



TEENAGE PREGNANCIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON EDUCATION. A CASE STUDY OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

Teenage pregnancies are a cause for concern to many countries in the world, Zimbabwe included. The effects such actions have on the lives of the affected and their families appear not evident but are very crucial. This study examined the causes of teenage pregnancies among ordinary level students in Harare high density schools and the ripple effects these had on the affected persons and their families and to suggest solutions to curb this matter. Schools and the teenage mothers in High Glen district were the target population and from these ten teachers and ten teenage mothers were purposively sampled. A qualitative research methodology was employed. Semi structured interviews were used to collect data from the participants. Data was analysed thematically. Findings from the study indicated that poverty was the main cause of teenage pregnancies among students. Lack of comprehensive sex education and peer pressure were other notable causes for teenage sexual relationships that led to teenage pregnancies. It was also found out that the effects of the teenage pregnancies were poor performance in schools, dropouts, and a high risk of failure to find well-paying jobs. The study concludes that poverty is a major determinant factor that caused teenage girls into engaging in sexual activities at an early age thereby getting pregnant and leaving school midway.

Keywords: Teenage pregnancies, Adolescents, Peer groups, Peer pressure, School dropout

Introduction

Education is the backbone of every country's economic, political social development and hence reduce inequality among its citizens (Alam *et al.*, 2020). Iddy (2021) believes education is a powerful force behind every strong economy suggesting economic and social development. It is believed that if you educate a girl child you have educated the whole nation. This sounds well with the millennium development goal on education that education is a basic human right. This has given rise to a shift of policy in schools where they now readmit back to school pregnant girls after delivery. The aim being to increase the chances of a brighter future for the mother as well as the child (Iddy, 2021). Globally, girls make up most of the population (World Health Organization, 2018), hence, when girls drop out of school because of pregnancy, it affects the development of a country because a large population becomes low in production, and a low gross domestic product (Isano *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, early pregnancy negatively affects performance due to loss of motivation and the difficulties girls face during pregnancy.

Teenagers today are raised in a culture that frequently sends unintentional messages that unmarried sexual relationships, specifically those involving teenagers, are socially acceptable and even the expected behavior. This has had a significant impact on the moral decay that is rife among our teenagers. Education regarding responsible sexual behavior and information about the effects of sexual activity is little, lacking at home, in the classroom, and in the community (Santelli *et al.*, 2017). Teenagers therefore end up learning a significant amount about sex through their uninformed peers. Such circumstances promote early alcohol, drug and cigarette abuse thus leading to early dating activities among youths, premarital sex, and pregnancy.

Being pregnant is a right that should be shared with one's life partner; unfortunately, the teenagers of today abuse this right for a variety of reasons (Munakampe *et al.*, 2018). Babirye (2019) points out that 40% of adolescent mothers are under the age of 18. This is because of various factors such as broken homes, ignorance of the conservancies of sexual activities, lack of self-respect on the part

of some teenagers to experience sex, as well as failure to take necessary precautions. Cadely *et al.*, (2020) state that research shows that 12-year-olds who start dating have a 91% chance of having a sexual relationship before the age of 19, while 13-year-olds who start dating have a 36% chance of having a sexual relationship during adolescence. Akella (2018) adds on saying 40% of adolescent mothers are under the age of 18. This has resulted in a high rate of school dropouts, a cycle of poverty and destitution, and a decline in the standard of living for the teenagers. People who fail to finish secondary school education frequently find themselves in a cycle of poverty that is difficult to escape. Research has revealed that school dropouts face barriers and disadvantages on the job market because of their level of education (Akella, 2018; Babirye, 2019). Their chances of raising their standard of living get reduced by low salaries.

Family dysfunction, poverty, and a lack of awareness about contraceptives are some causes of teenage pregnancies. The degree to which these affect individuals differ depending on circumstance. Family dysfunction is one main cause of teenage pregnancies. Johnsen (2020) advocates that family discord causes members to engage in rebellious behavior. This is because of the little care given to children. Finer and Zolna (2016) advocate that teenagers from low-income families are more likely to have an unintended pregnancy. Penman-Aguilar *et al.* (2013) concurs with the above by stating that youth from low-income families get involved in sexual activities earlier than their peers and are unlikely to use contraception, leaving them at a high risk of early motherhood. This signals the effect poverty has on the family. Teenagers frequently receive love and affection from their peers and in most cases, they end up interpreting their peers as the best models to follow and in turn act in terms of the expectations of the peers to get accepted by them. This has led Karim *et al.*, (2017) to point out that teenage pregnancy is greatly influenced by parents who don't provide for their children. Since parents have a crucial role to play in the lives of their children (Johnsen, 2020), it is believed that young people who engage in sexual behavior, and drug abuse at a young age demonstrate inadequate parental guidance, supervision, and support.

Knowledge is crucial when it comes to making decisions that impact a person's health and development. The high rate of teenage pregnancies suggests that teenagers in Zimbabwe have little knowledge of sexuality and family planning, and they also lack the skills necessary to put that knowledge into practice. This could be a result of the lack of effective sex education. The World Health Organisation (2012) regards this as a worldwide concern. Married or not, many pregnancies in adolescent girls are unintended, they are a result of sexual experimentation or a lack of knowledge about how to prevent getting pregnant (Rowbottom, 2007). In Nigeria, as Adogu *et al.* (2014), point out only a small proportion of sexually active adolescents use condoms when having sex. This is because of cultural norms, unfriendly environments with no condom accessibility, and a lack of knowledge about safe sexual activity. Wood and Hendricks (2017) argue that low contraceptive uptake is also a result of wrong perception by adolescents that contraceptive usage is a preserve for married couples, thus fail to use them and in the end get pregnant or contract HIV-AIDS. Mchunu *et al.* (2012) advocate that similar results as stated by Adogu *et al.* (2014) were found in South Africa when quantitative research on adolescent pregnancy and related factors was conducted. The study showed that risky sexual behavior is caused by both ignorance and poor decision-making, which leads to unprotected sexual encounters.

Boamah *et al.* (2014) add on saying misconceptions, a lack of awareness and a lack of knowledge about the varieties and use of contraceptive methods result in adolescent pregnancy.

Adolescent pregnancies are linked to school dropouts and absenteeism, which affects their academic work. There is a decline in a learner's academic performance when comparing their performance before and after pregnancy argues (Villamor, 2017). Teenage pregnancy forces female students to repeat classes, thus increasing their time in school. Some women retake classes after skipping exams while they were expecting. Gunawardena *et al.* (2019) believe that repeating classes lead to other issues that have an impact on a girl's education such as exposing them to a second pregnancy since they grow older and most likely make the same mistake. Koech (2017) conducted a study to evaluate how teenage motherhood affected students' academic performance in Uasin-Gishu County's public secondary schools. The study's guiding principles were to determine the prevalence of teenage motherhood in public secondary schools; to evaluate the effects of teenage mother absences on academic performance; to evaluate the perception that teenage mothers repeat classes; to evaluate the effects of teenage mother self-esteem on academic performance; and to identify the difficulties faced by teenage mothers. The Resiliency Theory served as a basis for the study. The study employed a descriptive survey research design. 392 school-age mothers from 144 public secondary schools in Uasin-Gishu County were the target population. The findings revealed that being a teen mother impacted negatively on their academic performance due to repeated absences from school and a lack of time to complete schoolwork because of divided attention. Their self-esteem and confidence were also negatively affected. Such learners are unable to attend school five days a week and most of them had repeated classes.

Menon *et al.* (2018) argue that there is a significant difference in number of years spent at school among teenagers who give birth and those who do not give birth while at school. This is echoed by Undie *et al.*, (2015) who advocate that teenage mothers are more likely to shorten their schooling compared to non-pregnant girls. The disturbance to their education that teenagers experience when they get pregnant while at school result in lack of education on the part of the teenagers and in the end long-term unemployment. Mutua *et al.* (2019) regards this as a dreadful situation since girls miss out an opportunity to attain important skills that could have guaranteed them meaningful employment thus leaving them susceptible to poverty. If employed it is most likely in low paying jobs with no security (Amike, 2020). Teenage pregnancy has significant negative impact on young mothers as well as their children by limiting their educational and financial stability and increasing their risk of becoming single parents and experiencing unstable marriages in the future. Teen mothers' life can be met by unpleasing situation as some societies regard them as prostitutes. This affects their self-esteem and discourages them from free movement within their communities. Amike, (2020) conducted a study on the effects of teenage pregnancies in the Siaya County's Ukwala ward. The study used a sample of 50 respondents in total. Questionnaires, observations, and interviews were used to gather data. On the consequences of teenage pregnancies, it was found out that pregnant teenage girls experienced stigmatization, mockery, and neglect at the hands of their parents and teachers. The study also revealed that teenage pregnancies have a significant impact on education, the future of the girls, and the nation's economy. Additionally, it was discovered that adolescent pregnancies play a

role in girls' subpar academic and exam performance. Amike (2020) also discovered that many young mothers drop out of school out of concern of being labeled as bad students, stigmatized by their peers, and made fun of by society. High school girl students' early pregnancies were found to be significantly influenced by the environment and the media. A recommendation by the study was that teenage mothers be given another chance in life since the cause of the teenage pregnancies could have been different circumstances in life encountered by the teenage mothers such as rape or assault.

Miriti and Mutua (2019) advocate that while comprehensive sex education can help students protect their sexual health, foster academic performance, and help them avoid negative outcomes, teenage pregnancy has a significant impact on school performance in that more teen mothers drop out of school than teenagers who do not have children. It is likely that less than one-third of the teenagers who start families before the age of 18 ever complete high school (Akella, 2019). Teenage pregnancy has a negative impact on girls' educational success, and there is a positive correlation between academic failure and teenage pregnancy. Low achievement scores are also associated with teenage pregnancies, this might be because the students are pregnant or nursing their babies thus leaving class to find prenatal and postnatal care. Low student achievement has a negative impact on the school's overall performance, a situation that schools detest (Akella, 2018). It is a fact that students who are mothers need more time to care for the child at home, which leaves less time for homework and other school-related activities. Malahlela (2012) conducted a study to investigate how teachers in the Mankweng area of Limpopo province perceived the impact of teenage pregnancies in secondary school students' behavior. The aim was to determine whether teen pregnancy impacted on student attendance, academic performance, and emotional behavior as perceived by teachers. A purposive sample of 14 educators from seven secondary schools in the Mankweng area was selected. In-depth interviews were conducted to gather data. The study found that teenage pregnancy had a negative and detrimental impact on pregnant teenagers' relationships with their peers and teachers and their academic performance. The study recommended the avoidance of stigmatisation of pregnant students by stakeholders and instead the offering of support to such students. It also encouraged the use of preventative and protective measures as a way of curbing teen pregnancy.

Teenage pregnancies are on the rise in Zimbabwe, resulting in a negative impact on the schooling of many female teenagers. Nehanda Guardian (2023) shows the extend of the teenage pregnancy in Zimbabwe when it stated that 350 000 girls aged between ten and 19 years fell pregnant between 2019 and 2022. This is a devastating rate of teenage pregnancies in Zimbabwe. Research statistics further reveal that the rate of teen pregnancies remained high in 2017, when it was recorded at 22%, a two percent decrease from the years prior to 2017 (Chadambuka *et al.*, 2018). The number of adolescent mothers remained high despite set educational and pregnancy prevention programmes. When the COVID-19-induced lockdown went into effect in 2020, teenage pregnancies dramatically increased, forcing many school-age girls to leave their studies (Amike, 2020). The Nehanda Guardian (2023) states that 4770 students left school in 2020 because of pregnancy. This is double tragic because the girls lost the chances of getting educated and got entangled in worsening poverty. With a 22% teenage pregnancy rate, Zimbabwe is ranked 28th out of 54

countries in Africa (Marisa and Marisa, 2018). There is a great deal of worry about the rise in pregnancies in educational settings, since they cause high absenteeism, low academic performance, and high school dropouts. Given that the national prevalence rate of early pregnancies is estimated to be 5.5 percent (Tinago *et al.*, 2021), it has made the researchers investigate the factors that lead to teenage pregnancies in High Glen district schools, one of the districts with high teenage pregnancy rates in Harare province and suggest measures to retain girls in schools for the full length of their programmes. No available study has been conducted in the High Glen district despite the prevalence of high teenage pregnancies.

Materials and Methods

Research approach

A qualitative research design was used in this study. Creswell (2013) states that qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in real world settings that is a context-specific setting, where researchers do not manipulate the phenomenon of interest. The goal of qualitative research is to enable thorough and in-depth explanations of complex social and political phenomena, which can only be realistically achieved with one or a small number of examples. Since this study sought to understand teenage pregnancy and its effects on the academic performance, the researchers found the qualitative research design relevant. It enabled the researchers to collect data on face-to-face situations by interacting with selected persons in their natural settings, describing and analysing people's individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions.

Research design

A research design used in this study was the case study. According to Yin (2014), a case study is a method and a type of empirical research that examines a single event, a series of connected events, or a phenomenon in its natural setting. The goal of a case study is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the relationships and interactions among the persons in a particular situation. Instead of using a single data gathering technique, with case studies a researcher can make use of multiple sources of evidence as well as various research designs and analytical techniques (Cresswell, 2013). Using the case study design researchers examined the causes and effects of teenage pregnancies on academic performance.

Population and sample

Teachers and teenage mothers from secondary schools in Harare's High Glen district participated in the study. Five secondary schools in the High Glen district were purposively selected for this study and two participants were purposively selected from each school to make a total of ten teachers. Creswell (2009) supports the use of purposive sampling when he states that the aim of purposive sampling is to ensure that information rich participants take part in the study. It was from the records of these schools that teenage mothers were identified and selected for the study. A total of 20 participants made up of ten teachers and ten teenage mothers were selected.

Research instruments

According to Alase, (2017), when a novel method is used to gather data, the data may be either primary or secondary. The researchers used interviews in this study.

Interviews

Open-ended interviews were employed by the researchers to gather data from the participants. Cresswell (2013) regards the use of interviews as a reliable way to learn about people's perceptions, meanings, definitions of circumstances, and reality constructs. In-depth interviews enabled the researchers to ask open-ended questions on teenage pregnancy. The researchers asked questions that enabled participants to provide in-depth descriptions of the causes of teenage pregnancies and their effects on academic performance. The participants were able to articulate issues under the study. Ten teachers and 10 teenage mothers were interviewed.

Data collection procedures

The researchers sought permission from the Ministry of Education and the District Education Offices to conduct the study in schools. Upon being granted permission the researchers made appointments with school heads of selected schools. On the appointed dates the researchers met school heads and explained to them the purpose of their visit. It was on those visits that school heads availed names of teachers at their schools and the researchers purposively selected four teachers from each of the schools. The researchers then met teachers and set dates for interviews that were convenient to the teachers. On agreed dates, interviews were conducted. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Data analysis

All gathered data was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. As the gathering of data went on, we also did our data analysis. This helped us pick areas that needed more amplification and further detail. Since we adopted a qualitative approach, we also used qualitative data analysis. We coded our data and for the data that carried the same meaning we allocated a similar code. The data categorisation led to the generation of themes that helped in the research study.

Data validity and reliability

The degree to which research delivers consistent findings in repeated trials is referred to as its reliability (Cresswell, 2013). On the other side, validity relates to how well an instrument measures what it claims to measure (Gunawan, 2015). To improve the reliability of the study the researchers were consistent throughout the data gathering process, in the interpretation of findings, and in the publication of study results. The researchers in this study made sure that the data gathered, processing, and the findings were all consistent.

Ethical considerations

The researchers made sure that no respondents were harmed during the fieldwork. The researchers explained fully to the participants the purpose of the study and informed them that the information they provided was solely for this study only and would not be used for other purposes. They were also informed that they were free to end the interview sessions whenever they felt that they could no longer continue. Their informed consent was sought before the researchers conducted the face-to-face interviews. The researchers were connected to the teenage mothers through the school heads who contacted them and informed them of our study. Their consent was also sought before the interviews.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are presented below under the topics causes of teenage pregnancies among Zimbabwean students,

differences in academic performance when a teen is pregnant, and the policy environment and teenage pregnancy.

Causes of teenage pregnancies among Zimbabwean students

The focus of this study was to identify the factors that caused teenage pregnancies among students in Zimbabwe's High Glen district. Through the interviews, poverty at the household level was seen to increase the vulnerability of girls. It was noted as the major driver towards sexual relationships that resulted in teenage pregnancy. Transactional sex, where gifts or money are exchanged for sex was also pointed out as a significant cause of teenage pregnancies.

Mildred, one of the teenage mothers said:

A girl will search for a spot to get if her needs are not met. This entails finding a partner who will provide for all her requirements at the price of a sexual relationship.

Another teenage mother, Yvonne, went on to say:

You discover a boy who has money and has made the decision to buy food for that family, his main goal is to be with this girl. Because of the girl's poverty, her mother does not prevent the boy from visiting or staying with her, and because of their relationship, pregnancy is discovered.

James, a teacher went on to say:

..... because their parents do not provide them with necessities like their preferred clothing, sanitary towels, or perfume. This prompts them to seek out financial sponsors in exchange for friendship, which is strengthened through sexual encounters."

The above responses indicate the part played by poverty at the household level as a major driver towards sexual relationships by teenagers. Of note is the research by Karimi (2015) which stated that teenage mother's education is largely at the mercy of their parents, if the parents want to marry off their daughter, they then use her pregnancy as an excuse to do so and not send her to school.

Peer pressure was cited as another factor that caused teenage pregnancy in the district. It was found out that both boys and girls experience peer pressure to start relationships. Girls who are already in such relationships frequently push their friends to find partners as well in most cases indirectly and unknowingly. For instance, girls feel admiration and envy of the lifestyle of their female friends who are in relationships (even marriages). They also perceive having a boyfriend as a sign of approval or affirmation of their attractiveness. From the data gathered from the interviews it was discovered that peer pressure is a contributory factor in girls' sex behavior. Chiedza, one of the teachers affirmed this when she said:

Peer pressure plays a big role in teenage pregnancies. For instance, when a girl finds her friend with good clothes, makeup, bangles, and hair style, she will admire, and ask her friend(s) where they would be getting such things. Sometimes she decides to take her out to her boyfriend who, at times can buy her lunch. Once the girl regard this as important to her, she will also try to hook up with a boy to be her sponsor as well.

The responses above indicate that peer pressure is another key cause of sexual relationships that lead to teenage pregnancy. Pressure from peers to enter a relationship is experienced by both

boys and girls, unfortunately in the end it is a girl that falls pregnant.

Differences in academic performance when a teen is pregnant,

Pregnancy has a negative impact on teenagers in so much as it stops them from attending school either permanently or temporarily. Adolescent mothers believe that having to balance the demands of being a mother and being a student, and that of low self-esteem leads them to difficult times resulting in them dropping out. These circumstances lead pregnant teens and those nursing babies to become depressed and eventually leave school. The following quote from Gracious, a teenage mother confirms these findings:

When caring for a baby and attending school at the same time, it is very difficult, especially the cleaning and the feeding of the baby. The way the community and peers look at you when you have a baby, is so frustrating that you think that dropping out of school is the best thing to do.

The response above indicates situations that teen mothers experience that lead them to prematurely leave their education. Studies show that many teenage mothers concentrate less in class when compared to their peers due to fatigue, this results in poor performance at the end of the term (Okumu 2020; Thomson, 2020). Because of the pregnancy, they skip classes thereby missing a lot of schoolwork. Miriti and Mutua, (2019), argue that once the teens leave schools because of pregnancy, rarely do they come back to continue with their education.

Participants also showed that anxiousness, inability to focus in class, lack of readiness for parenthood, lack of time for schoolwork, and absenteeism all play a significant role in grade repetition caused by teenage pregnancy. The general performance of learners gets negatively affected when teens become pregnant since they start concentrating more on their pregnancy than their academic journey thus affecting their performance. Some teenagers get negatively affected by their pregnancies so much that they either leave school temporarily or permanently.

Mavis, one of the teachers said:

The issue is that they lack concentration because of the pregnancy or the mothering process and therefore cannot perform like other learners and they also cannot finish their studies within the record time. They don't have time to read their books at home because they must take care of their kids.

The response above indicates the challenges that pregnant teenagers face as they try to balance things, going to school and taking care of the pregnancy such as ante-natal clinic consultations and neo-natal clinic consultations. Once the teens leave school Gunawardena et al. (2019) advocate that it signals limited job opportunities for them hence creating a cycle of poverty in the teenagers' families. This might also affect their offspring.

The policy environment and teenage pregnancy

In Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education established the Return to School policy in 2019. It states that girls should be permitted to attend class while pregnant and return to it after giving birth. This is done to make sure that their future is unaffected by pregnancy and that they can continue with their education. Participants were asked whether they were aware of the existence of such a policy and whether it was implemented in

schools. were aware of the policy, which was clear from the talks, but it was also plain that it is not being followed for several reasons. Mary, a teacher at one of the schools had this to say about the policy:

I've heard of this policy, but I don't think it's working because many girls don't return to school after giving birth when you compare the number of females dropping out of school due to teen pregnancy and those returning.

A teenage mother had this to say:

Some parents are not prepared to pay for their kids to return to school especially after having got pregnant even if there is a policy which allows us back. I just heard of the policy from other people that if you fall pregnant while at school, you can go back to school after delivery when it's possible to leave the baby at home.

From the responses of the participants, it was evident that the school re-entry policy was not well known and supposedly not effectively implemented in schools. It appeared that neither the teachers nor the community were well versed with the policy. Research has shown that there is little knowledge and awareness of the policy among the community members, including teachers, parents, and the schoolgirls (Macharia & Kessio, 2015). Mutua et al. (2019) concur that little is known about the return to school policy for teenage mothers and its effectiveness. It therefore suggests that the policy does not comprehensively protect the right to schooling for teenage mothers. Mutua et al. (2019) further suggest that relevant stakeholders should be made aware of and understand the re-entry policy and its provisions to ensure its effective implementation. Otherwise, people cannot talk of effective implementation of a policy they are not aware of. It is important that Ministries find ways of keeping girls in school through stepping up school engagement needs and revising approaches that realize a real difference in the school environment.

Conclusions

From the findings, it can be concluded that teenage pregnancy is caused by various factors in the High Glen district secondary schools. Key among the factors that were found to be the main cause of teenage pregnancy in the district was poverty operating on different levels. Poverty was a major consideration for girls in making decisions about who to sexually interact with. Girls' personal needs increase as they grow, including the need for sanitary pads as well as needs related to good grooming. Where these cannot be provided for by the family, girls are forced to look elsewhere. Encouraged by peer pressure, girls find themselves involved with boys and men who can provide resources and fund their needs in exchange for sex. Findings appear to suggest that parents fail to protect their daughters from these vulnerabilities by proactively providing for their needs. This seemingly tolerance of the sexual behaviour by their immediate family members often leaves girls with little or no protection against teenage pregnancy. Although a policy exists that allows teenage mothers to get back to school after delivery, parents were found to be reluctant to resent their children to school after such behaviour. It can also be concluded from the findings that teenage pregnancy has negatively impacted on High Glen district secondary school learners' academic journey and future job prospects. This is caused by the teenage mothers' erratic school attendance due to the negative perceptions they hold of how their peers perceive them in their pregnancy state.

Recommendations

The following recommendations can be made from the findings of the study:

- There is need to prioritize girls' education and the enforcement of the school re-entry policy.
- Conscious efforts must be made by female teachers to provide female role models to girls.
- Interventions to prevent teenage pregnancies need to incorporate elements of economic empowerment to support young women to earn income and be able to make independent decisions about their sexual choices.
- Policy makers should involve stakeholders to achieve the most when it comes to implementation.

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