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ARTICLE



## School return post-childbirth: barriers for Seychellois teenage mothers

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### ABSTRACT

Teenage childbearing interferes with girls' educational attainment in many settings, as it frequently marks the end of their basic education. In Seychelles despite numerous laws and policies to facilitate and support teenage mothers' schooling, the number of teenage mothers returning to school remains low. We are unaware of the factors that may be hindering their return to their studies. An exploratory, qualitative study was conducted aimed at exploring the factors influencing Seychellois teenage mothers' return to school after childbirth. A semi-structured interview guide was used during individual in depth interviews with a sample of six teenage mothers who returned and six who did not return to school, as well as four key informants. This paper reports only on the data on the barriers to school return. The findings suggest that the complex realities of teenage mothers' lives are insufficiently considered, limiting young mothers' educational options. It recommends measures to improve young school-going mothers' return to school.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Teenage mothers; school return; barriers; multi-level factors; policies; Seychelles

## Introduction

Despite increased public awareness and readily available contraceptive services in Seychelles, unplanned and unwanted pregnancy amongst teenagers remains a problem (Seychelles Association of Women Professionals (SAWOP), 2009). Data shows an increase in teenage pregnancy from 18.7% in 1999 to 29.2% in 2011 (UNESCO, 2003). Furthermore, 15% of teenagers were having their second or third baby by the age of twenty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). Statistics obtained from the only published study conducted in Seychelles (2004–2008) on the barriers to teenage mothers completing schooling showed that only five out of 37 teenage mothers returned to school after childbirth, and 27 out of the 37 were neither in employment nor in school (Seychelles Association of Women Professionals (SAWOP), 2009). In 2005, the Seychellois Ministry of Education (SMOE) implemented a Teenage Pregnancy Support Policy, which adopts a holistic approach directing that support structures be provided to teenage girls who become pregnant during schooling (Ministry of Education, 2011). Despite this policy, SMOE statistics showed that 10 out of 18 mothers did not return to school in 2013

(Ministry of Education, 2016). This study aimed to explore factors influencing Seychellois teenage mothers' return to school after childbirth. The findings contribute to better understanding what factors hinder girls' school return after childbirth at different socio-ecological levels in order to contribute to addressing issues militating against a return to school.

## Methods

A qualitative study was conducted with twelve young women,  $\geq 18$  years, who were past teenage mothers, and four key informants. The sample was purposively selected, and drawn from the SMOE and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), that provided therapeutic and counselling services to the teenage mothers. This paper reports only on the data collected from the young mothers who experienced barriers to school return. Table 1 shows the young mothers' socio-demographic profile.

Data were collected through individual in-depth interviews, lasting approximately 45 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide captured past experiences of the young mothers during pregnancy and motherhood and factors influencing their non-return to school. A monetary reimbursement for costs incurred was provided. Five interviews were conducted in Creole, the native language and one in English. Written consent was obtained from all participants. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Following transcription, data codes were generated and themes developed manually. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological model was used to guide analysis but not a priori in data collection. Rigour was ensured through triangulation, verification, an audit trail and co-coding of data. Participants' personal details were replaced with study numbers, with transcripts only accessible to the researchers. This ensured anonymity and confidentiality. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of the Western Cape (UWC) Senate Research Committee, and the Seychelles Health Research and Ethics Committee.

## Results

### *Socio-demographic participant profile*

#### *Micro-level challenges*

Some participants were deterred from returning to school due to their obligation for childcare as they did not have family support, and/or financial assistance. Their new circumstances of occupying adult roles conflicted with school continuation, even if pre-childbirth they aspired to educational completion.

**Table 1.** Young mother's socio-demographic profile

| Participants                                     |                 |
|--|-----------------|
| Number of participants                           | 6               |
| Mean age (years) when interviewed (range)        | 20 (18–24)      |
| Mean age (years) when pregnant (range)           | 15.8 (15–16)    |
| School grades when became pregnant               | Grades 10 to 11 |
| Lived with parent(s), post- childbirth           | 2               |
| Co-habited with baby's father post-childbirth    | 3               |
| Married, co-habited, then divorced baby's father | 1               |

*So, you are like a single mom having all the burden on your own ... I have to act like a mother ...* (P9)

Decision-making about school return was also subject to unpredictable circumstances and was fluid.

*You make a lot of decisions, so today ... you say ... I am ready to return; tomorrow it can happen a certain problem that you say I am not going ...* (P8)

Perceived negative school environments led to anxiety and stress for teenage mothers. School returns frequently led to repeating a grade post-childbirth, placing them in a lower grade than their school friends. Participants reported that they would feel uncomfortable attending classes with younger students and also wearing school uniform, post-childbirth. They additionally perceived that others in the school environment would view them disparagingly, deeming it 'not proper' for breastfeeding mothers to be at school. Moreover, some felt shy facing their teachers if they returned, especially if teachers had advised them to stop schooling upon pregnancy visibility.

### **Meso-level challenges**

Family socio-economic circumstances made it unrealistic for participants to return to school even when some parents had encouraged them to return. One participant expressed this as follows:

*[S]he [her mother] told me to return to school but I was telling her ... 'you cannot take care of me, my child and my small brother at the same time ...'* (P4).

The baby's fathers had varied reasons for their partners' non-school return. Some participants who cohabited with their child's father post-childbirth, found they urged them to stay at home until the child was older and then only seek work. A participant, previously married to her baby's father, explained that he was unsupportive of her return upon motherhood, as he wanted to study further. This caused relationship problems followed by divorce, single motherhood and a financial need for employment. In contrast, another participant reported the baby's father had left the choice to her. She decided against school return and rather sought employment, to avoid financial dependence on her partner.

Minimal family and partner childcare support strongly deterred participants' school return. They reported having no financial support for the baby's material needs from parents, baby's father even if co-habiting, or from government. Some reported that the welfare agency ruled them ineligible for financial assistance, without giving clear explanations. Participants therefore prioritised employment for financial support.

### **Macro-level challenges**

The Seychelles Teenage Pregnancy Support Policy, theoretically, encourages young women's school return post-childbirth. However, the policy was frequently poorly implemented at schools, which is at odds with the policy's spirit. Sometimes, a school prescribed

pre-conditions for a return, unspecified in the policy. One of these conditions was no contact with the baby's father.

*"Don't get in contact with any boys in school . . . "* (P10)

## Discussion

A combination of multi-level factors made decision-making for school return complex. Apart from personal factors, minimal family support was an important hindering factor. Receiving adequate family and childcare support were significant enabling factors for school return (Riordan, 2002; Chohan, 2010; Nelson, 2013). In this study, limited family support for economic stability, supportive environments and assistance with childcare suggest that participants had difficulties committing to continue schooling. Support for a teenage mother is often dependent on a family's socio-economic circumstances prior to and after her pregnancy. SmithBattle (2007) argues that while the parents of teenage mothers may value their daughters' continued education, their social and economic circumstances may be insufficient for their daughters to overcome a school return's significant barriers. Continued schooling could add pressure to pre-existing family socio-economic difficulties, forcing her to seek employment rather than return to school (Nelson, 2013; Riordan, 2002).

In 2015, the Seychelles President acknowledged that childcare costs may be excessive for many mothers and proposed additional government support for childcare (State House, 2015). However, there are no social welfare schemes specifically for Seychellois pregnant teenagers and young mothers. State social welfare only provides for a childcare scheme and supplementary welfare benefits for individuals in need of additional financial support. This requires separate applications, based on financial need. Only parents of teenage mothers <18 years are allowed to apply on behalf of their daughters'. These complex and time-consuming administrative requirements act as a welfare application disincentives and hence school return for female minors.

Schools prohibiting young mothers from having contact with baby's father are contrary to the Teenage Pregnancy Support Policy's spirit of facilitating girls' school return. This further discourages fathers' responsibility, burdening girls with primary childcare and potential education discontinuation. Hence, despite legislation and policy, ineffective and variable implementation discourages young mothers' school return.

Riordan (2002) suggests that education policies and strategies should recognise adolescent mothers' diverse needs, life experiences and circumstances, to be more inclusive and promotive of girls' basic education. The policy on Seychellois pregnant learners and teenage mothers should ultimately be incorporated in the Education Act to give it the legal weight. Any policy not in law may be taken less seriously when implementing. Financial packages similar to those offered for higher education, such as a monthly stipend, may offer provision of financial resources and reduce the need for teenage mothers' paid work (Mollborn, 2007). The scheme should be specific to pregnant learners and teenage mothers, with young girls allowed to apply on their own, without having to rely on their parents. This will reduce the complexities of accessing welfare support. Schools should create linkages for teenage mothers with other key agencies such as

welfare services (SmithBattle, 2006). This will promote a multi-sectoral approach to address the issue of teenage mothers' school return.

## Conclusion

This paper explored the barriers to Seychellois teenage mothers' school-return. The findings highlight the interconnectedness of multiple factors that collectively influence the teenage mothers' school-return. The findings suggest that the complex realities of teenage mothers' lives are insufficiently considered, limiting young mothers' educational options. These needs to be better addressed.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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