

When schoolgirls become mothers: Reflections from a selected group of teenage girls in Durban

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Schools are obliged to support young women who become mothers. Drawing from an interview study of young women in a Durban school, this article shows how their experience is situated within discourses of shame and stigma. Such shame works to reduce their agency and increase their vulnerability to drop out of school. Both teachers and peers are complicit in this. The participants argue that schools do not support the management of pregnancy, parenting and learning, with negative effects for learning outcomes. However, schools are not only sites of social reproduction, since the participants point to glimmers of hope as a consequence of care work among friends, some teachers and support groups in the school. The article argues that the experience of pregnancy and parenting is highly gendered, and addressing the challenges requires a commitment to gender equality and justice. Some implications for schools are suggested in the conclusion of the article.

Keywords: Girls, pregnancy, young mothers, schooling, sexual shame, teachers, peers, disruption, care work

Introduction

Schoolgirls becoming mothers is often perceived to be a problem. Having a child hinders progress at school, leads to dropping out and forecloses the possibility of educational and economic success (Grant & Hallman, 2006). In South Africa, HIV and AIDS has exacerbated the problem, since the prevalence among women is heightened in their late teens, almost five years before men (Human Sciences Research Council, 2009). Of the 15-24-year age group in South Africa, 10.2% are infected, and estimates suggest that 15.5% of young women aged 15-24 years are infected compared to 4.8% of men of the same age (Pettifor, Rees, Steffenson, Hlongwa-Madikizela, Macphail, Vermaak & Kleinschmidt, 2004). In KwaZulu-Natal province, where this study is situated, 17.260 pregnancies were recorded in 2010. Between 2006 and 2007, 29.473 pregnancies were reported in KwaZulu-Natal schools (Department of Education, 2010). Over 59% of all pregnancies in South African schools are located in this province.

The high rate of teenage pregnancy challenges HIV prevention strategies based on abstinence and condom usage. The special health risks for young women increase the already substantial implications of having a child while at school. Teenage pregnancy also complicates the efforts towards the legal expansion of girls' empowerment. Support for gender equality has been regulated by the legal framework under the South African Schools Act (Department of Education, 1996). This Act provides a legal premise for the expansion of girls' freedoms and is designed to remove any obstacles to their educational success. In relation to teenage pregnancy, the Act permits pregnant schoolgirls to remain at school, allowing for their re-entry after having a child. Available statistics indicate that 32% of 14-19-year-olds living in KwaZulu-Natal, who had ever been pregnant, were currently attending school (Grant & Hallman, 2006); this has major implications for schools.

Supporting pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers in schools is important (Chigona & Chetty, 2008), but remains a formidable task (Panday, Makiwane, Ranchod & Letsoalo, 2009). Recent research has seen the emergence of a more qualitative and theoretical understanding of the experience of teenage pregnancy and teenage mothers in schools, and illustrates some of the challenges facing young women

at school (Chigona & Chetty, 2008; Bhana, Morrell, Shefer & Ngabaza, 2010; Nkani & Bhana, 2010; Morrell, Bhana & Shefer, 2012). The evidence suggests that schools' support is critical for both increasing the educational aspirations of young women and addressing gendered poverty and women's marginalised position in society – all key to South Africa's developmental agenda.

Principals and teachers can mediate the deleterious effects that are often attributed to early pregnancy. The challenge remains for schools, pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers to grapple with the demands of being a young mother at school. Negotiating schooling under these competing circumstances requires that school teachers, learners and principals be amenable to the specific needs of young women.

Such support has long-term implications for gender equality (Romo & Nadeem, 2007). A major implication for schools is that they must recognise that, when schoolgirls become mothers, their experience is rooted within broader gendered social environments. Recognising gender as a key factor in the experience of being pregnant and being a young mother is vital to effective responses from schools.

However, as the evidence shows, the ability of pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers to exercise their freedoms in schools remains problematic. Young people have agency and do exercise such agency – but this is constrained by an ethos of sexual shame and othering. It must be noted, in this instance, that the girls in this study should not be perceived as victims without agency. However, this is limited in a context where teenage sexuality is scorned and punished and where power relations between teachers and learners are intact. Specifically, the agency of young women is limited when the dominant ideological framing assumes that pregnancy is unacceptable. This dominant discourse puts learners who are pregnant in a predicament, as this constrains their power.

Media reporting about high rates of teenage pregnancy has increased. Alongside this focus are invocations of sexuality, contestation over rights, and the burden that having a child places on social grants and on schools. The burgeoning discussion is evident in newspaper headlines such as 'Bored teens bonk – MEC'; 'Just Kids Having Kids' (*Sunday Tribune*, 20 March 2011), and 'Pregnant pupils, please bring your own midwives to school' (*Sunday Times*, 28 November 2010). The visibility of teenage pregnancy and teenage mothers is also implicated in long-contested views about children's sexual rights, and moralising discourses about an active teenage sexuality (Pillow, 2004). This increased discussion and visibility is deeply implicated in the challenges present when schoolgirls become mothers.

It is argued that schools are not necessarily supportive, as Bhana *et al.*'s (2010) study of South African teachers demonstrates. Teachers' responses are often situated within stigmatising and moralistic arguments. Teachers and principals (see Nkani & Bhana, 2010) wish sexual innocence upon teenagers and regard the public display of sexuality as deviant. The research also shows that they are dissatisfied with the challenge of dealing with a policy which they do not even support. Thus, when schoolgirls become mothers, schools mobilise against them and stigmatise. In so doing, they contribute towards the reproduction of gender inequalities.

Some schools, as Bhana & Nkani (2010) note, only tolerate pregnant teenagers, because they are threatened by the policy environment. In this instance, the policy provides an enabling tool to provide the platform from which any attempt to create obstacles to girls' education may be challenged. However, as we go on to show, the effects will be limited, if policy cannot mandate the exercise of girls' freedom. As Chigona & Chetty (2008) note, those learners who go back to school after giving birth face a number of challenges, and a lack of support from schools and teachers may impede their ability to succeed.

Recently, controversy about schools' management of learner pregnancy was raised in a case of law. On 12 May 2011, judgment was passed in favour of two schools in the Free State, Harmony and Welkom High, whose school policy restricted access to pregnant learners and young mothers. According to the Department of Education and the South African Human Rights Commission, this restriction was in direct contravention of the Schools Act. Using the controversial Department of Education's (2007) guidelines on managing learner pregnancy, the schools argued that no learner should be readmitted to school in the same year in which they had left due to pregnancy. In view of these guidelines and the anomalies in the interpretation of them, it was ordered that, within 24 months, the National Department of Education

should produce nationwide regulations on learner pregnancy policy that are in keeping with the spirit of gender equality and empowerment of women, as specified in the Schools Act and the Bill of Rights.

Against this moral, legal and political backdrop, this article asks the following: How do schoolgirls who become mothers experience schooling? It is argued that their experiences are gendered and have effects in schools. We argue that their experiences point to the ways in which teenage sexuality is constructed and stigmatised.

With little recognition of gender equality, schools remain unsupportive. While teenage pregnancy has been understood as having implications for schooling, there has been little work which examines the situated and gendered experiences of young women in schools (as an exception, see Chigona & Chetty, 2008). Examining this omission is key to this study. Despite the formal protection of access to education under the Schools Act, there is some evidence – as this article will reiterate – that the actual experience of schooling is unsupportive.

The 12 May 2011-case provides fertile ground for contributing towards the development of nationwide regulations, as mandated. This article is, therefore, particularly relevant, given the current social and political climate regarding teenage pregnancy. Girls bear the burden of having a child and grapple with the conflicting roles when they become mothers. The punitive environment, as noted in newspaper headlines such as the *Sunday Times* (28 November 2010) ‘Pregnant pupils, please bring your own midwives to school’, stands in direct contrast to the Schools Act – and the girls themselves are deemed responsible for the problem.

Through a study of selected African girls at a secondary school in Durban, this article shows how their experiences with teachers and peers are regulatory and reproduce gender inequalities. Gender is invoked when schoolgirls become mothers, and positioning the focus of teenage pregnancy and young mothers at school on gender has important implications for the development of national regulations required in this country within 24 months. These regulations must explicitly seek to enhance gender equality and empower young women in schools.

Schools are accountable. They are obliged to provide opportunities to empower and develop, to prevent pregnancy, and to support young mothers at school. While we will demonstrate that there are glimmers of hope, pointing to caring environments within some schools, a great deal more needs to be done to ensure the promise of educational empowerment and gender equality.

Research methods

Using focus group interviews we sought to explore the experiences of schoolgirls who had become mothers (Mcambi, 2010). The Department of Education in KwaZulu-Natal allowed access to a formerly White school, Oakleigh High (pseudonyms used), which is located in a middle- to lower middle-income context. Like many formerly White schools, racial transformation of learner enrolment has taken place since 1994. Many African parents live in higher status suburbs than was the case during apartheid, and others with lesser but some means are enrolling their schoolchildren into better resourced formerly White schools outside their township residences.

Seven African schoolgirls who attend Oakleigh High participated in this study. Interviews were conducted by the second author, who is both a former learner at the school and a teacher there. When the study was conducted in 2010, the school’s racial profile of learners was 71% African, 14% Indian, 11% white and 4% coloured. Learners at Oakleigh High come from a range of socio-economic groups, including those in the middle-class suburb in which it is situated, but the majority of learners are from the neighbouring African townships, including Ntuzuma, Umlazi and KwaMashu. Most learners from the townships depend on public transport such as taxis and buses to get to school, since many parents do not have their own means of transport.

Between 2005 and 2010, there were 92 recorded pregnancies at the school, of which 89 were in African and 3 in coloured schoolgirls. In South Africa, pregnancies among African and coloured schoolgirls are more common, with Jewkes, Morrell & Christofides (2009) noting that stigma and termination are possible

explanations for the low numbers of pregnancies among Indian or white schoolgirls. Oakleigh High had no school-specific guidelines on teenage pregnancy, although the national policy governs all schools.

The study sample of seven African participants, aged between 15 and 18 years, were all young mothers. In 2010, there were 19 recorded pregnancies at the school, all among African schoolgirls. The final selection of participants at Oakleigh High was based on their willingness and availability to take part, and completion of all consent forms.

Data were collected by means of focus group interviews, where all seven participants formed part of the focus group. Focus group interviews were deemed to be appropriate, as the intention of the research was to understand the experience of becoming a young mother at school. Putting young women together who shared these experiences provides a cascading effect in discussing their experiences.

Four focus group discussions of approximately two hours, over a period of three months each, were held with the participants. During these interviews, both isiZulu and English were used, since the second author's mother tongue (like the schoolgirls') is isiZulu.

We wanted to know from the girls how they experienced their schooling, about their relationships with teachers and peers, and how these affected the navigation of schooling, pregnancy and parenting. Only certain parts of the data were translated from isiZulu into English; these data were translated and analysed. A thematic analysis was conducted, which involved repeatedly going through the entire data set in order to discern patterns of meanings. Different codes were produced whereby potential themes were recognised. Themes were further defined and refined in relation to the entire data set.

Findings and discussion

Pregnant – “I was scared, very scared”

The assumed hierarchies between adults and children are disrupted when schoolgirls become mothers. Reproductive rights are assumed to be on the side of adults. Teenage pregnancy confronts such ideologies. It is judged within moral discourses through which childhood innocence is valorised and teenage pregnancy ostracised. Participants reported feelings of despair and fear, both in and outside school, while pregnant.

Sibongakonke: I was very afraid of ... my mother ... how was she going to respond to this whole mess and what the father of the child was going to say. I did not know how the father of the child was going to respond to this, whether he would be willing to take care of the child, at school what were they going to say and how were the people from the community going to react to all this ... I was still dependent on my parents for everything. Where were they going to get the money for the baby and me? I just caused trouble for myself.

Mkhwanazi's (2010) study of pregnancy in a township community in South Africa notes that teenage pregnancy is often perceived negatively among parents, while peers laughed at pregnant teenagers, nurses ridiculed them and the teenagers themselves felt ashamed. In this instance, Sibongakonke expresses similar concerns, and the burden of supporting the child financially adds to her anxiety. During the interview, Sibongakonke stated that she was also afraid of not knowing how to cope with “being a mother at such a young age”.

While all the participants' families accepted the fact of the pregnancy, Desiree reported that she had more support from her mother, who “was the first person to accept the fact that I was now pregnant”. She received counselling and support from her. None of the participants had considered abortion as an option, and all mentioned that it was morally inconceivable to them to terminate. It has been argued that termination of pregnancy is rooted within particular cultural practices and, among many Africans, termination is considered to be a cultural violation (Mkhwanazi, 2010).

While all of the participants eventually communicated with family members about the pregnancy, such communication with teachers was strained.

Sibongakonke: Some of them [teachers] just delete you from their system ... They pretend as if you do not exist any more. They stop talking to you. They sometimes don't even look towards your direction ... It's hard. It makes you think twice about coming to school.

Angel: Whenever I was around, she [teacher] would talk about young girls who sleep around with old men and end up being pregnant with children they would not even be able to support. The other teacher would always speak about how the government uses their money as taxpayers to feed children born to irresponsible 'brats'. So for me, knowing that I was going to be a mother caused me to have fear. I was scared, very scared.

When a schoolgirl becomes a mother, her experiences must be understood within gendered social environments and the subordinate and unequal ways in which young women are positioned. Age inequalities (Carrim, 2011) are deeply implicated in teachers' constructions of girls who become mothers, contributing to their fear. Fear stifles agency. The above testimonies confirm earlier findings (see Bhana *et al.*, 2010) which show that most teachers objectify and shame teenage pregnancy, which is premised upon a contaminating discourse and vilified. The effect of such treatment of schoolgirls who are pregnant leaves the mark of fear, stigma and shame.

Sibongakonke shows how teachers interpret and situate teenage pregnancy as a consequence of sugar-daddy relationships (girls who sleep with older men) and a burden of the State. Instead of a supportive environment to deal with disclosing pregnancy, none of the participants could communicate with teachers, which left them to "have fear".

Sibongakonke: They decide to completely forget about you and your worries. They do not ask you about how you are feeling or how you are coping with all that stuff that goes through your head. They make sure that they give all other learners attention and then leave you out in the cold.

Sibongakonke confirms what Chigona & Chetty (2008) state, namely that teenage mothers require support. Teachers are framed as insensitive to the particular needs of young women, without much care. Feelings of being "left out in the cold" suggest the harmful and exclusionary environment through which young women have to navigate, within the climate of gender equality in the country. The pregnant schoolgirl is constructed as a site of alarm, fear and scorn (Pillow, 2004). It must be noted, in this instance, that power relations mark the experience between learners and teachers and, while the exercise of agency by learners remains a constant feature of school life, it remains difficult to enact, particularly when the pregnant learner is constructed as having brought shame and is ostracised.

Not only the teachers, but also the schoolgirls' peers created unfriendly gender environments. Other learners are not outside the discourses of sexuality and the notion of childhood sexual innocence, and they too were caught up in the network of meanings where teenage pregnancy was scorned and ridiculed.

Hazel: Some kids here at school think that if you have a child, you are just stupid.

Ntwenhle: ... there was this one girl who told me straight that at home she was told to stop associating herself with mothers. Miss, I was hurt. Worse of all, this she said in front of other kids. It would have been better if she said this while it was just the two of us ...

Desiree: ... my mum had told me what to expect, because she was a teenage mother herself who had her first child while at school. Thank God she prepared me for this When they [peers] asked me questions, I just told them to leave me alone and mind their own business.

Reproducing the discourses of contamination, Ntwenhle shows how peers considered her to be unfit for school (Pillow, 2004). Feelings of humiliation and pain often described the ways in which the participants expressed their views about peers.

"I cannot cope": Being a mother and a learner at school

In addition to the school climate of hostility and shame, the participants found it difficult to cope with the demands of both schooling and being a young mother. All of them spoke about being tired and unable to

hand in work on time, with little support or understanding from teachers. It must be noted, in this instance, that women play a significant role in childcare; none of the participants had the support of the fathers of the children.

Malaika: ... having a baby has definitely affected my studies. Sometimes I cannot cope ... My marks are dropping. Sometimes teachers complain if there is some work that I have not done. They do not even bother to ask me the reason why I did not do it ... If my work is not done because I was absent, they will insist on seeing a doctor's note. They do not compromise.

Ntwenhle: Sometimes I am unable to attend school maybe because my child is sick ... Sometimes she becomes restless, and she would not want any other person to touch her other than me. Just imagine if I am writing a test the following day, I would end up not being able to study properly. What I do these days is that when I come back from school I try and do my homework while I also attend to her. As soon as she falls asleep which is mostly very late at night, I then take my stuff and learn for upcoming tests or exams. Sometimes this works and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes when she wakes up in the middle of the night, I am busy with work. Some other days she sleeps throughout the night.

Being a teenage mother must be understood as a gendered experience. Care is a highly feminised activity, and the burden of care rested with the mothers. None of the participants had relationships with the fathers of their children and, as stated above, none supported them with managing childcare and schoolwork. Ntwenhle described the reality of coping with a sick child and writing a test. While she, like the other participants, was deeply affected by the hostility of the school and the difficulty of raising a child while at school, none suggested that they would leave. Ntwenhle's agency is apparent in this instance. Despite the overwhelming difficulties, she tries to strategise the needs of the child with her need to produce work for school. As she mentions, due to the unpredictability of raising a child, "sometimes this works and sometimes it doesn't". Other strategies were developed as a direct consequence of the "no compromise" position of the teachers:

Ntwenhle: Sometimes they [friends] do projects for me and hand them in as if I did them. But that does not happen all the time.

When schoolgirls become mothers, the support required is evident. Desiree realised how much friends' support was necessary in managing the dual role of learner and mother:

Desiree: My friend Zodwa from school came to stay with us when there were taxi strikes. She is still with us. What we do is we take turns looking after my baby. When I am with the baby, she will read and summarise what she has read and when the baby is asleep I then read her summaries. When I am absent, she brings me handouts from teachers, takes down homework and informs me about the things that were happening at school. If it wasn't for her, I would be in trouble. I was begging my friend not to go back to her home after the taxi strikes were over because I do not know what I will do without her.

The circumstances described above were facilitated by the inability of Zodwa to come to school as a result of a taxi strike. The major point, in this instance, is that support for success at school is necessary both in and outside the school. However, at school the support (if any) was limited, causing further barriers to girls' education and creating vulnerabilities to failure, as noted by Chigona & Chetty (2008).

"We can still make it in life": The value of care

Despite the overwhelming environment of hostility and a lack of support, there were many forms of caring practices by friends, a minority of teachers, and the 'We care' group at school. 'We care' is a Christian-based informal group that meets in the school to provide support to girls at school. Participation is voluntary.

In all of this, the emotional engagement was valued and upheld as a positive side of schooling:

Angel: My friends at first were angry with me but as time went by they became nice again.

Researcher: What do you mean?

Angel: They fought for me when people were saying bad things about me. They even bought me baby clothes. One day they organised a surprise baby shower for me.

In contrast to the negative environment discussed earlier, friends are important resources through which young women feel validated. Under very constraining circumstances in school, there are spaces where young women feel validated. The baby shower is an acknowledgment of Angel and offers care and respect rather than exclusion and judgement. While not many participants talked about caring teachers, there were exceptions:

Ntwenhle: Only Mrs. Dexter ever said something to me ... and said 'My child what has happened has happened, just pull yourself up and carry on with your life'. Miss, when she approached me I was very scared, but when she said that to me I became relieved. Whenever I see her I just feel happy. I just did not expect that from her. Since that day she has never said anything about it. But I know that she cares.

Malaika: Hey, you are lucky my friend, they [teachers] never said anything.

Bhana *et al.* (2010) state that, despite teachers' negative construction of pregnancy in schools, they do have the potential to care. The example of the teacher, Mrs Dexter, above confirms this. It also shows that those teachers who can and do care have a positive impact on the ways in which pregnancy and mothering is experienced in schools – although not all teachers do care, as Malaika demonstrates. Instead of the punitive environment through which young women experience schooling, the capacity for teachers to show care is important in changing the experiences for educational success. Mrs Dexter said very little; nonetheless, the affirmation received was valued greatly by Malaika. Care is significant to the supportive environment and must be taken seriously in working to create gender-friendly school environments.

Another important means whereby young women accessed a caring environment was a religious organisation, 'We care':

Angel: The people from 'We care' encouraged us to share our experiences of being mothers with other learners ... It's the people from some church who come to our school every second Wednesday to talk to us about church things and they also encouraged us to form a support group for all the girls with kids.

A supportive group is key to addressing the feelings of estrangement and the difficulties of being a learner and a mother. The caring environment took the form of these girls being taken seriously and acknowledged:

Malaika: We talk about the difficulties that we face with our schoolwork and dealing with being mothers.

Sibongakonke: They give us tips on how we can cope with schoolwork. It's nice going there because we also share our secrets and fears. Nobody judges us there.

Ntwenhle: Yes, I enjoy it there. Those people listen to us. They always tell us that it's not the end of the world. We can still make it in life.

The participants express the care work in ways that draw on and facilitate better schooling environments and contribute towards gender equality, as Ntwenhle states, importantly, that "we can still make it in life". Agency is facilitated and enhanced, which is in contrast to the despair illustrated earlier. The 'We care' group at school provided the most support to young mothers, and is perhaps an important element in the path to enhancing the girls' educational aspirations and gender equality.

Conclusion

This is a small-scale study of young women at school, and it is, therefore, impossible to generalise from it. Our intention was to provide insights into the experiences related by schoolgirls who become mothers. Pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers are not supported as they should be at school. Discourses of

sexual shame situate their experiences within the domain of negativity, which arises from the home, from peers and from teachers. This creates vulnerabilities for young women at school, hurt and pain.

With little or no support from teachers, many of whom do not compromise, young women are expected to grapple with the daily battles between the demands of schooling and of having a child. However, schools are not only places of reproduction of sexual shame and stigma – within the context of changing policy environments there are glimmers of hope and opportunities which can promote care and gender equality .

First, interventions must address the persistence of stigma and shame that continues to harm young women. Such interventions must be designed for all constituents in the school, including other learners. Pregnancy and young mothers are hyper-visible, and the punitive gaze upon them must be ended. Such interventions must be rooted in the Schools Act; the persistence of stigma goes against the promotion of access to school of pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers, and blocks gender equality.

This will go some way to enhancing the agency of young women in school and to speaking out against the hostile environment in schools. None of the girls in this study did so, since the discourse of fear was so great. However, Desiree's confidence was boosted and she did react against condemnations, precisely because her mother prepared her for such experiences and supported her. Bringing in parents to such interventions is also critical for the achievement of gender equality and for ensuring gender-friendly schools.

Secondly, as Bhana *et al.* (2010) note, interventions must address the work description of teachers, which includes providing them with professional development and specific guidelines to assist these pregnant girls and young mothers with tests, examinations, projects and homework. Understanding that having a child and care work are highly gendered is important, since the burden for care of the child falls on the young mother – and such a burden is far greater in the context of poverty. Girls from different social backgrounds have different challenges, and this must be considered in the development of guidelines. Importantly, childcare is feminised, and it is women and young women at school who are expected to care for the children. This is a part of gendered social environments and the subordinate position of women in society. Interventions should also challenge these unequal positions. Investigation into the provision of child care in schools could be considered to alleviate the burden that young women face.

Finally, care work in schools is important and needs to be encouraged. Teachers are considered to be *in loco parentis*. Emotional engagement is an important aspect of care. None of the girls in this study talked about the grinding poverty that creates further vulnerability. In 2010, each girl paid R6.500 to attend Oakleigh High. They do not emerge from wealthy families, but they can and do afford to pay for the daily expenses of the child through family support and the child grant. Their expectation at school was for emotional care, understanding and respect – not judgement.

While it is not a certainty, it is likely, considering how positive the participants in this study considered the care group and the glimpse of care among teachers and friends, that caring will contribute to the process of better schooling outcomes and achievement of gender equality. Care work must be an explicit goal of the interventions aimed at ensuring that many more teachers such as Mrs Dexter can work towards better schooling experiences and gender-just ideals and practices.

Engaging pregnant teenagers and teenagers in general within a logic of gender equality should be part of a more comprehensive approach to addressing the problems in schools and creating supportive spaces.

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