed that setting new goals after pregnancy, desire to achieve self-efficacy, strategies against hate language and support from their significant others were key contributors to the resilience for the continued pursuit of the PPLs' educational aspirations. The main recommendation from the study is for school management teams to help build a safe, child friendly and inclusive social environment among the school-based education duty bearers.

Key words: pregnancy, educational aspirations, formal schooling, resilience, self-efficacy

1. Introduction

Teenage pregnancy and early marriage continue to push girls out of school in Sub-Saharan Africa (Stromquist, 2005; Singh, 2003; Chigona & Chetty, 2008; Runhare & Hwami. 2014) and is a challenge for most developing nations' efforts to achieve the Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) targets of eradication of gender inequalities and improving the quality of education (UNESCO, 2005; Stromquist, 2005). In most traditional societies, teenage or unplanned

pregnancy outside a defined matrimonial arrangement is usually negatively perceived as an indication of sexual immorality (Luttrell, 2003). Such negative beliefs and attitudes may impact negatively on the educational participation, outcomes and career aspirations of young mothers (Kelly, 2000, Makgalabone, 1999; Chevalier & Viittanen, 2001).

To reduce gender inequalities in education, most United Nations (UN) member states, South Africa included, ratified and domesticated international conventions that aim to provide more opportunities for the education of the girl child and women in general (Chevalier & Viitanen, 2001). This paper reports on the results of a case study that investigated how eight pregnant and parenting learners (PPLs) remained resilient to pursue their educational aspirations within a formal but socially conservative school environment in a rural South African setting.

2. Literature Study

Research indicates that stringent education policies, grade repetition, educational disruption, and stigma in and out of the school premises are some of the contributing factors to the poor educational participation and opportunities for girls who fall pregnant while in school or college (Hosie 2002; Williams, 2010). In South Africa, however, the constitution's Bill of Rights defines education as a basic human right which should be accessed by every citizen, including girls who might fall pregnant or get married while at school. Further, the South African Department of Education has policy guidelines for schools and the immediate education stakeholders such as parents and guardians on how to manage and support schoolgirls who choose to continue with their education after falling pregnant (Department of Education, 2007). However, despite the existence of these democratic constitutional and education policy provisions, PPLs usually encounter social challenges which might obstruct their educational participation and achievements (Runhare & Hwami, 2014).

2.1 Educational challenges of teen mothers

Research indicates that teen mothers experience educational challenges such as grade-repetition, school disengagement and poor discipline and academic achievement (Furstenberg, 2007; SmithBattle, 2005, Nkosi & Pretorius, 2019). One reason for the poor academic output of teen mothers can be attributed to high rate of school absenteeism and inadequate support from their families (Malahlela & Chireshe, 2012; Chetty & Chigona, 2008). Ferre et al. (2013) posit that parenting schoolgirls are more likely to discontinue school and not reach the same educational levels as their peers who do not become pregnant. However, there are some teen mothers who may make it in life through education despite facing disadvantaged educational situations. It is against such negative conditions that this study sought to explore the factors that contributed to the resilience of some of the teen mothers to remain in school and complete their schooling against all odds.

2.2 Negative societal attitudes and stigma towards PPLs

Studies by Runhare (2010) and Odu, Ayodele and Isola (2015) revealed that it can be difficult for a young mother to return to school because both the school and community fear that young mothers may become a bad influence to other learners in the school. It is against such negative perceptions to teen motherhood that in most of the Sub-Saharan African region, while policies that allow pregnant schoolgirls to either continue with or return to school after giving birth, most of them would rather voluntarily drop out of school due to the stigma attached to teenage pregnancy (Chigona & Chetty, 2008; Runhare, 2010; Runhare & Hwami, 2014). In South Africa, Chigona and Chetty (2008) and Grant and Hallman (2006) observed that a supportive family environment is a key determinant factor for pregnant or parenting schoolgirls' decision to continue with their education. However, a study by Runhare (2010) indicated that the family may also be a stigmatising environment, resulting in PPLs losing their childhood rights in the family. In Africa, societal conservatism to childbearing and

breastfeeding contributed in limiting women participation in the public spheres like schools and the workplace (Chilisa, 2002; Mensch, et al., 2001; Manzini, 2001).

2.3   Socio-economic challenges of PPLs

Socio-economic status is based on family income, parental educational level, parental occupation, and social status in the community. Some studies have indicated that pregnant teenagers experience more social and economic maladjustment challenges than their non-pregnant counterparts (Malahlela & Chireshe, 2012; Galabo & Gempes, 2017). A survey conducted in South Africa revealed that there could be a relationship between teenage pregnancy and one's socio-economic background. The survey found that low-income and rural communities had a higher rate of teenage pregnancy than high-income and urban communities (Panday, et al., 2009). Without adequate educational opportunities, teenage pregnancy could therefore be a hindrance to social mobility.

2.4   Resilience theory as a source of inspiration for PPLs

A study by Odu, Ayodele and Isola (2015) found that early childbearing has a negative impact on the socio-economic status of PPLs because it curtails the number of years they may spend in formal education, unless they developed some strategies to resist the negative impact that early child bearing may have on their educational aspirations. This study was therefore underpinned by resilience theory (Masten & Obradovic, 2006; Van Brenda, 2018) because educational resilience is necessary for PPLs to pursue their educational aspirations after falling pregnant while at school. According to Van Breda (2018:2), resilience theory has "its roots in the study of adversity and an interest in how adverse life experiences impact harmfully on people", yet some people can find an escape route from detrimental experiences to their life opportunities. Masten and Obradovic (2006: 14) define resilience theory as a "broad conceptual umbrella, covering many concepts related to positive patterns of adaptation in the context of adversity". Similarly, Theron (2016) explains resilience theory as the process of adjusting to a adverse social system by focusing on mediating factors or processes that enable positive life outcomes. Williams (2019:25) further explains that resilience theory "focuses more on the strengths rather than the shortcomings while finding factors that can protect individuals and help them overcome adversity, instead of looking for weaknesses". On the same note, Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) posit that the resilience theory focuses on understanding healthy development despite risk, and on strengths rather than weaknesses. Therefore, this study investigated educational resilience which motivated some PPLs to pursue their educational aspirations despite all the adversities such as stigma, societal negative attitudes, disadvantaged socio-economic conditions and a generally hostile school environment.

3.   The Research Focus

Despite the existence of policy initiatives that democratise educational access and participation for the girl child, early pregnancy and child marriages continue to be one central reason for the gap in educational success between male and females at all levels of education, which has not been eradicated globally in terms of the millennium development goals to which most UN member states ratified at the beginning of the 21st century (Grant & Hallman, 2006). Since the South African national education policy provides for continued enrolment of pregnant and parenting teenagers in formal schools (Department of Education, 2007; Runhare & Hwami, 2014), we investigated the source of resilience of eight South African pregnant and parenting learners who continued with their schooling at an ordinary school despite the negative attitudes and stigma they encountered.

4. Methodological Approach

Two rural schools facing high learner pregnancy, were identified as suitable case study sites for an in-depth investigation of how pregnant and former pregnant teenagers experienced schooling in a socially hostile school and community environment to teen pregnancy and motherhood. The case study strategy was found appropriate as the two study sites were purposively selected for rich and in-depth data collection from eight pregnant and parenting learners who studied at two schools (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). The relevance of case studies for depth is also alluded to by Berg (2001:225) who recommends that, "rich, detailed, in depth information characterise the type of information gathered in case studies". The two schools were therefore selected based on the information richness as there were pregnant and parenting learners (PPLs) who were willing to tell their life stories.

4.1 The research sample and sampling procedures

Purposive and snowball sampling methods (Seamark & Lings, 2004; Creswell, 2007; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Silverman, 2005) were found relevant to identify and select willing a total of eight pregnant and parenting learners at the two study sites. In view of some negative attitudes towards teenage pregnancy in society (Chilisa, 2002; Lemons, 2009), the population of pregnant and former pregnant learners who were willing to participate in this study was small. For this reason, we chose the purposeful and snowballing sampling methods whereby one identified PPL would help identify another similar participant who was willing to be involved in the study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Sample representative in this case was defined in terms of rich information from PPLs which was required for the study. Consequently, at the two selected schools, PPLs were preferred because they experienced schooling within a potentially stigmatising school environment to teen pregnancy. The eight purposively selected PPLs, four from each school, participated in an individualised face to face interview to explore their past and present educational needs, aspirations, experiences and challenges.

5. Ethical Measures

As an ethical measure, all the participants, their parents, spouses, and school principals consented before the study was conducted. Further to that, measures were taken to protect the personal dignity and confidentiality of the pregnant and parenting learners, as key participants of the study by interviewing them individually in a private space (Albertse, 2006; Moss, 2004; Lemmer & Van Wyk, 2004). Further, the actual names of participants are not indicated where their ideas are reported in this paper. Snowballing sampling was also adopted as an ethical measure for confidentiality of the eight PPLs. Accordingly, narrative statements made by the eight PPLs are allocated the following pseudo names; Arleen, Angie, Attie and Assie from school A and Bella, Bessie, Belie and Bettie from School B.

6. Results

From the gathered narratives of the eight PPLs who availed their life and school experiences, we organised the results into the following two main themes and four corresponding subthemes.

Theme	Subthemes
Educational aspirations of pregnant and parenting learners (PPLs)	• New goal setting after pregnancy
Motivating factors to PPLs' educational aspirations	• Desire for self-efficacy • Strategies against hate language • Support from significant others

This study revealed that the educational needs and aspirations as well as challenges of PPLs are central factors in defining achievement of their educational endeavour. We therefore identified motivating factors that engineered the resilience of PPLs to pursue with their schooling in spite a hostile school setting; namely new goals that emerged after pregnancy, the desire to achieve a self-reliant life, resistance to stigma and support from their sympathetic peers and confidants or significant other people in their lives. On the other hand, the condition of pregnancy itself and the public nature of teen pregnancy as a master status label was a demotivating factor which PPLs fought against in pursuit of their educational aspirations (Turner, 2004; Mutekwe & Mutekwe, 2012; Molla, 2016).

6.1 New goal setting after pregnancy

Interviews with PPLs revealed that teenage pregnancy is a phenomenon that is unexpected, which one is unprepared for, could disrupt the career plans and aspirations of a girl-child. However, for those PPLs who chose to continue with their schooling, all hope for future was not lost as some PPLs mentally reengineered a new resolution to remain in school and to restore lost trust from the immediate significant people around them. In this regard one grade twelve PPL, Assie at School A resolved that "*I betrayed many people, but I have to face the future and make sure that I achieve my goal of going further with my education*". In the same vein, her counterpart, Bella at School B expressed the desire to rise beyond her current circumstance, to restore her reputation. She therefore indicated that, "*I want to show people that I can become something in life, especially my mother who has forgiven me for what I did*". Positive refocussing of goals in life was therefore a resilient instrument which strengthened PPLs to remain in school despite their social disadvantaged condition.

    Similar sentiments of goal-reorientation were also expressed by other PPLs who also acknowledged that pregnancy could only delay their educational achievement, as illustrated by Bella from School B who felt that, "*Pregnancy is not a barrier to achieving my goal. I will achieve my goal but a little bit longer than expected*". In the same vein, Arleen also insisted that, "*my educational plans have not changed because I am now pregnant*".

    The above extracts illustrate that new goal setting is an important factor that influenced PPLs' resolution and resilience to remain in school despite challenges such as possible delays in achieving their educational goals, change of support from friends and educators, and feelings of disappointing significant people in their lives. From the above testimonies, the PPLs seemed to have positively changed their attitude towards education after getting pregnant as they considered their future-plans more than the history of pregnancy (Runhare, 2010). The need to redeem themselves from people who matter in their life or significant other people (Molla, 2016; Turner, 2004) was found to be one influential factor to PPLs resilience to remain in school. This implies that close people such as parents and educators should cultivate and embrace positive attitudes to assist pregnant and parenting teenagers in pursuing their educational goals. Studies by Grant and Hallman (2006) and Chigona and Chetty (2008) confirmed that teen-mother learners who got family support on their education had better chances of making it at school. In the same vein, Van Breda (2018:5) posit that generally, "resilience theory enables people to achieve better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity". In this regard, the eight PPLs who participated in this study most likely developed a resilient response to the negative impact that teen pregnancy might have on their educational aspirations.

6.2 Desire for self-efficacy

It emerged that one resilience factor for PPLs who continued with schooling, was the need to achieve financial independence using education as a weapon to fight poverty, as proclaimed by the first democratic president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela (Bertram, 2018). On this view, Arleen put her

hope on education on the basis that, *"A person will need education to support her child and without education how am I is going to support the child"*. Likewise, Bessie also felt that pregnancy should not compromise her future even if she did not get married because, *"it was just an accident and I want to continue with my education so that I can look after my child even if he [child's father] does not marry me".*

Financial independence is indeed an important reason why governments and social welfare organisations advocate for the continued school enrolment of pregnant and former pregnant teenagers. Some related research findings from elsewhere indicate that most recipients of welfare grants are unemployed single mothers, who have a low education and are financially unstable (Arai, 2003; Kelly, 2000). In South Africa, concerns have been expressed that there could be a causal relationship between increased teenage pregnancy in poor communities and the government child support grants (Panday et al., 2009; Human Sciences Research Council & Education Policy Consortium, 2005).

6.3   Strategies against hate language

One of the stigmatising elements which pushes out PPLs from formal schools is hate language and labels that are attached to teen pregnancy (Runhare, 2010). Pregnant learners are given all sorts of negative labels at school, in the community and even in their own families as some of their peers, teachers and family members might verbally abused them (Chigona & Chetty, 2008; Runhare, 2010). However, neutralisation of negative labels can be achieved by those who have strong character or get support from other people to 'fight back'. In this study, some PPLs indicated that they had developed strategies like openness and teaming up with their friends to withstand the challenges of verbal insults which they encountered in the formal school environment. This was mostly adopted by parenting learners than those who were currently pregnant at the time the study was conducted. One of the parenting learners, Bettie opted to employ openness rather than concealment of her teen motherhood status on the basis that:

> *It's better to be open than to hide because people want to tease those who are pregnant or have a child. If you have a baby at home, they know it and want to make fun of you. But if you show that you do not care, it is better. It will not hurt when they talk.*

While it is common that some PPLs may seek to transfer to another school where they are not known as a means of reducing stigma, Belie, from the same school argued that it was better to continue at the same school where there are other learners in her situation than to hide her pregnancy. She defended this view by pointing out that:

> *I feel that I should just continue at this same school simply because I see that there are other pregnant girls in the school. Even if some talk about it, they know it happens and we have to go on with our education and progress with life.*

One other benefit of openness, according to PPLs was that it enables them to team up to encourage and protect one another against any hostility and abuse from their stigimasing peers. This was indicated by Attie, who explained that, "Some other pregnant girls encourage you to answer back. If I answer back, they see that you are still an important human being with rights even if you are pregnant".

6.4   Support from significant others

Pregnant learners from both study sites expressed that they received support from some of their mainstream peers, particularly girls who were either also pregnant or had friendship ties with the pregnant learners. At both study sites, friendship ties were mentioned by many pregnant learners as

one important source of support. However, it seemed that pregnant learners from School B benefited more from friends because they got academic support, unlike their counterparts at School A, who seemed to get more support in the form of encouragement and fighting back hate speech. Such support could however be a mechanism to help restore positive self-image and encouragement to pursue their educational aspirations. One pregnant learner at School A expressed that she had the motivation to remain in school despite verbal abuses from other learners because:

> *My friends help me to answer back because they still like me. They even do help to get me water, and at break time they can share with me what they have. I do not feel bad or isolated at school (Attie)*

It also emerged that besides teaming up on their own, some of the pregnant learners felt accommodated by their non-pregnant friends, who maintained close social ties with them. Another pregnant learner from School A said she depended on such support, and therefore was grateful:

> *I get encouragement from my friends. They have not left me. We still play together, and they can cheer me up sometimes and tell me not to worry about what other learners say (Assie)*

At School B, some pregnant learners indicated that the support they got from their friends went beyond the moral support and encouragement to remain in school. Most learners from School A expressed the same sentiments. In this regard, one such pregnant learner, who was now at home awaiting delivery, illustrated the academic support she got from her friends by pointing out that:

> *My friends are still good to me, they pass through here most of the time and we do some schoolwork, or during the weekend. I have not heard them say that their parents are unhappy that they play with me because I am pregnant. I can even go to their homes, and we discuss schoolwork (Arleen).*

In the same vein, another pregnant learner from School B, in a similar situation, concurred with the view that friendship ties could be depended on to catch up with schoolwork which might have been covered during class in the absence of the pregnant learner. The girl, Bessie was therefore pleased and grateful that; *Even now as I am at home, I do ask my friends what they are doing and I study so that I do not remain behind, I know I will join them again.*

From what the pregnant learners at both sites said, we concluded that support from mainstream female peers encouraged them to persevere with their education within a formal school setting, which otherwise is socially and culturally hostile to their condition. Our conclusion concurs with Mensch et al. (2001) and Grant and Hallman, (2006), who studied interaction patterns within the school and found that the decision by pregnant learners to quit schooling largely depended on the stereotypical perceptions and treatment that teachers and other learners held towards them. Similarly, Williams (2019:25) concurs that "receiving support from the individual's environment allows the individual to be victorious over any risk and cope effectively with adversity". Based on this observation, we therefore recommend that schools must involve their communities to help PPLs to continue with school and achieve better despite the hurdles they encountered.

7. Discussion of Results

The study investigated the source of resilience of pregnant and parenting learners who pursued their educational aspirations within a formal school setting in rural South Africa. Masten (2015:187) posits that "resilience is the potential or manifested capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the function, survival, or development of the system". We therefore inferred from this theoretical position that it could be the renewed interest in education by the interviewed PPLs which was a source of their resilience not to drop out of school in spite of negative factors that could threaten them to continue with schooling (Cappella & Weinstein, 2001).

From the narratives of the eight PPLs that were interviewed in this study, it emerged that one

source of their resilience to learn included intrinsic motivating factors such as setting new goals after falling pregnant, the political will to become economically self-reliant, neuralisation of the negative label of teen pregnancy as a master-status and provision of the much-needed self-esteem by the other significant people in their lives (SmithBattle, 2007). Further, the intrinsic motivation to continue with schooling was reinforced by the back-up support from the PPLs' significant other people in their lives such as their parents, siblings, fellow PPLs and other sympathetic female learners. It may also be concluded that the PPLs were inspired to focus on building their future by the popular words echoed by Nelson Mandela that education is a strong weapon to fight poverty in Africa (Bertram, 2018).

From this study, setting of new goals and realigning oneself to achieve the new goals was found to be an important factor that influenced pregnant and parenting teenagers' decision to remain in school, despite the challenges they encountered such as possible delays in achieving their educational goals, change of attitudes from some friends and educators and the fear of disappointing those people significant to them. From a similar study of six formerly pregnant teen girls who were determined and graduated from high school, Watson and Vogel (2016) observed that perseverance to graduate was an escape-route from their earlier mistake and to disapprove those who labelled them as failures. In this study, the participants confirmed that after realising the mistake of falling pregnant while at school, they felt that they owed their parents, teachers and siblings an apology which they could only show through good behaviour and working hard at school. They gave sentiments which indicated that by being accepted by the significant people in their lives, there was a new lease of life which gave them steam to focus and achieve their newly set school goals and beat all the odds against them, to graduate from high school and further their educational and life chances.

One common impression identified from the eight participants of this case study is that most of the PPLs seemed to have been positively accepted and treated by their family members, teachers and school peers, which gave them an opportunity to change their attitude towards their schooling after getting pregnant. This observation indicates that there are child rights duty-bearers who support pregnant and parenting learners' educational aspirations. From this, it can be inferred that parents and educators with such positive views are likely to assist the PPLs to successfully pursue their educational goals (Silk & Romero, 2014). According to results of an earlier South African study by Grant and Hallman (2006), family support was found to be an important ingredient for pregnant teens' resilience to remain in school.

The desire for self-efficacy emerged to be another key motivating factor for pregnant and parenting teenagers who continued with their schooling. The pregnant and parenting learners in this study indicated that they needed education as stimulus to achieve financial independence to fend for their babies as education is generally perceived as the way of getting out of poverty, especially in developing countries (Bertram, 2018).

Pregnant and parenting learners from this study indicated that they used openness and answering back verbal insults as ways to repulse negative pressure from other learners. The benefit of openness, according to the PPLs was that they could team-up to encourage and protect one another against any type of hostility such as isolation, mockery and negative labelling from some of the mainstream peers. Teaming-up against hurtful language and support from other sympathetic learners were critical sources of resilience for them to continue with schooling within a potentially hostile school environment. Further, they were also encouraged by the awareness of their right to education, as provided by the country's democratic constitution and education policies (Republic of South Africa, 1996a, 1996b; Department of Education, 2007).

From our findings, we noted that resilience to a potentially hostile school environment was a necessary ingredient for PPLs to pursue of their educational aspirations. Thus, without the spirit of resilience which was evident among the sampled participants of this study (Masten, 2001, 2015; Masten, & Obradovic, 2006) PPLs in South Africa may not benefit from the democratic constitutional and educational provisions that allow them to remain in school and take a recovery path after unplanned pregnancy.

8. Conclusion

The findings of this study offer a deeper insight into resilience in the lives of pregnant and parenting teenagers who remained in school after unplanned pregnancy which could have disrupted their educational opportunities and life chances. Their resilience was informed by the inspiration to open a new page of life by setting for themselves new life goals, the need to be financially self-reliant through education and fighting back any social hostilities with the support from their significant other people in their lives as well as sympathetic fellow learners, and the knowledge that education is a human right for all citizens (Republic of South Africa, 1996a, 1996b; Department of Education, 2007). The narrated educational experiences of the eight PPLs in this study are helpful in giving an insight for the development and implementation of school-based policy initiatives and programmes targeting the inclusion and retention of PPLs in regular schools.

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