

2 School principals and their responses to the rights and needs of pregnant and parenting learners

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[N]one of us really want them at school, let's face it. None of us really want them. We would love it if we could say there's a special school for those who are pregnant and they must go there and be taught there and they can all look after their babies there together. (Principal, Munster Girls, KZN)

It is over a decade since the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996) (SASA) forbade discrimination in schools on the basis of pregnancy, stating that pregnant learners have 'the right to basic education'. Likewise, it is illegal for schools to discriminate against those learners who have become parents while still at school. Nevertheless, although the law is clear that learners cannot be turned away from school, it is less clear about how schools should respond to the presence of pregnant and parent learners in the classroom. This chapter explores the ways in which school principals respond to and have implemented national policy regarding pregnant and parenting learners.

As the principal cited at the beginning of this chapter suggests, authorities in many schools are deeply uncomfortable about having pregnant learners in their classrooms. In Cape Town an anonymous principal is quoted as declaring that 'if one of the school learners fell pregnant the parents were called in and told their child had to stay home without tutoring' (*Cape Argus* 31 October 2006). And in May 2008 it was alleged that 13 pregnant learners had been expelled from Mzuvele High School in KwaZulu-Natal (*The Mercury* 8 May 2008). While raising numerous questions about the nature and extent of school compliance with the provisions of the SASA, the ongoing debates in the media have drawn attention to the lack of clarity and guidance about how schools can best implement the provisions of the Act. Such lack of clarity and guidance is embodied in President Jacob Zuma's suggestions that 'schoolgirls who fell pregnant should be separated from their babies until they had completed their schooling' (*Cape Times* 11 November 2008). Although such views have been supported by some leading politicians and school principals, there are also dissenting voices that have insisted that such practices undermine several constitutional rights (*Cape Times* 11 November 2008; *Mail & Guardian* 14–20 November 2008). What is clear is that schools make distinctions between 'normal' and pregnant learners, as well as between pregnant learners and parenting learners, and these distinctions leave school authorities confronting a variety of difficult choices in contexts where there is often unclear, ambiguous or even conflicting guidance.

The responses of school principals in this study regarding the rights and needs of pregnant and parenting learners are reported in this chapter. A number of key themes are explored: principals' understanding of and responses to the SASA; school policy and pregnant learners; school responses to pregnant learners; school responses to parenting learners; and narratives on teenage sexuality and pregnancy at school.

Understanding of and responses to the SASA

In aiming to provide a legislative framework within which schools address the needs and rights of pregnant and/or parenting learners, the Act has received a mixed response from school authorities. The requirements of the Act to admit pregnant learners were primarily understood by the principals involved in this study as a government initiative that had, to a greater or lesser extent, been foisted on schools. As the principal of Munster Girls, cited at the beginning of this chapter, bluntly put it: '[N]one of us want [pregnant learners] at school'. Although others were a little less direct in their views, their lack of enthusiasm for pregnant learners in their classrooms was often marked:

We have to abide by the policy but I must say it does give some problems to the school per se...But I would say it is not a pleasant thing, you know, but we have no option but to accommodate them because the policy says so. (Mr Kabeya, Dingiswayo High, KZN)

Some of the things, because of the Constitution and the policy, we can ask for, but we can't insist on. I mean to say that the child mustn't show signs of sleepiness in class and things like that, and if they are showing that they are not coping, then they must leave – we can't ask that any more. We've just got to put up with it and try and get them through. (Mrs van Zyl, Munster Girls, KZN)

While Mr Meiring, the principal of Nehru High in KwaZulu-Natal, observed that his school half-heartedly accepted pregnant learners ('I don't advise them being at school'), others were apparently less accommodating, with the same principal reporting that 'the one school in the area, the principal turned away these children because they were pregnant'. 'A better route to go,' declared this principal, was to 'have the baby, sort out all your problems and come back...the following year.'

Principals generally believed that pregnant learners required particular medical expertise, which, in turn, justified their being asked to leave school at some point during their pregnancy. Few schools have access to nurses, doctors, midwives or even paramedical personnel, and so the absence of such personnel was constructed as a critical problem when it came to addressing the needs of pregnant learners. Mr Amla, the principal of Gopi High in KwaZulu-Natal, argued: 'No, we don't provide any services, we don't treat pregnant women as different from any other learner. This is an educational institution and we'd like to treat it as such. It's not a clinic.' Understanding pregnancy as pathology requiring specialised medical care underpinned anxieties about pregnant learners in the classroom in KZN in particular:

Now, if...she falls sick, if there are problems...there are no midwives here, here at school...a pregnant person is unpredictable, there is no one who would be able to assist you here in school. (Mr Ntini, Lilian Ngoyi High, KZN)

[W]e have support facilities – we refer them to the social worker, psychologist and the parents – nothing in the school – all outside the school...No...the teachers do it in the LO [life orientation] lessons – you know, trying to educate them as far as pregnancy and HIV and AIDS is concerned – but when it comes to the actual pregnancy we refer to the outside support services...We give them advice – that’s all we can do and thereafter it is the responsibility of the parents themselves and the professional people who handle this sort of thing. (Mr Meiring, Nehru High, KZN)

Another element underpinning the reluctance on the part of school authorities to admit pregnant learners is connected to the ways in which schools themselves are assessed: it is academic results and pass rates rather than the ways in which schools address the diverse educational needs of learners that matter. Learners are not homogeneous, and schools are populated with a cross section of learners with various aptitudes and abilities, as well as pregnant learners, to identify just a few. Out of this diversity, pregnant learners were understood as a particular burden, or ‘liability’, in terms of school performances in the matriculation examination. In KZN, the principal of Munster Girls explained that in her view:

[T]he ones that fall pregnant and produce during their matric year are, I think, the greatest liability to the school let’s say, because they don’t want to withdraw from matric, and you don’t want to wreck your statistics for matric, so you bend over backwards whatever happens for the sake of the school, to help them get through.

The principal of Dingiswayo High in KwaZulu-Natal also drew attention to the question of grade 12 learners: ‘[W]e want to do well in our matric results so...if they fall pregnant therefore it becomes a problem because we keep that girl in school and she’s to break for maybe three months and to go and deliver and come back again.’ He indicated that in previous years pregnant learners would drop out, but now, with the changed legislative framework:

they don’t drop out, they don’t drop out but they will be there and they will be struggling and most of them will not do well and pass...It’s a very small percentage, yea, but even the small percentage does affect the results, because we want 100 per cent passes in matric in this school. (Mr Kabeya, Dingiswayo High, KZN)

So there are signs of change and a degree of flexibility in the ways in which schools address the needs of pregnant learners. ‘At first,’ recalled the principal of Lilian Ngoyi High School, ‘one could not swallow it easily because one has been a teacher for a while, we know the past experiences, during the apartheid era the child will

be chased away from school. But now one has to transform, one has to go with the changes.' Even those teachers who formerly supported the expulsion of pregnant learners were developing new attitudes. As Mr February, the principal of Richmond High in the Western Cape, recalled: 'Many years ago I used to get uptight about it [pregnant learners at school], now I am focused on them getting back into the school system.' And in the Western Cape there was evidence that some principals even welcomed and approved of the changes engendered by the Act. 'I was very disturbed, you know, with previous government policy around pregnant learners,' reported Mr Jordaan, the principal of Southside Senior Secondary, 'where the learner was basically in a way was very, um, discreetly asked not to continue.' Therefore, schools evidently have mixed responses to the aims of the Act, responses expressed through the leadership of school authorities, but which are rooted in the contexts and histories of individual schools and the communities in which they are based.

The SASA, school policy and pregnant learners

The demands of the Act in terms of admitting and teaching pregnant and parent learners, and specifically the continuing education needs and rights of pregnant and parent learners as outlined by the Act, were clearly seen by principals as posing several challenges. Despite this, none of the schools involved in this study had developed formal policy guidelines to address the needs and rights of pregnant and parenting learners. Although before the Act one school had a policy that addressed pregnant learners, this has been let slide in recent years:

We had a formal policy drawn up where we talked about people coming back, whether they'd paid fees, etc., etc. But I have to confess that we have not adapted that policy and reformalised it, with taking out the things that are no longer allowed. That was drawn up when we were a Model C school and we could make certain provisions, we've let it hang. (Mrs van Zyl, Munster Girls, KZN)

Regarding pregnant learners, Mr Amla of Gopi High, KwaZulu-Natal, explained: 'We don't have a policy because we don't have a major problem with pregnancy.' Others made it clear that the absence of a policy was linked to understanding the challenges facing pregnant learners as problems confronting the learner rather than the school. As Mr Kabeya of Dingiswayo High in KwaZulu-Natal observed, 'we don't have a school policy about them because...we are mainly concerned with normal school-going learners.' Other principals reported that they did not have a policy framework either to guide the management of pregnant learners:

[T]he school doesn't have a policy as such...We don't have a policy to cater for this kind of things. We don't have a policy for example to cater for uhm, uhm pregnant girls who are not at school to get some kind of additional tuition. We don't have that kind of facilities, and with the problems that schools have these days we can't cater for this. (Mr Amla, Gopi High, KZN)

While few schools had developed a formal policy to address the needs of pregnant learners, the need for such a policy was frequently linked to the incidence of learner pregnancy, and varied from school to school. The principal of Nehru High in KwaZulu-Natal thought the incidence of learner pregnancy and parenting learners was '[v]ery minimal, very minimal – not many at all', while in the Western Cape, the principal of Southside Senior Secondary saw it to be static: 'For the last three years it's been on average about between eight to nine learners per annum.' In contrast, Mr Makili, the principal of Maputo Secondary, also in the Western Cape, observed that he had 'a feeling that it is increasing'. Overall, principals considered the incidence of learner pregnancy to be relatively stable, although there was some uncertainty about this, and given the newspaper reports cited earlier, and recognising the apartheid legacies of inequality, it is likely that trends vary from school to school and province to province:

I would have to go back to the EMIS [Education Management Information System] document. I know it was about 11 the one year. And I was actually thrilled to see that last year we had a drop. I think only six that we recorded in the EMIS document that fell pregnant last year. But I'm already hearing about pregnancies and of course, we always have a rush of pregnancies that we calculate is after the matric dance. If we have a matric dance fairly early that's when we have them delivering in November, during matric. But this matric dance is only in April, so maybe they'll only deliver in December. But they will be sitting in uncomfortable states if they do fall pregnant. (Mrs van Zyl, Munster Girls, KZN)

Let me be honest, I don't think we do have a database, because when we take learners we don't ask questions whether you have a child or you don't have a child, so we don't have a database of learners who are mothers... Because I don't think that, the percentage is not big, you know of female learners who have children, so as a result therefore we don't have a policy, but we deal with the causes depending on the situation... We do have them from grade 8, you know, but it is much more noticeable in grade 12. (Mr Kabeya, Dingiswayo High, KZN)

It ranges between 12 to 15 per year, but this year is very high. One or two years, the rate was quite down, about three or four only. I think because I went haywire with the parents – raising awareness about this; either it went underground or the parents put a lot more stress on birth control etc. I would like to think I had an effect on parents. (Mr February, Richmond High, WC)

Even though the incidence of pregnant learners varied from school to school, and even over time within particular schools, all schools were confronted with the presence of pregnant learners in the classroom. In the absence of formal policy, there was a great deal of variety in the day-to-day management of pregnant learners, and each school had their own informal ways of responding. To some extent, these appeared to involve encouraging a pregnant learner to withdraw from the classroom –

and even at times insisting on it – on the basis that it was in the learner’s best interest. For example, although Lilian Ngoyi High in KwaZulu-Natal has no formal policy to prevent pregnant learners from attending classes, the principal explained that:

It is frustrating, not that we hate them but they are experiencing problems... They are not being expelled from school but we advise the child to remain at home during that pregnancy.

Similarly, Mr Amla of Gopi High in KwaZulu-Natal reported that:

The policy that we would follow informally is the same policy that we would use for our educators. We would use the same kind of accouchement leave that we offer to our educators to these learners... We don’t have a system where we don’t allow them back in school, but in most cases we advise children that if they have taken a decision to become parents then they must take on the responsibility to act as parents.

And also regarded as acting responsibly were those parents who removed their pregnant daughters from school. According to one principal, ‘some girls have had sensible parents who have taken them out of school for a year, let them finish the year and then come back’.

In the Western Cape, another principal, who claimed to be supportive of pregnant learners and to follow the Department of Education’s policy, explained: ‘[I]n our school there is a code of conduct...the parents must inform us if the child is pregnant, the child must leave school, but must return as soon as she is healthy.’ In defiance of the Act, this principal insisted that in his school, learners who have become pregnant ‘have to leave school immediately that they inform us even if it is very early, so parents tend to keep the information from us until it really starts showing’ (Mr February, Richmond High, WC).

This principal was one of the few to recognise that patterns of gender inequality privilege access to education in favour of young fathers and not young women. He explained that in his school both pregnant learners and the fathers of their unborn babies had to leave school:

If the father is also at the school, he must spend the same amount of time as the girl away and must support the girl at home. We will also support him while out of school. Mostly the fathers [are] in early 20s and not boy learners. We fit into the formal policy except for the ruling about fathers (Mr February, Richmond High, WC).

In drawing attention to the intergenerational sex between young women and older and better resourced men, this principal highlights the ways in which gender inequalities compound young women’s vulnerability – conceiving a child has much more of an adverse impact on the educational opportunities of young women. Although he acknowledges this inequality and tries to address it, if the potential father were a learner in his school, he addresses this inequality in a way that compromises the right to education of both young men and young women.

School responses to pregnant learners

You can't throw away any person...throw a person to a dustbin because she is pregnant, you know, life goes on and these people must not be thrown away. (Mr Kayeba, Dingiswayo High, KZN)

A key issue for learners who take time off school is keeping up – or catching up – with their education. In this regard pregnant learners and parent learners were understood to present slightly different challenges to schools. For pregnant learners, time off school was constructed by some principals as desirable, necessary and legitimate. Other schools had a more formal approach, as Mr Makili of Maputo Secondary in the Western Cape noted:

Teen pregnancy is an issue at our school, so we can't deny that fact. Next step is for us to come up with arrangements; we make arrangements for the learners to remain in school to a point where the learner is advanced. We discuss this with the parent. We usually give the responsibility to the guidance teacher to be in contact with the parents and also arrange pieces of work from educators for the pregnant learner to work at home as required by the law. We are however not condoning pregnancy, if there was a way it could be avoided, what we want is education, that is educating learners not to fall pregnant, by looking at alternate means of dealing with the situation, but if it does happen these are the steps that we take.

Also in the Western Cape, the principal of Southside Senior Secondary explained: '[W]hat we normally do is we assist them by asking the teachers to give work either to the parent or they need to send somebody to fetch work for the learner. We also meet them and try and meet them halfway by making notes available to them.' Another principal in the Western Cape elaborated further and explained that his school made limited allowances for pregnant and parenting learners: 'There aren't any special concessions, except they are now placed in support groups with the social worker. Also [we] allow the learner to take their child to the clinic, etc.' But in another school in KwaZulu-Natal even these kinds of support groups were not available, as the principal at Lilian Ngoyi High explained: '[T]here is nothing we can do except to teach them just like other learners, not marginalising them in any way. We treat them as normal kids who are back at school.'

Overall, there appears to be very limited support from schools for learners who take time off from school, and what support there is tends to be informal, individualised and often dependent on the benevolence of particular educators. While this is connected to the absence of policy provisions, it is also very closely tied to the lack of financial, material or even emotional resources in schools. In other words, the lack of support is not especially aimed at pregnant or parent learners, but is a consequence of the ways in which schools are institutions with a very particular mandate, and the ways in which this mandate is structured, staffed and financed.

School responses to mothering learners

What is lacking is that when they are back, as a school we only expect them to run the race – to continue as if nothing has happened. Whilst they are at home we arrange with classmates to share homework with them, but when they are back there is not follow-up...the only arrangement is with educators to send them some work. (Mr Makili, Maputo Secondary, WC)

Whereas pregnant learners are by definition all female, and their time away from school is understood as both necessary and desirable, parent learners can be of either sex. Despite this, the nurturing work of parenting learners was overwhelmingly and unambiguously understood by principals as women's work in general and mother's work in particular. Supported by community values of a gender division of labour that ascribes nurturing work to women, female parent learners struggle to juggle the social expectations of mothering while at the same time attending school. As interviews with school authorities suggest, the two were largely understood to be mutually exclusive. As discussed later, despite their expectations that young, school-going mothers should be the primary caregivers, few of the principals involved in this study considered such work to be appropriate on the school grounds or within the school premises. Even the most accommodating of schools could not countenance the thought of breastfeeding on school premises:

We cannot allow you to breastfeed here...we had instances where people, some of the family members, bring the child to the school and now the mother must breastfeed in front of other children, you know, we try to discourage that kind of practice and rather make alternative arrangements...So we try to ask parents to make practical arrangements you know to bottle-feed the child, that the mother breastfeed in the afternoon, early morning and afternoons. (Mr Jordaan, Southside Senior Secondary, WC)

The idea of babies and infants in crèches actually on or in close proximity to school premises alarmed several principals. As the principal of Munster Girls observed: 'I've sarcastically said sometimes that we need to set up a crèche here...a crèche. No, no, that would really give the school the most terrible name. And we certainly wouldn't want the children here.' But whereas some principals clearly understood parenting on school premises to be unacceptable, there were others who were willing to be a little more flexible over the parenting obligations of their learners. Some principals supported the idea of crèches close to schools as a way of improving the attendance of parenting learners. The principal of Dingiswayo High in KwaZulu-Natal suggested that the Department of Education should 'build a nursery next to the schools so that the pregnant girl will leave the child in the nursery and go to school'.

However, although there were principals and teachers who spoke of the need to provide childcare facilities for parent learners in their schools, it was equally clear that such arrangements were understood to be outside the parameters of school business. In the absence of substantive support from schools, most principals expected young

school-going mothers to be helped by their families, and indeed there is substantial evidence to suggest that familial support is crucial in helping young mothers with their schooling (Bhana et al. 2008; Bhana et al. 2010; Jewkes et al. 2009). However, while on the one hand acknowledging the need for support for young school-going mothers, school authorities argued on the other hand that familial support allowed young mothers to avoid the responsibilities, duties and obligations that motherhood (but not fatherhood) brought. Mr Kayeba of Dingiswayo High complained that ‘in our cases they leave the kids with their grandmothers, with their mothers and don’t feel the responsibility...these girls become irresponsible because they know they have mothers and grandmothers.’

Similarly, the principal of Richmond High in the Western Cape reported:

I tell the parents that the biological mother must take care of the child. [F]or example, I will give them time to go to the clinic etc., the child must know who the mother is. I insist that they have as close an interaction with the child as possible. Bearing in mind that they have tests to write etc. But as much as possible I would like them to deal with the child’s needs.

However, when young mothers did take responsibility for the care of their children they could be constructed as irresponsible and lacking in commitment:

The thing that really annoys the staff and me and the secretaries is when they’re given a note to say that the baby is sick and they had to take the baby to the clinic. But that’s usually the type that drops out. The families that give the ultimate support are the ones where the children succeed in the end. (Mrs van Zyl, Munster Girls, KZN)

Even though they make limited provision for the needs of learners with parenting obligations, school authorities nevertheless expect the burden of childcare to fall primarily on mothers, rather than fathers or other members of the extended family. But in acknowledging nurturing and care work as primarily the responsibility of biological mothers, school authorities perhaps underestimate the challenges faced by ‘normal’ learners of all ages and genders. Many South African learners – and female learners in particular – spend time doing care work even if they are not parents themselves (Truscott 1994; and see Section B). However, as articulated below, the principals involved in our study suggested that it was primarily the mothering work undertaken by biological mothers that compromised school work:

I have to be honest, sometimes they struggle. The one learner told me last year that when she comes to school she is so tired because at night she has to breastfeed, the child gets sick, you know, she’s for most of the evening awake and when she comes here she feels she cannot really get her best here at school. (Mr Jordaan, Southside Senior Secondary, WC)

The continued education of pregnant learners and parent learners, as required by the Act, presents different, if overlapping, challenges. A key difference is that absence

from school on the part of mothering learners is understood in contradictory ways, whereas the absence from school of pregnant learners is understood much more simply as legitimate. While pregnancy itself is seen as undesirable, absence from school is perceived to be necessary. These understandings overlap in the assumption that problems faced both by pregnant and parenting learners are problems facing the learner – almost always a young woman – rather than the school. As reported by principals, support for both groups of young women was limited. Support was often based on the concern and goodwill of individual teachers, and given the gendered expectations surrounding nurturing work, it probably represented additional unpaid work for primarily women teachers, further reinforcing gendered divisions in schools and society more generally. Such practices further contribute to extending the time it takes for young female parents to complete their education, and undermine opportunities to further their education compared with male parents, as noted by Perry and Fleisch (2006). These understandings and responses to pregnant and parenting learners – namely, that they are the problems of an individual (and specifically a female individual) rather than those of a society – need to be understood against the gendered and heteropatriarchal values of the communities from which teachers and learners themselves originate, and against earlier, entrenched practices that refused pregnant learners the right to education, in contrast to the relatively recent policy and legislative shifts embodied in the Act.

The next section discusses the ways in which contemporary discourses produce these understandings. It shows how school authorities have little or no incentive to redefine their obligations in ways that would deconstruct childcare and parenting as women's work or to reconstruct it as school business. Given that it is not just parenting learners who are involved in caring and nurturing work at home, and that many learners come to school tired and hungry, and present with competing and diverse needs, schools in fact have much more of an incentive not to take on obligations that are likely to place additional burdens on already stretched resources.

Narratives on teenage sexuality and pregnancy at school

There is nothing new about young women becoming pregnant while at school, and all principals and teachers operate within and draw upon sets of competing discourses about pregnancy, sexuality and young parents in their efforts to respond to the presence of such learners in their classrooms. In preparation for a more detailed discussion of the views of teachers and learners in Chapters 3, 5 and 6, this section explores some of the ways in which the principals involved in this study reproduce and occasionally challenge the normative constructions of pregnant and parent learners. In many contexts there are highly moralistic and stigmatising views about pregnancy among teenagers – for instance, the view that teenage pregnancy is a sign of promiscuity. These views coexist with rights-based discourses that have emerged in the context of the AIDS pandemic, which validate the sexual agency of young people. Taken in the specific context of each school, such competing and contradictory understandings and systems of belief shape what principals

understand as either possible or desirable within their schools. Mrs Ericksen, the principal of Gladstone Secondary, KwaZulu-Natal, observed:

I do know that while many teachers are sympathetic towards pregnant girls, some educators are actually very opposed to pregnant girls being allowed to continue at school. I know that because teachers have complained to me personally that they do not feel comfortable teaching women, as opposed to girls. Principals have to acknowledge and respond to the discomforts articulated by their teaching staff about teaching 'women' rather than 'girls'.

In addition, principals have to consider the social context and the challenges created by balancing the needs of pregnant and parent learners with the expectations of the community in which the school is located. Principals expressed concerns about the ways in which any social stigma attached to an individual who was pregnant and or parenting while at school might overflow into the school. As the principal of Munster Girls noted, 'the presence of pregnant learners' in her classrooms meant her school risked 'being known as a maternity ward'. So on the one hand, principals hope to do the best for individual learners, but on the other this has to be balanced against what are perceived to be the needs of the school and the broader community within which the school is located.

Although there were differences between schools, most principals stated that in their view the presence in the classroom of parent learners, and pregnant learners in particular, provided negative role models for 'normal' learners, and that being at school was 'humiliating' for those who were or had been pregnant:

Let me be honest, previously, even previously we did not expel them. But we, it looked nasty, you know...Grade 12 learners with a big tummy in the school with small kids, grade 8 learners, you know, didn't look pleasant at all. (Mr Kabeya, Dingiswayo High, KZN)

These understandings of the challenges of complying with the Act and accommodating pregnant and parent learners in school suggest that for many the classroom is not a particularly supportive environment for a learner who is pregnant or parenting. Principals largely agreed that school was not the place for pregnant and parent learners, citing poor role modelling and the stigmatising of pregnant and parenting learners by 'normal' learners and the wider community as explanations for their views. But instead of questioning these processes of stigmatisation and marginalisation, or perhaps even using them as a teaching and learning exercise, principals often acted in ways that inadvertently reinforced stigma and marginalisation, thus effectively reinscribing gender inequalities that permit men and boys to avoid responsibility and oblige girls to shoulder it.

In cases where, for example, pregnant learners insisted on their right to attend school, often in the face of a lack of enthusiasm from school authorities, the practices sometimes employed to respond to their presence effectively quarantined them from the rest of the school population, clearly marking such learners as 'other':

[W]e have this unwritten sort of rule that we don't treat you differently. However, when it comes to exam time we, especially when the learner is pregnant, we make special provision not to let the learner write in the class, rather one of the offices, because what we discovered...when learners are pregnant and you expose them to other learners who might have contagious diseases like measles or chicken pox like that, we rather make provision for that learner to write in isolation. (Mr Jordaan, Southside Senior Secondary, WC)

The principal of Munster Girls in KwaZulu-Natal reported that in her school '[s]ometimes they have to be forcibly sent here [by parents]' and the challenge 'is to handle it so the pregnancy causes the least embarrassment to the other pupils. That's what we found – that there's a huge feeling against the girls that are pregnant.' But rather than challenging the stigmatising stereotypes held by 'normal' learners, the school attempted to support pregnant learners by asking them to stop wearing their school uniforms: '[W]hat we try now is as soon as they are showing too much to wear school uniforms, we put them into civvies and I suggest that if they want to rest at home they can rest at home, but otherwise they can attend school in civvies.' Therefore, in its efforts to address the competing needs of different constituencies, this school inadvertently reinforced the stigma, and simultaneously missed an opportunity to critique gendered norms that operate against women and girls.

It was concern for the reputation of her school that saw the principal of Munster Girls in KwaZulu-Natal react with horror when 'Marie Stopes Clinic put a "safe abortions" sign outside our school on Friday last week tied on a tree outside. We nearly went berserk...so we've taken those signs down...we just felt that outside a girls' high school it's just not a thing to put up for our name.' Moreover, she was simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the sexual rights and possible reproductive choices open to her learners; and going on to overlook the reality that many young women's sexual encounters – even with boyfriends – are coercive and that this has an impact on their schooling (see, for example, Hallman 2007). She further explained:

I think some of the teachers are more sympathetic than others, but nobody's really sympathetic because all the girls have had warnings. They have been told how to protect themselves and we're not sure how many of them...most of them, when you get them in and you say, 'Who is the father of the baby? Is it a boyfriend?' 'Yes, it's my boyfriend.' And so it's not rape. If they were all products of rapes, one would be much more sympathetic. We know we have girls who are indulging in unprotected sex. (Mrs van Zyl, Munster Girls, KZN)

Partly underpinning these kinds of unsympathetic responses was a tendency to see pregnancy as the result of a perverse moral choice, as opposed to a legitimate expression of teenage sexuality, and furthermore a choice that could be construed as an overt challenge to principals and teachers. The principal of Lilian Ngoyi High in KwaZulu-Natal observed:

[W]e are not happy, we are not happy that our learners, young as they are, fall pregnant and we are surprised as to why and how because we preach the gospel of abstinence or at least those who cannot resist but they must practise safe sex, but the problem is still there.

Conclusion

The relatively recent provisions of the SASA represent an important break with past practices that discriminated against pregnant and parent learners. If the media debates are anything to go by, the ensuing presence of pregnant and parent learners in South African schoolrooms is becoming increasingly contentious, although it is unclear whether this is because there are more of these learners or because their visibility has been heightened by legislation that insists on their right to attend school. Pregnancy used to signal the end of formal education for many learners, but the Act now means that they are now entitled to continue their schooling. For school authorities one of the key challenges of complying with this new legislative framework has been to find ways of negotiating their way through the moral legacies of their own upbringing and schooling, as well as resisting exclusionary and blaming practices that are evident in their communities and in society more broadly. It is clear this has not always been easy. The principal of Lilian Ngoyi High in KwaZulu-Natal noted of the new legislation: '[O]ne could not swallow it easily.'

As outlined in this chapter, different paths have been negotiated by different principals in different locations. Under the leadership of men and women, inevitably shaped by their own social and historical contexts, implementation of the Act has been patchy, uneven and at times contradictory in schools in both KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. And yet at the same time, patterns have emerged. Although often reluctantly, all the schools involved in this study admitted pregnant and parent learners. None of the schools excluded (expelled) learners when they were found to be pregnant, and none denied access to learner parents. Although all the schools admitted and retained such learners, none had produced a formal policy to guide responses to them. While some schools expected individual teachers to make ad hoc arrangements with individual learners to continue their education, others employed measures to distance the school from such learners, and others sanctioned and/or marginalised learners whose pregnancy might adversely affect their school's reputation. Most, if not all, of the principals we interviewed agreed that pregnant learners should be encouraged to give up school and to return only after the birth of their babies. Most drew upon normative gendered expectations regarding childcare in terms of duty, blame and obligation to justify their views, reinscribing hegemonic understandings that pregnancy and childcare are matters confronting the individual, gendered as woman or girl, rather than problems requiring a social solution. It could be argued that this is a self-serving position, one that lets schools off the hook in terms of providing for the needs of pregnant and parent learners, as required by the Act. But at the same time it needs to be recognised that it is virtually inevitable that principals privilege dominant responses and positions on teenage pregnancy in the

interests of their schools, rather than the interests of certain 'recalcitrant' individuals. And it should also be acknowledged that schools, often located in conservative, patriarchal, paternalistic and frequently sexist communities, have little incentive, and are generally ill equipped and ill prepared, to risk challenging hegemonic understandings of schooling, pregnancy and parenthood.