



Policy commitments vs. lived realities of young pregnant women and mothers in school, Western Cape, South Africa

Sisa Ngabaza and Tamara Shefer

Abstract

Reproductive rights in South Africa continue to be undermined for young women who fall pregnant and become mothers while still at school. Before 1994, exclusionary practices were common and the majority of those who fell pregnant failed to resume their education. With the adoption of new policies in 2007, young pregnant women and mothers are supposed to be supported to complete school successfully. Notwithstanding these new policies, there are incongruities between policy implementation and young women's lived experience in school. This paper explores the experiences of pregnancy and parenting among a group of 15 young women who fell pregnant and became mothers while attending three high schools in Khayelitsha township, a working-class community in the Western Cape of South Africa. Qualitative, in-depth interviews, conducted between 2007 and 2008, highlighted two key areas of concern: continuing exclusionary practices on the part of schools, based on conservative interpretations of policy, and negative and moralistic responses from teachers and peers. Such practices resulted in secrecy and shame about being pregnant, affecting the young women's emotional and physical well-being and their decisions whether to remain in school during pregnancy and return after having the baby. Further attention is required to ensure appropriate implementation of policies aimed at supporting pregnant and parenting young women to complete their education successfully.

Young South African women who become pregnant and parent whilst in school continue to experience negative responses from their schools and communities, who see them as a moral threat.^{1,2} Notwithstanding these popular views, the South African government, through its human rights framework, has undertaken to promote all young people's rights to education through the South African Schools Act 108 (1996),³ including young women who may fall pregnant and decide to parent while at school. The Act, which derives from the South African Constitution, emphasises that educational opportunities must be provided for all learners, abolishing the exclusion of pregnant learners from mainstream learning.

In 2007, the National Department of Education, drawing from the Schools Act, also implemented guidelines on managing pregnant young women in schools.⁴ One of the central guidelines specifies that learners may "request or be required to take leave of absence...to address both pre and postnatal health concerns...No pre-determined period is specified for this purpose since it will depend entirely on the circumstances of each case" and that "learners as parents should exercise full responsibility for parenting and that a period of absence of up to two

en interpretaciones conservadoras de las políticas, y respuestas negativas y moralistas del profesorado y pares. Dichas prácticas propiciaron un ambiente de secretos y vergüenza en torno al embarazo, lo cual afectó el bienestar psicológico y físico de las jóvenes y sus decisiones en cuanto a permanecer en la escuela durante el embarazo y regresar después de dar a luz. Este asunto requiere mayor atención para asegurar una adecuada aplicación de las políticas destinadas a apoyar a las jóvenes embarazadas y madres para que logren terminar sus estudios.