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Socio-Cultural Barriers to Preventing and Managing Teenage Pregnancies: Perspectives from Two South African Schools

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study conducted in two South African co-educational high schools in uThukela, KwaZulu-Natal. Within this context, a qualitative case study approach was employed to explore the challenges school managers and teachers face in averting and managing pregnancies among the uThukela schoolchildren. Insights into this phenomenon were gathered using structured interviews, document reviews and observations. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory guided the data analysis and interpretation. Thematic analysis unveiled how cultural practices and poverty in uThukela jointly impede school managers' efforts to prevent and manage teenage pregnancy occurrences within the respective schools. This paper expounds on this finding.

Keywords: cultural practices, poverty, pregnant schoolgirls, school pregnancy policies, rural issues

1. Introduction

This paper highlights the challenges managers and teachers of two South African schools faced; who, despite their best efforts, failed to curb escalating pregnancy figures in their respective schools. Their disappointments are considered against a global mandate for school leaders to ensure pregnant girls succeed academically. Supporting this mandate, the Constitution of South

African Constitution (RSA, 1996), for example, recognises formal education as a fundamental right for all South Africans. Equally, the South African Schools Act (DoE, 1996) entrenches a law that makes it mandatory for children from 7 to 15 years of age to receive a formal education. School communities cannot infringe on this right for children; parents are thus legally forced to ensure their children's school attendance (DoE, 1996).

Adding to the above, in 2000, the South African government strengthened its obligation to preserve South African women's and children's educational rights by committing to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's *Millennium Development Goals* (UNESCO, 2005). This organisation, more commonly known as UNESCO, expressed a global agenda to provide equal access to education for every child, youth, and adult by 2015 (UNESCO, 2005). Of the eight-documented Millennium Development Goals, a section was devoted exclusively to promoting gender equality and empowerment of females, therefore acknowledging the elevated levels of gender inequality females experience when attempting to access educational institutions and complete their studies (Stromquist, 2005; UNESCO, 2004). UNESCO's agenda was to ensure that by 2015 females, especially at all levels of the educational system, would be supported in their formal educational journeys (UNESCO, 2005). Achieving this mandate meant that all UNESCO members would strive to eradicate gender inequalities from their respective countries' academic policies, programmes and practices (Runhare, 2010; Stromquist, 2005; UNESCO, 2004). It was hoped that a combined universal agenda would facilitate a global reduction at all educational levels, of females dropping out of educational institutions worldwide - and, more particularly, of pregnancy-induced dropouts (Runhare, 2010). For pregnant scholars, this meant that educational rights and protection from unjust treatment within formal learning spaces would now be legally preserved and globally monitored.

Correspondingly, in 2007, the *Measures for the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy* (MPMLP) was introduced by the National Department of Education, in South African public schools (DoE, 2007). That initiative not only recognised a need for children to enjoy equal access to education; it also acknowledged the constraints of pregnant girls in this undertaking. Hence, the MPMLP aimed to reduce learner pregnancy and manage it where it had already occurred. The main responsibility for implementing the MPMLP was placed directly on school managers (DoE, 2007). The implementation was expected to be done in a way that would guarantee, on the one end, that learner pregnancy rates would be minimised and, on the other end, that pregnant learners would be retained in schools without the fear of discrimination. However, this mandate suggests the Department of Education's assumption that school managers had the required expertise to support pregnant learners (Monyai & Metsing, 2019; Sefoka & Odeku, 2021; Segalo, 2020). In South Africa, while policies guarantee all citizens equal access to basic education, such rights are not easily enforced (Ramnarain & Hlatswayo, 2018). This is mainly because policymakers wholly entrust transformational policies to implementers, who are seldom empowered with the required knowledge and power to execute the desired transformations (Jansen, 2002; Ramnarain & Hlatswayo, 2018; Schmidt & Mestry, 2019). Likewise, the Department of Education called on school managers to implement the MPMLP (DoE, 2007) without equipping them with the necessary skills to help

pregnant learners (Monyai & Metsing, 2019; Sefoka and Odeku, 2021; Segalo, 2020).

Despite what the MPMLP aimed to achieve, by 2013, statistics reflected that pregnancy rates among South African schoolchildren continued to rise (Ramulumo & Pitsoe, 2013). Likewise, pregnancy-related school dropout rates illustrated an upward spiral (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2013; Ramulumo & Pitsoe, 2013). It is from this standpoint that the challenges - that school managers and teachers from two selected schools faced in averting and handling teenage pregnancy incidents – were considered. The following research question guided the exploration:

- What challenges do school managers and teachers encounter in averting, and dealing with, teenage pregnancy incidents among schoolchildren from impoverished families?

The research into this phenomenon was conducted in two rural KwaZulu-Natal schools where pregnancy and dropout rates were concurrently rising at an alarming rate. The research uncovered how particular cultural practices and poverty induces sexual vulnerability; these factors, in turn, combine to impede school manager and teacher efforts in dealing with teenage pregnancy rates amongst school children from impoverished backgrounds Evidence of individual "misinterpretations" of cultural practices was highlighted in the data. Reasons for these "misinterpretations" were also identified. This paper expounds on these findings. Whilst the results are not generalisable to other contexts, they may resonate (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020) with the custodians of poor school communities, particularly those charged with implementing learner pregnancy (prevention and management) programs within such contexts.

2. Literature Review

At a local level, this paper illustrates how cultural practices, sexual vulnerability and poverty jointly undermine the efforts of two schools to address pregnancy occurrences amongst schoolchildren from impoverished backgrounds. However, at a broader level, it recognises that becoming pregnant at a young age creates a barrier to educational access, school completion, and academic achievement for schoolgirls. Regarding this, the previous section underscores global and local efforts made so pregnant girls can access education, complete schooling and succeed academically. Beyond these efforts, this section highlights the challenges pregnant girls come up against to access education, complete schooling and succeed academically.

2.1 Challenges to Educational Access, School Completion and Academic Achievement for Pregnant Schoolgirls

In 2010, the Commission for Gender Equality issued a report recognising socio-economic factors that impede learners' academic achievements (Commission for Gender Equality, 2010). The report found that, due to pregnancy, girls are more likely than boys to leave school prematurely. Teenage fathers, however, could continue uninterruptedly with their education (Naidoo, Muthukrishna, & Nkabinde, 2021; Panday, Makiwane, Ranchod, & Letsoalo, 2009). It was also found that teenage fathers tended to be absent fathers, despite their contributory role in the teenage mother falling pregnant in the first place (Saritzky, 2013).

Furthermore, the literature shows that teenage mothers were unlikely to receive emotional and financial support from equally emotionally unprepared, and negligent, teenage fathers (Potjo,

2013). When a teenage father is still a schoolboy, the teenage mother's financial, physical, psychological and emotional costs are thus likely to escalate (Panday, Makiwane, Ranchod, & Letsoalo, 2009). In families where caregivers are unemployed and rely on financial support from outsiders, receiving an additional family member becomes burdensome. In such households, babies are often seen as a liability (Naidoo, Muthukrishna, & Nkabinde, 2021). Being seen as a liability could jeopardise the prospects for babies enjoying a healthy and happy lifestyle (Sethosa, 2007). Therefore, teenage mothers are often forced into finding financial means to support their babies; they drop out of school as a result (Breheny & Stephens, 2007; Nelson, 2013).

As mentioned earlier, schools are legally mandated to avert pregnancy rates and cope with pregnancy incidents among schoolchildren (Monyai & Metsing, 2019; Segalo, 2020; Sefoka & Odeku, 2021). However, from the above review, it becomes evident that the emotional and financial costs of teenage pregnancy do not just affect a pregnant girl's schooling; it affects her immediate family, the family of the baby's father, and the baby as well (Potjo, 2013). The impact of these factors on schooling produces implications for school managers, who are legally entrusted (DoE, 1996; DoE, 2007) to deliver quality education to children irrespective of children's pregnancy status. The above review, however, suggests that school-based efforts may be compounded by social factors external to the school, thus causing a further rise in pregnancy figures and school dropout rates. The research reported in this paper was conducted with this in mind. It therefore adds to existing research on teenage pregnancies by exploring the external social challenges school managers and teachers from two schools faced in averting and managing teenage pregnancy occurrences within their respective schools.

3. Methodology

To conduct the research reported on in this paper, ethical clearance was obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. A permission letter was granted by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education to access the two school sites in which data was gathered. Informed consent was acquired from the research participants.

The research sites and participants (referred to in this article by pseudonyms) were selected through purposive sampling. Two coeducational high schools were chosen from the uThukela District – a deep-rural region of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Selected participants included the school principals of the two rural schools. A Life Orientation teacher, a parent member of the School Governing Body, and a Life Orientation Head of the Department were chosen from each school. The principals of the selected schools approved school access for research purposes. Once ethical clearance was attained from the relevant gatekeepers, informed consent letters were issued to the research participants. These letters explained the study's main goal, participants' rights to remain anonymous, their right to confidentiality, and the right to inconsequentially revoke their participation at any point in the research (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014).

Research participants' views on the research phenomenon were obtained through semi-structured interviews (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Yin, 2014). A digital voice recorder

ensured the accuracy of capturing interview data; this also provided an irrefutable record of participants' reports, rather than relying on what the researcher thought was said (Yin, 2014). The recordings were transcribed verbatim. Document reviews were also conducted, comprising minutes of staff, parent, and departmental meetings, the schools' Education Management Information System records, and school logbooks (where all daily activities are recorded). Data was also generated through observations. The underlying intention was to attain rich, in-depth data to address the key research question in a way that goes beyond documenting the personal opinions of the research participants (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). A database was created where transcribed data were original data were stored (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).

Interview, document, and observation data were inductively analysed, using a thematic approach to analysis. Themes and categories were identified through data coding and specification (Creswell, 2009; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). The final data analysis phase involved data interpretation and reflecting on, and explaining, the findings in relation to the critical research question (Creswell, 2009; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) offered a suitable lens to explore the intersectionality between cultural practices, poverty and education for schoolgirls. This theory argues that a series of interwoven structures comprises the unique environment that shapes one's personal life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is useful to consider the inter-relationship of these structures when contemplating the challenges that affect the education of female learners in schools, especially those located in economically deprived contexts (Van der Merwe, 2020), such as the two schools in which the research reported on in this paper was conducted. Hence, this study assumes that a learner's education could be influenced by their experiences from their unique cultural, social, religious and family lives. Adopting the Ecological Systems Theory offered an inclusive method for considering an individual's interactions at various social levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) - in this case, that of pregnant schoolgirls, and the extent to which these interactions may affect their educational outcomes (Reddy & Fadiji, 2020).

4. Findings and Discussion

The broader study informing this paper identified *cultural practices, relationships* (arranged, romantic and transactional), and *poverty* as the predominant factors that challenged school-based efforts to prevent and manage teenage pregnancy incidences among children in their respective schools. The findings also revealed how the intersectionality of these factors sustained high adolescent pregnancy rates in the community while undermining school-based (teenage) pregnancy prevention efforts. These findings are discussed under the following themes:

- Ukuthwala, Lobola and Poverty;
- Ukuqoma, Ukumisa Iduku and Poverty;
- Economic Survival and Transactional Relationships.

4.1 Ukuthwala, Lobola and Poverty

The findings revealed that long-standing Zulu customs known as Ukuthwala (Note 1) and Lobola (Note 2), practised among uThukela community members, inadvertently boosted

teenage pregnancy rates.

From a traditional premise, the rules of Ukuthwala and Lobola are not intended to harm the parties directly concerned; nor to undermine the community (Nkosi, 2014). However, in promoting universal rights to basic education for girls of this traditional uThukela community, the findings highlight the point at which cultural practices begin to challenge school managers' and teachers' efforts to address learner pregnancy incidences within the two researched schools. To this end, Mr Dube, the Principal of Ngwenya Secondary, described how these traditional practices are conducted. According to Mr Dube:

> *This activity of Ukuthwala is accepted in the community no matter how young the child is. Boys in the community, especially the older ones who are not at school, maybe working, especially those working in Johannesburg, will come at a certain time and take this girl child to his home to become his wife. The boy's family will send the lobola to the girl's family, and that is all.*

Adding to the above, a Ngwenya Secondary Head of Department articulated her challenges in attempting to change the mindsets of the community members who practised cultural beliefs in the way Mr Dube described above. According to Miss Bhengu:

> *The parents do not support the learner pregnancy policy in action because they still promote the culture of Ukuthwala, which is against this policy. They say their children will be married and they will get money.*

Miss Bhengu's explanation uncovered an obscure co-dependency between Ukuthwala and Lobola practices in the uThukela District. Thus, among some community members, the relationship between Ukuthwala and Lobola is intentionally misconstrued, and such practices are a culturally disguised way of attaining financial gain. Ukuthwala and Lobola practices are thus obscurely seen (hence promoted) purely as a means of alleviating poverty, as opposed to being seen as a proper way of upholding customary practices on how the courtship and marriage among young Zulu males and females should unfold. The findings thus show that it is not the traditional practice of Ukuthwala and Lobola *per se* that undermines school-based efforts to avert and manage pregnancy rates in two uThukela schools. Rather, it is the reasons why such procedures are upheld among older uThukela members (parents, especially) that undermine such efforts. Adding to this finding, a Ngwenya Secondary teacher, Mr Nkabinde, highlighted the negative sexual implications that (mis)interpretations of such practices presented for young girls living in uThukela. For Mr Nkabinde:

> *The biggest problem is that parents support this cultural activity no matter how old their children are; it doesn't matter. When they have engaged in Ukuthwala, they become pregnant because they do not even practice safe sex; it is normal, as everyone knows, that so-and-so is involved in a sexual relationship because lobola has been paid.*

The above extract documents how cultural practice and financial gain result in arranged relationships, predisposing young females to sexual risk (Hoss & Blokland, 2018; Mampane, 2018). Similar sentiments about the complex co-dependency between cultural practices and economic survival were evident in interview data from Jabulani Secondary. This is most

explicitly found in Mr Ntuli's (the Jabulani principal's) explanation, which echoes Mr Nkabinde's earlier documented account. Mr Ntuli explained that:

> *The community pressures these learners to follow this Lobola tradition no matter how young they are. These parents do not care whether the child is still young and should concentrate on her studies. As long as they get the money, it is enough, and they will be happy that their child is married now.*

In both Mr Nkabinde and Mr Ntuli's above accounts, it is evident that when the transaction between Ukuthwala and Lobola involves females of school-going age, it renders schoolgirls sexually vulnerable. Given the likelihood of living with the boy's family, many girls fall pregnant and drop out of school. Therefore, Mr Nkabinde and Mr Ntuli's accounts equally uncover a disturbing interplay between the socio-economic conditions, whereby households' financial needs seem to promote a clear yet convenient, communal misinterpretation of traditional Zulu practices.

4.2 Ukuqoma, Ukumisa Iduku and Poverty

Research data further revealed how the ancient Zulu traditions of Ukuqoma (Note 3) and Ukumisa Iduku (Note 4) intersected with poverty to create a similar challenge as Ukuthwala and Lobola practices did in addressing teenage pregnancy rates in the two research schools. Miss Thusi, a Life Orientation teacher from Jabulani Secondary, offered insight into this practice. According to Miss Thusi:

> *The girls send gifts to the family of their boyfriends as a sign that they are now in a relationship. Everybody will know, and it will be an event for everyone. Therefore, if a learner is pregnant, everybody knows who the girl is involved with because she has sent Iduku to the family in front of everyone. In addition, some of these learners are not staying with their parents; they are staying with their boyfriends, so parents don't see the problem when the learner is pregnant. It's culturally correct to them.*

The finding that some adolescent couples cohabit predisposes them to the possibility of falling pregnant at an early age. Hence, the "cultural correctness" of Ukuqoma and Ukumisa Iduku, as described by Miss Thusi, becomes a challenge for schools in addressing pregnancy incidents among learners.

The data further reveals how parents, vindicated by traditional beliefs and practices, bolster teenage pregnancy within the uThukela community. Relating to this, Mr Ntuli, Jabulani Secondary's principal, explained that:

> *We work with a rural community where traditional activities are practised. They legalise things like love affairs by parents. They support Ukuqoma and Iduku as long as they get the money. Maybe even the boy will send his parents to the girl's family to pay lobola for the girl. Parents approve of that; they think you are jealous when you disapprove.*

Endorsing this view, Miss Bhengu, a Head of Department in Ngwenya Secondary, expressed the following:

> *Some parents even put pressure on their children to do this practice of Ukuqoma. What they are doing is the opposite of what the schools expect. They do not have a problem with learners not being expelled from school when they are pregnant, but they will tell you that it is up to the boyfriend's family to allow the girl to come back to school after delivery because damages have been paid.*

It is evident in the above accounts that, in uThukela, the financial aspects of traditional belief systems such as Ukuthwala, Lobola, Ukuqoma and Ukumisa Iduku present challenges for school managers and teachers in their struggle to preserve the educational rights of young girls in a context of poverty and high unemployment. This evident disjuncture between cultural practices and school-based efforts means that, for schools to address teenage pregnancy effectively, they would first have to alter the mindsets of the community members at large. On the other hand though, as confirmed earlier in Miss Bhengu's account on Ukuthwala and Lobola, within a context of poverty, and for as long as such practices are seen predominantly as a way of offering some financial relief for impoverished low-income families, it is unlikely that the mindsets of the financial recipients can be easily altered. Interestingly though, for such families, their perceived wealth will be short-lived - given that the money gained, for a girl child whom her parents see as a currency that can be traded for financial gain in the name of cultural practices, will not last very long. Instead, her prospects of moving herself and her family out of a life of poverty through educational access, school completion and academic achievement disappear as her access to formal education is sacrificed in exchange for a role as a teenage wife and mother.

For such girls and their families, the cycle of poverty is likely to continue unless there is a mind-shift in the ways that they perceive the purposes and intentions (and therefore in the ways that they observe and uphold traditions such as Ukuthwala, Lobola, Ukuqoma and Ukumisa Iduku) against the backdrop of poverty, unemployment, and substantial illiteracy levels.

4.3 Economic Survival and Transactional Relationships

Further on poverty, the research revealed how economic survival predisposes schoolgirls to transactional relationships (Hoss & Blokland, 2018; Mampane, 2018) in the hope of escaping what Spaull (2015) refers to as *the poverty trap*. Mr Dube, the Ngwenya Secondary school principal, declared:

> *Another thing that causes pregnancy and affects education is poverty; some learners come from families who do not have jobs and are unemployed. Some end up not eating anything at home.*

The data also revealed that, in some instances, parents are migrant workers; children are thus left to fend for themselves. Parental absence also results in children lacking parental guidance and support regarding their (children's) sexual lives. Mr Sithole, a Governing Body member of Jabulani Secondary, explained:

> *This community has many psychosocial issues like learners living alone, parents unemployed, and no food at home. Some learners are left alone in their homes. Their parents have passed on, so they have no one to look after them. You will find that some*

> *parents work far away from home, so they need to live by themselves while the parent is at their workplace. Some parents come home once or twice a year, so learners live by themselves the whole year through.*

In such scenarios, the void of parental support forces children to seek ways to be self-supporting. This predisposes children (and girl children particularly) to sexual exploitation, usually by financially stable older men (Hoss & Blokland, 2018; Mampane, 2018). The relationships they enter with these men may result in girls dropping out of school due to unplanned (as well as deliberate) pregnancies. Confirming this finding, Miss Bhengu, a Head of Department from Ngwenya Secondary, stated:

> *Many parents are unemployed, while others work far away from their homes, leaving children alone. Some learners in this community live in child-headed households; they do not have a parent figure looking for them, so they do as they please, while others involve themselves in sexual relationships because of poverty. They do not have anything to eat or to wear.*

Drawing on the above explanations, it appears that many parents are either unemployed or absent from their children's lives altogether. This results in learners suffering financially, educationally, sexually, and emotionally. Therefore, among uThukela's girls, entering intergenerational transactional relationships is a survival strategy and appears to be the norm. The sexual vulnerabilities of such girls are highlighted in Mr Dube's further explanation on the subject:

> *They [girls from low-income families] tend to find an old boyfriend from a well-to-do family who will be able to feed them. Some get pregnant because of the social grant; they know they will be able to get this money and put food on the table.*

It is evident from the above accounts that pregnancy occurrences among the Ngwenya and Jabulani schoolgirls had much to do with their poor socio-economic circumstances outside of their schools. As shown in the data, this happened in two ways: firstly, impoverished social circumstances made girls exceptionally vulnerable to the sexual prowess of older men. Secondly, it was believed that an opportunity to access financial assistance through the South African government's child support grant led to some girls deliberately becoming pregnant. Therefore, whereas social assistance provided by the South African government is intended to mitigate poverty to a certain extent, it is evident that among the uThukela community, this recourse is seen to promote teenage pregnancies; due to poverty, some families depend on child-support grants (Panday, Makiwane, Ranchod & Letsoalo, 2009). Pregnancies thus enable teenage girls to access child support grants. Hence, while the baby becomes an additional mouth to feed (Naidoo, Muthukrishna, & Nkabinde, 2021), receiving a child support grant is also perceived as a way of guaranteeing that the teen mother will eat as well. Consequently, in the context of poverty, this finding reveals a concerning interconnectedness between increasing pregnancy rates and accessing government child-support grants.

5. Conclusion

This paper has revealed how poverty and cultural practices in the uThukela community

intersect in a way that, on the one end, undermines the school management's efforts in the two researched schools to mitigate learner pregnancy incidences and, on the other end, predisposes schoolgirls to pregnancy. Sadly, in these schools, without the community's support, school managers, as custodians of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (UNESCO, 2005), could not carry out the official mandate to successfully address learner pregnancies. To have successfully met this directive, there was an evident need in uThukela for school managers to be supported by the larger community. Without communal support, teenage pregnancy and school dropout rates will likely remain on the incline, with the poverty cycle in uThukela most likely continuing under the existing state of affairs. As a result, the global vision of institutional access and educational success for pregnant schoolgirls will remain a pipe dream for South African pregnant girls in uThukela and communities like this. Hence, to address barriers to educational access, school completion and academic achievement for pregnant schoolgirls, it is necessary to determine the collective and individual factors within immediate communities that cause teenage pregnancy figures within school communities to increase. Furthermore, a transformational role should not solely be rested on school managers and teachers. Instead, reducing pregnancy figures in schools, and managing the educational journey of pregnant schoolgirls, should be a joint effort of the schools and members of the wider school districts - parents and traditional leaders, particularly.

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Notes

Note 1. Thwala literary means carry (Nkosi, 2014). Hence, Ukuthwala is a Zulu term that denotes a practice whereby a mutual arrangement to carry a girl away is made between a boy and girl considered by tradition to be ready to enter a romantic relationship leading to marriage. Even though the public may perceive the girl as being forcibly taken (Nkosi, 2014), Ukuthwala is an arranged process that involved the girl in the planning of her perceived abduction.

Note 2. In an Ukuthwala exchange, the immediate family of the "taken" girl is compensated with cows or money (Nkosi, 2014). In isiZulu, this compensation is referred to as Lobola.

Note 3. Ukuqoma is a formal declaration of love by a young female for a young male who is ready to marry.

Note 4. Like Ukuqoma, Ukumisa Iduku denotes a cultural practice whereby a young male is accepted formally as the future spouse of a young female. The female's family thus offers a gift (e.g., blankets) to the male's family. Such gifts are referred to as Iduku. The female intends for this gesture to publicly declare that she is now officially romantically involved with a particular boy. Ukumisa Iduku also involves hoisting a red flag at the groom's home so everyone in the community knows there is new love and a forthcoming wedding. These rituals and practices are valued in traditional Zulu communities. That is why schoolchildren enjoy the status of going through this process; they view themselves as being socially "better" than others.

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