



Participatory development of a support package for pregnant and mother learners in South African schools.

“At school, they did not even know I was pregnant”:

Chelsea Coakley^{a,b}, Hlokoma Mangqalaza^a, Yusra Price^a, Janina Jochim^c, Jane Kelly^a, Lulama Sidloyi^d, Yanga Dipa^d, Mildred Thabeng^d, Elona Toska^{c,f}, Lucie Cluver^{c,e}

^a Centre for Social Science Research, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
^b Desmond Tutu HIV Centre, Department of Medicine, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
^c Department of Social Policy and Intervention, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom
^d Oxford Research South Africa, East London, South Africa
^e Department of Psychiatry and Mental Health, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
^f Department of Sociology, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
^{*} denotes co-first authors

Chelsea.Coakley@uct.ac.za and Hlokoma.Mangqalaza@acceleratehub.org

Background

Each year, approximately 21 million adolescent pregnancies occur, of which half are unplanned (World Health Organisation, 2023). Adolescent motherhood hinders young mothers' chances of continuing with school, and is associated with higher exposure to domestic violence, poor food security and exposure to HIV (Toska et al., 2022). Between 2017 and 2022, South Africa has seen an alarming increase in the rate of adolescent pregnancies (Baron et al., 2022). Currently, there is limited literature focused on how the school environment can create a protective environment and a platform for care and support for pregnant learners and adolescent mothers. This study sought to actively engage adolescent mothers and other young parents and young people in co-designing a school-based support package.

Methods

- **Aims:** This research was informed by 15 years of work with adolescent and youth advisory groups in South Africa (Cluver et al., 2021; Gittings et al., 2021). This study aimed to co-construct support package components and design considerations in partnership with young people. It explored priorities and provisions that support or hinder young mothers' educational attainment.
- **Conceptual frameworks:** informed study design and thematic analysis:
 - Ecological framework focused on enabling environments for adolescent sexual and development (Svanemyr et al. 2017); and
 - Socio-ecology theory exploring multi-level factors and long-term trajectories that influence adolescent mothers' school return after birth (Jochim et al., 2021).
- **Participants:** young people and parents aged 21–26 years, from urban areas of Eastern Cape Province, South Africa (n=13); a sub-set of this group were young mother advisors aged 23–26 yrs, with one child each <6 years (n=4).
- **Data co-generation:** Part I – co-developed and validated methods with young mother advisors; Part II – participatory dissemination via private Facebook group drawing on quantitative data-informed storyboards; Part III – residential participatory design workshop using arts-based methods through “dreamy care package” collages, which encouraged group discussion and collaboration amongst young advisors with shared young parenting experiences, and “talking walls” which enabled silent reflection and response, to explore provisions and co-construct priorities for a package of care.
- **Analysis:** Group thematic analysis used a combined inductive and deductive approach where we were directed by the data and open to new phenomenon, while also using the conceptual frameworks to map our findings and policy implications.

Results

Young research advisors described support figures, services and system of multiple influential stakeholders that pregnant and mother learners require support from throughout pregnancy and into motherhood.

- **Social workers** were identified as those who can identify and support learners, link them to services outside the school, provide ongoing case management as well as counselling, and mediate complexities of disclosing and navigating pregnancy as a learner at home and at school;
- **Peer networks** were described as an important source for continuing learning support, informally sharing resources and class materials with young mothers at home;
- **School leadership** facilitated support for taking and completing exams on time, however not all young mother advisors received assistance from their schools;
- **Childcare provision** was described in multiple methods as an essential but burdensome expense, which necessitated government financial assistance; and
- **Caregivers**, especially mothers, were cited as the primary source of support to attend clinic appointments and keep up with the demands of secondary schooling.

Young mother research advisors that participated in methods development suggested that arts-based, participatory research activities enabled them to express themselves more easily.

Further, advisors described that the methods and setting created a space of social support, enabling critical dialogue between young people and adults on the issue of young parenthood.



“Ok at school...I did not get any support at school. I didn't get any, because they used to make fun of me, that I got pregnant, even the female teachers. So, I was forced to drop out of school, and I quit. So, I did not get any support.”
(Young mother advisor, 24 years old)

“To have a list of those who struggle to make ends meet where they can maybe, with that baby that will have been born, to be able to take her to school, to that creche and pay for her at those creches that will require payment... So it's mostly resting ...on a social worker and the government.”
(Young father advisor, 26 years old)

Conclusions

This study contributes to the limited literature on supportive interventions for adolescent mothers' return to school, in the Southern African Region. It also contributes to an emerging literature on participation, centering the lived experience and expertise of adolescents and young people in the design and implementation of interventions that affect them.

While experiences and prospective support from family, community members, school staff and social workers were described, internalised and externalised stigma around learner pregnancy was also surfaced in discussions and remains a persistent concern. Young mother advisors shared varied experiences, some leaving school due to insufficient support to return, while others reported little to no trouble with returning and continuing with school.

These findings complement our existing research on the factors that hinder adolescent mothers' ability to return to school and that young mothers benefitted from novel research methods that enabled their involvement in optimal policy implementation.

This study has also informed the design of Khanyisa Ngemfundo (Be the Light Through Education), an ongoing multi-stage mixed methods study in South Africa, exploring how pregnant and mother learners can be supported to stay in school.



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