

Schooling-Going Mothers' Experiences in Relation to Teachers: A Case of High Schools in Leribe District, Lesotho

C.M. Molapo

J. D. Adams

Miss S P Zulu

Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education: university of Zululand

M S Mabusela

Department of curriculum and instructional studies: University of Zululand
Mabuselam@unizulu.ac.za

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Abstract

This qualitative study reports on an investigation on experiences of school-going mothers at the Leribe district of Lesotho, with specific reference to how they view their relationship with teachers. Individual interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of ten young mothers from five different schools in high schools of Leribe district. The findings of the study have revealed a variety of experiences young school-going mothers have to bear from teachers. These include humiliation, absence of attention, hostility, condemnation, threats of termination, less encouragement and insensitivity, lack of support from teachers. The researchers have learnt through this study that teen mothers are rarely supported by teachers, thus resulting to an unpleasant experience. In the light of these findings, the study recommends that on returning to school, school-going mothers should be subjected to an integration programme. In addition, the Lesotho Department of education must initiate teacher training programmes to assist teachers eliminate their prejudices against young school-going mothers.

Keywords: School-going mothers, teenager, experience, school environment, Lesotho.

1. Introduction and Background

Teenage pregnancy has become a social virus at the basic education level, particularly at the senior phase. Many well-intentioned people blame the pregnancy of young school-going girls on their risky behavior to engage in sexual activities prematurely. This phenomenon has led to an increase in a number of school-going mothers in South Africa and neighbouring countries like Lesotho. Indeed, being a school-going mother has numerous consequences in the lives of such mothers and their children as they, inter alia, get ostracized and relegated to the margins of society by both their peers and teachers. In most cases girls' academic careers stop with their pregnancies. Others, who are fortunate enough to continue with school, are faced with numerous problems. For example, on return to school most of them are rejected and ridiculed by their teachers among others (Chiganon & Chetty, 2008). Such experiences could be quite upsetting and undoubtedly have a lasting impact on these mothers, especially if the school environment is unwelcoming.

It is against this background that this study probed the experiences of young school going mothers in the high schools of Lesotho, particularly the Leribe district. In this study, the researchers argue that those in education, who have social justice as a goal, can play a crucial role in advocating the educational rights of school-going mothers instead of castigating and relegating them to the margins of society. As argued by Anyon (2008, p. 518) a supportive and trusting environment provides 'identity security' to learners who are then emotionally more ready to challenge the stereotypical myths which define them as 'others'. Thus, it is argued in this study that a healthy educational environment which nullifies the politics of difference should urge school-going mothers towards a stance of entitlement, regarding the responsibility of teachers and administrators to provide equal opportunities irrespective of their individual social standing, such as being school-going mothers. "Teenage mothers are women who become pregnant before they are twenty (Phoenix 1991, p.6)". These are school-going girls who are socially, psychologically and emotionally immature and really young to be mothers. In the case of this article, the term refers to a learner who has a child while still at school and whose experience of the

phenomenon is not more than three year

Studies have been conducted on teen pregnancy and school-going mothers in South Africa and elsewhere. These studies focus on school dropout (Eloundou-Eny'gue', 2004; Grant & Hallman, 2006; London, 2008; Masuku, 1998; Macleod, 1999; McDowell, 2003; Mkhize, 1995; Singh, 2002; Taylor-Ritzler & Balcazar, 2007;). Other studies (Chigona & Chetty, 2008; Lillah, 2006; Macleod, 1999; Masuku, 1998; Mkhize, 1995; Ramalebana & Le Roux, 1998) were conducted on factors that contribute to teen pregnancy and thus teen mothers and young school-going mothers. These studies have found the following factors as contributing to teenage pregnancy and early mothering: the earlier occurrence of menarche; risk taking behaviour; psychological problems; peer influence; coercive sexual relations; dysfunctional family patterns; poor health services; socio-economic status; the breakdown of cultural traditions; reproductive ignorance; and the cultural value placed on children. Early pregnancy may represent a rational life choice for certain adolescent women (Preston-Whyte, Eleanor & Zondi, 1993). The consequence of this rational choice is that, in Lesotho most girls engage themselves in sexual activities to avoid being called ' mafetoa' (unmarried women). In Basotho culture, girls who are not married by the age of 20 years are called mafetoa (Mohlakoana-Mokobocho, 2005). On the other hand it is also regarded as a disgrace for girls to have babies before marriage and be called mothers. Preston-Whyte and Zondi (1998) opine that early marriage as a norm in different cultures contributes to the increase of early child bearing because some of the girls engage in sex and fall pregnant in the hope that the fathers of their children will marry them. Rational choice to be pregnant by some teenagers is worsened by the fact that boys are no longer afraid of impregnating girls because they no longer pay compensation of six heads of cattle, unlike their parents who used to pay for impregnating unmarried girls (Makatjane, 2002). The aftermath of teenage pregnancy and early mothering is dropping out to school.

Dropping out of school is of concern because it typically results in a host of negative consequences. Different researchers (London, 2008; Masuku, 1998; Mkhize, 1995; Singh, 2002; Taylor-Ritzler & Balcazar, 2007) offer different reasons for dropping out. Writing from a South African perspective, Masuku (1998) investigated pregnant school girls at Kwamgaga High school in Umlazi. Among the findings of her study were that peer perceptions and attitudes contributed to the decision to drop out. Girls in the same study were also in favour of other girls' expulsion. Mkhize (1995) in a study on: Social needs of teenage mothers in the rural communities of Ongoye and Enseleni Districts, reported that respondents dropped out because of pressure from school and family. On the other hand, Tayler-Ritzler and Balcazar (2007) in their study on: Understanding School Dropout from Urban, Ethnic Minority Teenage Mothers with Learning Disabilities (LD), found that teen mothers with LD lacked support at home and at school. Oyaro (2008) declares that stigma and discrimination by teachers and classmates are two major reasons that contribute to teen mothers and pregnant girls' decision to leave school. London (2008) in his study on: Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood, has noted Puerto Rican young mothers marry as soon as they realize that they are pregnant or are suspected to be pregnant or feared to have lost their virginity, and drop out of school immediately. Dropping out of school is a multi-generational problem (National Women's Law Centre, 2007), that affects both pregnant teens and school-going mothers. For school-going mothers dropping out of school is precipitated by the behavior and attitudes of educators. The worse scenario is when school -going mothers are confronted by new challenges when they return to school. The challenging enrolment and attendance policies that place limits on absences; lack of ability to sign them into and out of school to attend their own or their children's appointments, are factors that affect them (Tayler-Ritzler & Balcazar, 2007) to an extent that some consider leaving school, and as a result become unintended dropouts. In addition, research (Dench & Bellis, 2007; Freeman & Rickels, 1993; London, 2000; Tayler-Ritzler & Balcazar, 2007) reveal that they are affected by lack of support from the family and school.

In most countries schools' policies require pregnant students to be expelled from school. (Macleod, 1999) A paradigm shift on the issue of expulsion is that re-entry policies are practiced in those countries that have signed up with the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Chelisa (2002). The CEDAW, policies stipulate that once the expectant girl is identified as pregnant she should be temporarily expelled. In South Africa, "the 1996 Schools Act no. 84, ruled against the expulsion of pregnant girls from schools" (Masuku, 1998:37). In Lesotho, the Education Act 10 of (1995) ruled that pregnant girls should be temporarily expelled from school. In a further development, however, the Lesotho Education Act (2000) states that there should be continuation, meaning that pregnant girls and school going mothers should continue with their education. Chelisa (2002) regards this policy as 'girl friendly' due to the fact that it allowed teenage girls who have given birth to continue with their schooling. Despite this proposed policy, in practice school-going mothers seem to encounter problems regarding being absorbed unconditionally in the education system. In Lesotho young school-going mothers in high schools are rejected by their teachers who believe in the tradition and culture of the Basotho nation, which advocates having children only in wed-lock.

Teachers in Lesotho, reject young mothers completely on the basis that they do not teach young mothers in their schools. For example young mothers are rejected by not giving them enough time to do their work at school. Sometimes

they are referred to other learners in order to be helped with what has been learned while they were not present due to their mothers as teachers would. The young mothers are also not supported by their teachers in times of tests and examinations, because there is no special provision for them. The rationale for showing lack of sympathy towards them is that young mothers have to suffer for the consequences of what they have done.

The attitudes of the educators towards the young mothers vary according to how the educators feel about culture. Some educators feel for these young mothers and try to help them. Some communities humiliate school going mothers and their children by labelling them. They give them bad names such as Molahlua (outcast) and Matlakala (trash) (Mohlakoana -Mokobocho, 2005). Such names are an indication of how societies view teenage motherhood. In addition to this, the unmarried school-going mothers and their children are not given space within the family tree. In Sesotho culture, only married women and their children have space within the family tree (Makatjane, 2002). Such experiences could be quite upsetting and undoubtedly have a lasting impact on these young school-going mothers. The researchers are of a view that these school-going mothers are determined to start afresh, but nobody seems to understand their plight and what they are going through.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study is underpinned by the work of Chigona and Chetty (2008) ; Mohlakoana –Mokobocho (2005). Chigona and Chetty (2008) study offers insight into concerns around issues regarding the schooling of teen mothers. Their work shows that school going mothers do not receive support from school. The work also shows that teen mothers at school are not considered as learners with special needs; but as learners with ordinary needs. This work provides an idea of how learners are viewed by teachers; that is, they are misunderstood and a lot of pressure is put on them by teachers – that includes fellow learners. Mohlakoana –Mokobocho (2005) offers an understanding around how culture affects young mothers. This work shows that teen mothers are rejected by their teachers who believe in the tradition of Basotho nation; a tradition which advocates having children only in wedlock.

3. Statement of the Problem

Teen pregnancy and motherhood has increased at a fast and alarming rate in schools in Lesotho, for this reason the number of young mothers has increased. Most of these mothers return to school after giving birth. As teachers, the researchers have observed that most of these girls were embraced by teachers and peers before they could become pregnant. On returning to school after giving birth, most of these young mothers face challenges such as stigmatization, lack of support from educators, other learners and friends. The type of treatment these learners were exposed to was seen as cause for concern. The researchers wondered how these school-going mothers viewed their situation. It was against this background that the researchers sought to undertake a focused study on the experiences of school-going mothers at school. This would allow the school-going mothers to provide the truth within the framework of their understanding about the phenomenon under investigation. Besides, the researchers have noted that there is no clear data to show how school-going mothers in the Leribe district of Lesotho experience their situation at school, specifically with regard to teachers. More specifically, the study sought to find an answer to the following research question:

What are school-going young mothers' experiences with regard to their teachers?

4. The Significance and Contribution of the Study

The contribution of the study will be enormous. It will make the government aware of the presence of the young mothers in schools and that young mothers have special needs and should be treated like learners with special needs. The study will sensitize the government, in particular the Department of Education that the inclusion policy is undermined. It will sensitize the government planning unit to plan for all types of learners including young mothers so that learning could be maximized.

It is envisaged that the findings of the study will assist the Ministry of Education in Lesotho to include programmes such as life skills and sexuality education in the school curriculum. It was envisaged that such programmes would sensitize all learners (males and female) about prevention of pregnancy. Such programmes will also, enable school going mothers to adapt and deal effectively with the demands and challenges of life. This would also improve the relationship between young mothers, on one hand, and teachers, classmates and members of the community, on the another.

5. Research Design and Methodology

This study aimed at exploring the experiences of young school-going mothers, and to establish the challenges and difficulties they faced in the school environment, particularly with respect to their teachers. A non-experimental design that involved a case study research was chosen in order to explore in-depth information about experiences of school-going mothers. Purposive sampling was used to enable the researcher to select knowledgeable participants. Ten school going mothers from five high schools of Leribe were the main respondents. Data were collected through individual interviews as participants were dispersed at different schools. Individual interviews were used in order to allow respondents to speak about their experiences without fear that others would hear about their sensitive issues. The researchers ensured that they complied with rules and morals of research as literature (Neuman, 2006) recommends. In this regard, before conducting the interviews, the participants were informed about the nature of the interview, the type of questions to expect the purpose of the study. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed word for word. To attain validity, the researcher allowed the interviewees to read interview transcript in order to check whether what had been written reflected what they said; and also comment and give some clarifications where necessary. The coded information was transcribed into themes pertaining to the school-going mothers' experiences.

6. Results

The interviews revealed a variety of experiences young school-going mothers have to bear from teachers. The following themes were identified with regard to experiences: humiliation, absence of attention, hostility, condemnation, threats of termination, less encouragement and insensitivity, lack of support from teachers.

6.1 Humiliation by teachers.

Teachers have been reported to say words that pass bad impressions on young mothers in class and at assemblies. This has direct and indirect negative impact on the self-esteem of the teen mothers. Due to the fact that the teacher's attitudes are very negative towards young mothers, young mothers prefer to avoid them. The respondents feel that it is not fair to be humiliated by teachers more especially in the presence of other learners as expressed by four teen mothers:

'I was embarrassed and humiliated by words that were said at assemblies about young mothers.....'

'Teachers were no more calling me by my name. They called me Motsoetse (mother).....'

'Because of funny names given to young mothers in my school and in class, I do not want to take trips to learning places anymore. I just want to be in class and then go home immediately after school.....'

'I really don't know how long these misunderstandings and calling names will go away from me and other young mothers.....',

The girls want to have a healthy relationship with their teachers and they take exception at being labeled by them. They also feel embarrassed to be asked very personal and sensitive questions about their mishap. A respondent who was disturbed by this said:

'When I came back to school, after delivery of the baby some of the teachers would ask me about the husband or father of my baby. I did not like such questions because I was no longer in love with the father of my baby.....'

6.2 Absence of attention

All the young mothers interviewed expressed their concern regarding their teachers' depriving them attention. It is evident that some of the teachers do not support teen mothers in classrooms and they do not give them the opportunity to recover what they missed when they did not attend classes due to their appointments for their babies, such as taking the baby to hospitals or themselves (teen mothers). Teen mothers are referred to other learners for more information. It becomes very difficult for other learners to explain the lessons to young mothers. In most cases peers may not be in a position to explain because they did not understand the lesson themselves; or may feel that it is not their duty to teach young mothers. It is in this regard that a young mother made the following remark:

'We need the attention of our teachers and they ignore us...

and another said:

Trying to explain to us, it's up and down for us[being moved back and forth]. The teachers will be busy with their work and saying that it is very difficult to deal with young mothers because they do not come to school everyday....

6.3 Hostility

It is clear that the attitudes of teachers towards young mothers in schools are very negative. Even though the policies on pregnancy and motherhood are in favour of young mothers, teachers still show hostility towards learners. Three young mothers illustrated this hostility as follows:

'Teachers could not ask me any question even if I had raised my hand.....'

'Here at school teachers expect us, young mothers to come to school very early to study like other learners and leave very late in the afternoon, if we fail to do so, they treat us very badly.....'

At school, when the other girls have done bad things and I happened to be amongst them, even though I did not actually do the bad thing, the blame is put more on me as a young mother.....'

6.4 Rejection

Some of the young mothers have experienced rejection from their teachers. This view is illustrated by the following comment:

'I was afraid to face my teachers after delivery because they did not want to have anything to do with me when I had a big tummy; even now[after giving birth]. They always say they do not deal with women but school girls... so I am afraid to meet with my teachers because I am an outcast...'

6.5 Condemnation

It was quite clear that some of the teachers in high schools had the wrong mentality that the young mothers' education was totally disrupted by their motherhood and would never recover. Therefore, it was like wasting time assisting these young mothers. This was expressed as follows:

'My teacher once told me that there was no use of me coming to school, because I do not come to school everyday. The teacher went further to tell me that I was here to increase the number of failures.....'

And

'They should not associate our mistakes (motherhood) with our being at school.....'

Condemnation by teachers could decrease the chances of success. As it is, the respondents felt that they have already failed even before they could write their examination because of the teachers' prophesies. It is obvious that teachers focus only on covering the school syllabus and on increasing the pass rate, whilst excluding young mothers in that process.

6.6 Threats of termination

The results show that some teachers pose threats of termination when some activities have not been done due to absenteeism. Two young mothers asserted:

'I keep on skipping days on coming to school because I have to look after the baby when my mother is committed to her appointments. Sometimes I have to take the baby to the clinic for check-ups. I also have no time for extra-mural studies because of the baby...'

' Sometimes I am reminded by my teachers that if I keep on skipping school days, I may be expelled from school because of the school policy. This policy stipulates that learners should not be absent from school for more than three weeks... '

It is evident that young mothers have no time to do their school work at home because of their babies and house chores. For this reason, teen mothers find themselves locked in unstable situations which are not conducive to learning. This situation upsets teachers. Some respondents participating in individual interviews reported as follows:

' At home I have no time to do my homework because I have to do cooking for the baby and the whole family and washing clothes for all. Sometimes I do not sleep well especially when the baby is sick. When I get to school I sleep in class and miss the lesson and the teacher will say bad things ... '

' I live with many people at home. They make a lot of noise at night and we run short of candles to light the house, as a result I am not able to do homework like any other school child. The teacher will shout at me... '

' At the end of the school terms I achieve very little and always fail tests because I do not have time. My teacher looks at me badly. I was very stressed and ashamed of failing... ,

6.7 Less encouragement

Teenage mothers experience less encouragement from teachers at school and this contributes to the teenage mothers' decision, most often, to leave school. The following confessional remarks are worth quoting:

' I struggled to cope with all the challenges, but it was of no use since there was no one to support me at school as the teachers are discouraging me..... '

' I felt that I was losing and frustrating myself every day. I am really confused I need someone who can feel for me and understand what is in my heart. At times I feel that I am not wanted at school..... '

' What can we do to convince our teachers and fellow Learners, so that they may take us as learners and nothing else? Are you also going to talk to our teachers now... to change their negative attitudes towards us.....? '

6.8 Insensitivity

Results have shown that some teen mothers have to rush home after school and they do not have time to go for study sessions like other learners. They expected teachers to be sympathetic and give them a preferential treatment, but that seemed not to be a case. They respondents feel that teachers are not sensitive to their needs. This situation is best exemplified by these assertions:

'After school I have to run home to see and feed the baby... They know that we have babies to care for at home they cannot compromise and bear with us..... '

'Teachers expect us to go on school trips and come... to school on weekends and holidays, failing which we are called mothers and marginalized... '

6.9 Lack of support from teachers

Respondents emphasized the fact that learners who are school-going mothers have experienced serious incidences lack of support from teachers. Mention was also made of stigma being attached to their condition by teachers. The results revealed that teen mothers who receive support and are motivated from their homes get frustrated when they are not supported by their teachers. The last resort for most of these teen mothers is to isolate themselves, absent themselves from school or drop out from school.

7. Discussion and Recommendations

The research showed that school- going mothers are exposed to negative experiences from their teachers. Evident from the findings is that the sample experienced the following treatments from their teachers: humiliation, absence of attention,

hostility, condemnation, threats of termination, less encouragement and insensitivity, lack of support from teachers. These findings accord with those of other researchers (Dench & Bellis, 2007; Freeman & Rickels, 1993; London, 2000; Tayler-Ritzler & Balcazar, 2007) whose studies revealed that young mothers lack support. The study revealed that some high schools in Lesotho do not provide enough assistance and support to these young mothers to cope with the school demands. The little support or assistance given to the young mothers is only by giving them access into school yards and opening classroom doors for them.

The major problem for young school-going mothers in Lesotho, is that teachers do not understand their situation and how they feel; for this reason they fail to assist the young mothers academically. The rationale for educators' behaviour might be that they have not been trained to deal with young mothers. The other rationale for their actions is the dictates of culture. Culturally, in Lesotho, it is a disgrace for a girl to have a child out of wedlock. This is the main reason why the teen mothers are 'othered'. The worst part of this phenomenon is that most of the teachers in schools come from the very same community and share the same perspective as the community about teen-motherhood and young school-going mothers, and thus afford teenage mothers a negative treatment rather than supporting them..

Despite the fact that the Lesotho Act of 2000 allows teenage-mothers to continue with their education, there appears to no guidelines in terms of how school –going mothers should be treated nor an educational programme to be followed by them. It is of concern that the Ministry of Education does not give any guidance to schools about these young mothers. What is prominent in the policy is that they must return to continue with their education. The researchers assume that there is no school policy on how to assist young mothers because respondents did not allude to it in the interviews. The condition of re-admission creates problems for teen-mothers as it creates expectations that they should be afforded a special treatment from teachers rather than being reminded of their down fall. The educators are portrayed as impossible by the teen-mothers as they view themselves as learners who deserve the same opportunity as the rest.

In the light of the results it is recommended that on return to school, school- going mothers should be subjected to an integration programme which will spell out all expectations about their being learner- mothers. The Department of Education in Lesotho must initiate teacher training programs which will assist teachers in eliminating their prejudices against girls who become pregnant and those who return to school. In addition school social workers must be engaged in order to deal with the welfare issues of school-going mothers so that educators could deal with the educational part of the these young mothers . Counseling psychologists also need to be involved in order to counsel young mothers about motherhood and related matters. In addition, counseling psychologist could provide young mothers with life skills also training like decision-making, refusal skills and assertiveness among others.

8. Conclusion

Identifying experiences of school-going mothers in the school environment of Leribe high schools of Lesotho with the view establishing their experiences was the main focus of the research. Given the fact that teen-age pregnancy is on the increase and consequently teen-motherhood, it is clear that from this research the education stakeholders have a lot to learn about dynamics of school-going mothers and how it is experienced by young school-going mothers. This will serve as an eye-opener to educators about their conduct towards teen mothers. From the findings of this study, it is quite clear that the legislation to allow teen mothers to return to school, has not been accompanied by enabling policies and support instruments to enable teachers to support school-going mothers. This article has only scratched a surface about experiences of young-school going mothers as it only focused on their experiences with teachers. Future research will focus on their experiences with regard to their peers at school, including the community.

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