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'LEGALISING THE ILLEGAL' INTERROGATING THE POLICY THAT ALLOWS PREGNANT SCHOOL GIRLS TO GO FOR MATERNITY LEAVE AND COME BACK TO SCHOOL. A CASE OF SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN GWANDA DISTRICT.

D. Ncube

Zimbabwe Open University (Zimbabwe),
Matabeleland South Regional Campus,
Zimbabwe.
ncubedings@gmail.com

T. J. Mudau

Department of Gender and Youth Studies,
School of Human and Social Sciences,
University of Venda, Thohoyandou,
South Africa
thizwilandi.mudau@univen.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The study sought to assess the perceptions of key stakeholders on the desirability and functionality of the policy on pregnant school girls. The study was motivated by the contentious nature of the policy based on the need to achieve gender equality between the boy and the girl child while at the same time diverting from the norm. The study was anchored on the critical theory which focuses on human emancipation through self-examination and self-discovery among other life processes. The study used the qualitative approach, where parents, teachers, heads of schools and students were purposively sampled and interviewed. The study revealed that the policy is achieving its intended objectives of keeping the girl child in school but is susceptible to abuse by the intended beneficiaries. The study recommends that more education should be given to the key stakeholders on the policy and that more research be done on the area in as it is a prime area as far educational policies are concerned.

Key Words: illegal, pregnant school girls, maternity leave and secondary schools.

1. INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The need to achieve gender equality between the girl and the boy child in all spheres of life in general and in educational provision specifically has resulted in the crafting, adoption and implementation of many affirmative action policies in many countries across the globe. Ofoegbu and Ojibwa (2005) note that in Africa including Nigeria one worrying aspect of educational development is the disparity with regard to equal educational opportunity for girls. Ahikire & Madanda (2011)'s report on the Global Picture of Girls' Education indicate that: 104 million children aged 6-11 are not in school each year – 60 million are girls. Nearly 40% of these out of school children live in Sub-Saharan Africa and 35% live in South Asia. The girl child is reportedly prejudiced of educational



opportunities as more girls than boys are out of school. However policies based on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Education for All (EFA), the Universal Primary Education (UPE), the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 1989 and the Fourth World Conference for Women popularly known as the Beijing Conference in 1995 have improved the situation for the girl child across the globe.

The aim of these policies among other things is that girls and boys should have equal and full access to primary education, should complete primary school education and proceed into secondary school education. Consequently Ahikire & Madanda (2011) confirm that Uganda has registered some achievements with enrolment of girls and boys at primary school level have almost reached the 50/50 mark since the introduction of Universal Primary Education. While it is worthwhile to celebrate the strides made by Uganda and possibly by other sub-Saharan countries, the challenge of schoolgirl pregnancy induced drop outs has become a new challenge to the full participation of the girl-child in schooling at both primary and secondary education in many countries. Birungi, Undie, Mackenzie and Katahoire, Obare & Machawira (2015) posit that a study in Botswana shows that between 1998 and 2002, pregnancy was the major reason for girls dropping out of secondary school, accounting for 56%. In Kenya, it was estimated that between 10,000 and 13,000 girls leave school each year due to pregnancy (accounting for nearly 70% of all female school dropout cases). Similarly Ahikire & Madanda (2011) reveal that in Uganda pregnancy is a major reason for school dropouts, especially among upper primary and 'O' level students. For example, in 2002, a total of 8,116 girls countrywide, dropped out of school due to pregnancy, of these, 6,229 were upper primary pupils while 2,353 were 'O' level students. In the same vein the Gender Research & Advocacy Project Legal Assistance Centre (2008) reports that in Namibia in 2007 a total of 1465 learners dropped out of school with 96% of them being girls due to pregnancy with highest figures from Kavango and Ohangwena followed by Omusati, Oshikoto, Oshana and Caprivi. Birungi et al (2015) posit that a high proportion of pregnancies among adolescent girls aged 15-19 years in Sub-Saharan Africa are unintended, ranging from 39% in Tanzania to 59% in Kenya. Similarly ranges of statistics of school girl-dropouts due to pregnancies are reported in Botswana, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Nigeria and Ghana (Health & Education Advice & Resource Team 2015).

Zimbabwe like her sub-Saharan neighbours is also gripped with high school girl pregnancies and is frantically searching high and low for a solution. The Financial Gazette (March 12.03.15) reveals that in 2013 the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education reported that the rate of pupils dropping out of school has risen to over 13000 per annum, an increase of about 40 percent from the 2012 figures, 52 percent of the female drop outs, do so chiefly because their studies are interrupted by unplanned pregnancies and marriage. In the same vein Mandizha (2015) confirms that approximately 3,000 Zimbabwean girls leave school every year due to pregnancy.

In response to the challenge of school girl pregnancies the government of Zimbabwe like its counterparts, has come up with mitigating measures on the prevention and management of teenage pregnancy in schools. These measures are enforced through P35 policy which focuses on issues of discipline. Mawere (2013) reveals that, one of the effects of P35 is to provide continued access to schooling to girls who become pregnant while at school. In actual fact, in schools, girls who fall pregnant are allowed maternity leave whilst boys who are found to impregnate them go on paternity leave. The same measures are confirmed by the Newsday (10.08.2010) thus, according to an Education, Sport, Art and Culture ministry circular (P35), which deals with disciplinary actions against pupils, students who fall pregnant during the course of their studies will no longer face expulsion but will get three months' leave after which they will resume their studies.

The same privilege is given to the school boy responsible for the pregnancy in the form of paternity leave (Sithole, Manwa & Manwa 2013). This is a revolution in the history of the Zimbabwean educational delivery system as it contradicts the norm where pregnant school girls were automatically expelled. It has on one side been hailed as a progressive policy rather than the punitive yesteryear policies. On the other hand, some commentators and stakeholders perceive it as a retrogressive one giving a license to the school girls and boys to indulge in sexual escapades at will. Mutesi (2012) argues that 'a rotten apple spoils the barrel; it's an indication that girls having sex at an early age is acknowledged as fine, and this is where we cannot spare the rod'.

It is this divided opinion among key stakeholders on the policy that has motivated this study, to assess the perceptions of the Gwanda community on this contentious policy. The Gwanda community like the rest of Zimbabwe is also battling the high school girl drop out due to pregnancy as literature highlights. Moyo (2016) highlights that a total of 1,253 pupils dropped from primary schools in Matabeleland South province during the first term of 2016, while 1,572 also dropped out from secondary schools mainly due to pregnancy. Matobo recorded 654 dropouts, Beit Bridge 634, Mangwe 582 Insiza 509 and Gwanda 297. These figures definitely set an agenda for discussion against the new measures as contained in P35 disciplinary measures meant to curb the school girl pregnancy scourge, hence this study.



2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Literature shows that democratic policies have been adopted and implemented in many countries including Zimbabwe in the management of school girl pregnancies. In the case of Zimbabwe these measures are contained in P35 policy of the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and they allow pregnant school girls maternity leave to deliver the baby and come to school. In cases where a school boy is responsible for the pregnancy he is also allowed paternity leave and comes back to school at the same time the girl comes back. Superciliously, this policy appears democratic but it has however divided opinions of key stakeholders with some 'hailing' it while others 'savage' it as a retrogressive one, as it gives school boys and girls a license to indulge in sexual activities without restraint. This has given birth to this study to assess the perceptions of the Gwanda community on its desirability and effect on the behavior of the intended beneficiaries.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study may be of significance to the government of Zimbabwe in general and to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in particular as it may give it (ministry) an opportunity to get public feedback on the policy and possibly make the necessary reforms to it. Secondly, the study may be of great importance to the intended beneficiaries of the policy themselves so that they do not see it as good as giving them a 'blank cheque' in as far as sexual conduct in the school is concerned. The implementers of the policy such as school administrators may also get the knowledge and guidance on the policy; hence they may be more informed about it. Last but not last the parents and teachers may get the knowledge and details of the policy to enable them to guide and counsel the adolescent boys and girls from an informed point of view on their behavior while at school.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study answered the following research questions

- ❖ Are key stakeholders aware of the policy that allows pregnant school girls to go on maternity and comeback to continue with school?
- ❖ How have key stake holders reacted to this policy that allows pregnant school girls to go on maternity leave and comeback to continue with school?
- ❖ Has the policy benefited the intended beneficiaries?
- ❖ What challenges have been encountered in implementing this policy that allows pregnant school girls to go on maternity leave and comeback to continue with school?
- ❖ How can the policy be improved?

5. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Various countries have come up with different policies to manage the problem of school girl pregnancies in the spirit of keeping the girl child in school. These policies though different in nature, scope and implementation their common denominator is to ameliorate the plight of the girl child by giving her a lifeline in pursuing her education against the threats of pregnancies and early marriages. These policies have been met with divided opinion from stakeholders as shall be revealed by literature below.

The Policy /Policies on School Girl Pregnancy

Below are sampled countries which have implemented policies to manage school girl pregnancies.

The Botswana

According to Molosiwa and Moswela (2012), Section 34 (1) of the 1967 Botswana Education Act requires that a pupil who has fallen pregnant to withdraw from school and that she can be re-admitted on condition that she goes to a school other than that from which she was withdrawn after a one calendar year after the cessation of the pregnancy and subject to the approval of the Minister. Sections 34 (3) and (4) respectively state that such a pupil shall not be allowed to write an examination at a school while she is pregnant; and she shall not be allowed to write an examination at a school until at least six months after such pregnancy has ceased. This Act has however been amended to allow the girl to return to her former school after the cession of pregnancy as long as the doctor has certified her fitness. The policy is clear in that it stipulates all the conditions for withdrawal, readmission and period of writing examinations. It is however silent on the person responsible for the pregnancy, for example what if it is a school boy.



Kenya

Birungi et al (2015) posit that Kenya has education sector policies that specifically address pregnant students and adolescent mothers. The relevant policies are the 1994 “Return to School Policy” (hereafter referred to as ‘re-entry policy’) and the 2009 “National School Health Policy.” The re-entry policy stipulates that girls may return to school (preferably, a different school) after giving birth; however, no definitive time frame details, how long the period of leave should be. Despite its long standing tenure, the re-entry policy has never been properly implemented or disseminated in recent years. Lack of proper implementation of the policy could prejudice the intended beneficiaries.

Malawi

The Malawian Ministry of Education put in place a re-entry policy for adolescent mothers in 1993, and was further revised in 2006. The guidelines for the policy stipulate that girls are immediately suspended upon discovery of their pregnancy for one year, and will be allowed readmission at the beginning of the next academic year following their suspension. According to this policy a boy who impregnates a student faces an equivalent suspension of one year and is re-admitted in the same timeframe with the girl (Birungi et al 2015). The Malawian policy is clear in spelling out the fate of the pregnant school girl, the reentry period as well as the fate of boy responsible for the pregnancy, save for that it does not explain whether or not they return to the same school.

Tanzania

Birungi et al (2015) report that Tanzania has a draft re-entry policy guidelines of January (2011) which include: pregnant school girls being allowed to sit for their national examinations if diagnosed within examination timeframe; only one re-admission opportunity for pregnant girls; conditional re-admission within 6-12 months after giving birth, with a medical doctor’s approval; and mandatory disclosure of the boy or man responsible for the pregnancy. The Tanzania re-entry policy among other things specifies that the girl is mandated to disclose the boy or man responsible for the pregnancy. It will be interesting to know what happens to those girls who fail to name the person responsible for the pregnancy.

The United Kingdom

According to Vincent (2009) UK launched the national teenage pregnancy strategy in 1999 to reduce conception rates and increase participation of teenage parents in education, training or employment. In 2001, in support of the national teenage pregnancy strategy, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) issued guidance on the education of school-aged parents which outlined expectations on schools and local authorities (DfES, 2001 cited in Vincent 2009). As stated in point 14.4 of the 2001 guidance: ‘The school should ensure that the young woman continues learning as long as possible up until delivery by exploring all opportunities for curriculum support available’ (DfES, 2001 cited in Vincent 2009). The policy is further explained by the Health & Education Advice & Resource Team (2015) that the pregnant school girl gets 18 weeks maternity leave to be taken before and after the baby is born. Support with transport to school and tutorials with a qualified teacher during the 18 weeks of maternity leave are provided local authorities.

Namibia

In Namibia the pregnant school girl may continue with her education at school, until the time of her confinement or an earlier date on the advice of a medical practitioner or clinic sister. After giving birth, and provided that a social worker is satisfied that the infant will be cared for by a responsible adult, the girl shall have the right of readmission to the same school within twelve months of date on which she left school, irrespective of her age. She shall have the option, within the same period, to return to another school, provided that space is available. Should the girl decide not to return to full-time schooling, she should be counseled about the options available to her for continuing her education (Gender Research & Advocacy Project Legal Assistance Centre: 2008)

The above examples of policies on the management of school girl pregnancy have shown that many countries have embraced the progressive idea of keeping pregnant school girls in school by giving them maternity leave rather than arbitrarily expelling them.

Extent to which Stakeholders are Aware of the Policy

Literature reveals that different stakeholders view the policy on pregnant school girls in different ways. Some see it as a progressive policy meant to safe guard the interest of school girls while others view it as a retrogressive policy which will spoil the innocent girls. The Health, Education Advice & Resource Team (2014:6) reports that in Kenya, “despite the really brilliant policy, a lot of school personnel are not really well versed in it”. In the same vein Runhare and Hwami (2014) report that there is inadequate knowledge of national policies by educators, parents, SGB members and members of the communities did not know nor had very little knowledge about the guideline on learner pregnancy management policy. Similarly Runhare (2010), Mutshaeni et al (2015) and Omwancha



(2012) indicate that educators, head teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders indicated that they have heard but not seen the pregnant learner management policy. There was a notable lack of awareness of the policy at various levels among the key stakeholders. This means that the intended beneficiaries and implementers are not conversant with the policy thus casting doubt on its proper implementation let alone success in achieving the intended policy objectives.

Stakeholders' Reaction to the Policy on Pregnant School Girls

From the literature identified the majority of key stakeholders have not embraced the policy on pregnant school girls. Umutesi (2014) posit that the common English adage 'a rotten apple spoils the barrel' is a good start in this case. A pregnant teenager should stay home until she gives birth so that her presence won't be an encouragement to her peers to also indulge in pre-marital sex just because they won't be sent away should it happen to them. There is a realization here that learning institutions are sacred places for morally upright students who are good examples to other learners. Nkani et al. (2011) in Mutshaeni et al (2015) and Runhare (2010) found that objections to pregnancy policy was blamed for being too permissive and was cited as reinforcement to moral decay rather than being punitive to discourage permissiveness and to serve as a message that learner pregnancy is not something to "celebrate". Studies by Sithole, Manwa & Manwa (2013), Omwancha (2012) and Runhare (2012) reveal that parents were so disturbed about the violation of cultural expectations that they thought that school pregnancy should be punished to make other girls fear becoming pregnant. They thought that punishing pregnant girls would discourage other girls from becoming pregnant and further proposed that the policy should be formulated in a way to act as a deterrent to other girls. Last but not least Chiweshe (2010 in Sithole et al 2013) established that conservative groups, such as church and traditional leaders considered it taboo and unmentionable in African culture to allow school girls to get pregnant, let alone introduce policies which promote it. So in short, key stakeholders see no merit in introducing policies which encourage pregnant school girls to remain in school as they are evidence of moral decay.

Challenges in Implementing the Policy on Pregnant School Girls

From the reactions of the key stakeholders noted above, the implementation of the policy on school girl pregnancy is likely to be stunted in many respects which are interrogated below.

Lack of Policy Clarity

Literature has shown that many policies on pregnant school girls are ambiguous, difficult to understand and making implementation equally difficult if not impossible. Mashishi and Makoelle (2014) and Omwancha (2012) report that some officials and head teachers expressed the view that the re-entry policy was not clear and they were unsure on how to implement it. There were particularly conflicting views about how to interpret the guidelines, and different practices with regard to when pregnancy was discovered, when pregnant girls should leave school for delivery, how long should pregnant girls be absent from school and re-entry to school after delivery among others. Lack of policy clarity poses a challenge on implementation which could prejudice the intended beneficiaries.

Socio-Cultural Belief

According to Omwancha (2012) and Sithole et al (2013) among the Kuria people when a girl has given birth she is now regarded as a woman and she should be married off. They believe that because of the social stigma associated with pregnancy before marriage, the girl is always scared of the embarrassment to self and that of the family. They noted that when some families discover teenage pregnancy they opt to keep silent about it to avoid shame until the girl is married. Parents view the re-entry policy as a means of exposing this shame hence the focus on the pregnant girl getting married off to remove the shame from self and the family rather than continuing with her studies (Omwancha 2012). Such socio-cultural beliefs act as a strong barrier to the successful implementation of the re-entry policy.

Unsupportive School Environment

The study found that pregnant learners need support and encouragement from their educators, it is however unfortunate that some educators consider pregnant and mothering teenagers' problems as private matters and none of their problems (Chigona et al. 2008). Educators felt that the training they received in their pre-service training did not adequately prepare them and have insufficient time to deal with learners' social problems (Mutshaeni et al 2015). Akhire and Madanda (2014) reveal that teachers' resistance on retention of pregnant girls in school is that, their bad influence will spread to the rest of the girls; the girls cannot concentrate well in their studies and that encourages the rest to get pregnant and they need special attention.



Lack of Sensitization

Runhare and Vandeyar (2011) noted that there has been no sensitization of the regulations on management of school girl pregnancy to stakeholders in most educational institutions in Zimbabwe. In the same vein Chirimuuta (2006) reveals that the girl is never empathized with in the Zimbabwean society at large, as teenage pregnancy is viewed as resulting from deviance, and immorality. Even though the policy accords the pregnant teenager the right to continue with her education until she completes her courses, the girl is ostracized and castigated for allowing her to be abused. The girl really goes to hell with all the jeering, laughing, and giggling from fellow students (Chirimuuta 2006).

Fear of Stigmatization

The social environment at schools is one of the major factors affecting the re-entry policy. Asked about the problems affecting school girl mothers in schools, teenage respondents identified social isolation (34%) and stigmatization (20.4%) as the major challenges faced by schoolgirl mothers in the re-entry process (Onyango et al 2016). Malahlela (2012) reported that pregnant learners usually suffer from inferiority complex, low self-esteem and lack of confidence based on the thinking that others are laughing or gossiping about them hence limiting their association with their peers any more.

Balancing between School and Motherhood Responsibilities

According to Vincent (2009) and Malahlela (2012) many pregnant schoolgirls continue to find it difficult to complete their education in school and young mothers continue to face problems in balancing the demands of child minding and work or studying. Pregnant teenagers are perceived by educators as generally performing poor or lower than their peers in the classroom due to the fact that they are in most cases emotionally disturbed, suffer from physical weakness especially after giving birth, and are faced with huge responsibilities of being mothers.

Physical /Health Challenges

Malahlela (2012) contend that pregnant teenagers have a tendency of absenting themselves from school on a regular basis, that is, they maintain a high rate of absenteeism. The reasons behind the irregular school attendance are revealed as ante-natal clinic consultations, neo-natal clinic consultations, pregnancy-related sicknesses, and unsafe feeling of pregnant teenagers at school. In the same vein one interviewee had this to say; ‘when I was really tired it was hard for me to do all my work and I would be falling asleep in class... and sometimes I used to get depressed from school because I was so tired . . . cause at times I was up during the night with him [my son] because he was teething (Mutshaeni et al (2015). It can be seen that although the re-entry policy allows pregnant girls/young mothers to return to school, integrating motherhood and school responsibilities is not easy, hence there is need for more external assistance to them than envisaged.

Attitudinal Challenges

Sithole et al (2013) reports that one experienced senior teacher said, “it is easy to notice a girl-child who is an expecting mother either by being very arrogant or being very shy”. Those who are arrogant tend to challenge teachers; as a result they do not usually perform well. Arrogance may be as a result of frustration since they may be stigmatized by other school children or by their parents. Sithole et al (2013) identified three main arguments that were opposed to the inclusion of pregnant learners in formal schools, namely that the policy could be the cause for the increase in teenage pregnancy, the increase in school indiscipline and poor educational standards in schools. Most of the participants were of the view that pregnant teenagers should be enrolled in special schools where they may not ‘socially contaminate’ other children (Runhare and Vandeyar: 2012). The two sources show that the re-entry policy has not been embraced by key stakeholders; hence its implementation is likely to be constrained.

Benefits of the Policy to the Intended Beneficiaries

Some participants expressed positive views on the re-entry policy basing their argument on the premise that education is a basic human right hence inclusion of pregnant teenagers in schools promoted the principles of gender equality (Runhare and Vandeyar: 2012). Furthermore, Runhare and Vandeyar (2012) report that some parents argued that education is important for pregnant learners because it would allow them to be independent even if they remained single mothers. In the same vein, Meekers and Ahmed (1999) in Grant and Hallman (2006) found that young women in Botswana who dropped out of school following a pregnancy and subsequently



returned to school, stayed in school until they received their matriculation certificates. Sithole et al (2013) confirm most heads of schools, teachers and parents accepted that the policy prior to this was too harsh to the girl child, hence the need to give the girl child another chance. Literature cited above shows that the re-entry policy is appreciated as it allows the girl child to be treated with dignity by being afforded maternity leave rather than being arbitrarily being expelled.

Ways to Improve Policy

Bloem in Chigona et al. (2008) in Mutshaeni et al (2015) argues that there is a need for educators' in-service training so that they could be more informed and knowledgeable in how to handle teenagers and their social problems. In the same vein Mutshaeni et al (2015) believe that pregnant learners should be made aware that not all people in the school community will be ready to accept them, so they need to be prepared to face some hostility from some of the learners and some of their educators. The need for sensitization across the whole spectrum of the school community, that is; students, teachers, administrators, non-teaching staff and the community at large becomes paramount (Malahlela 2012). The above suggestions can be used to improve the policy to make it more responsive to the needs of the girls and to those of the key stakeholders.

6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the critical theory (critical social theory) which focuses on the emancipation of people by making them aware of the basis of their misrepresentations through self-reflection and self-understanding of their situations. Through self reflection, self-examination an individual results in self discovery which leads to self liberation, consequently refocusing one's goals in life. The theory thrives through a process called the communicative actions which takes the view that the stakeholders and actors in education such as policy makers, head teachers, teachers, MOE officials, students and parents, should be engaged in free, open and democratic deliberations in order to move beyond basic information, discussion and communications (Waghid, 2002 in Omwancha: 2012). This theory therefore attempts to bring together the individual (girl child/boy child) to reflect upon their lives, reflect and redirect their lives by giving them a second chance to continue with their schooling programmes rather than being arbitrarily thrown out of school for good. The sharing of ideas, information and experiences among all key stakeholders through the communicative actions is likely to bring about consensus on the desirability, validity and merit of the re-entry policy.

7. THE RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative research since it sought to explore participants' views on the contentious policy of re-admission of pregnant school girls/mothers in selected schools in Gwanda district. Patton (2001) in Golafshani (2003) posits that qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings, such as "real world setting [where] the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest". Similarly Creswell (2003) cited in Tichapondwa (2013) sees qualitative research as a process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data by observing what people do and say. This means that study participants are not manipulated in any way; rather the researcher is immersed among the respondents in their natural settings in order to observe and record what they do and say in their daily life undertakings.

8. THE TARGET POPULATION

Tshuma (2010) posit that the population in a research context is any target group of individuals that has one or more characteristics in common that is of interest to the researcher for purposes of gaining information and drawing conclusions. The target population in this study comprised of all primary and secondary school authorities, staff, students and parents in Gwanda District. It was from this target population that a sample was chosen through relevant sampling strategies to participate in this study.

9. SAMPLING STRATEGIES

This study used the purposive sampling technique. Tichapondwa (2013) posit that, the primary consideration in purposive sampling is your judgment as to who can provide the best information to achieve the objectives of the study... You as a researcher only go to those people who in your opinion are likely to have the required information and will be willing to share it with you. In the same vein, Shava (2012) advises that the aim in purposive sampling is to identify "information-rich" participants who have ... detailed knowledge or direct experience relevant to the phenomenon of interest to the study.



10. DATA GENERATION METHODS

Data were generated through individual and focus group interviews.

The Interview Technique of Data Generation

In this study parents, heads of schools and teachers were individually interviewed while students participated through focus group discussion. These individual and group interviews enabled the researcher to generate rich descriptive data from the information rich informants that provided a deeper understanding of the issues under discussion. The interviews allowed the participants to tell their own story in their own words in great details based on their personal feelings, knowledge, experiences and perceptions in their own language or words.

Analyzing Qualitative Data

In this study data were physically sorted out by breaking the raw data into themes and categories that relate to the research questions. From there, the researcher described, analysed and interpreted what was seen and heard in terms of common words, phrases, themes or patterns that aided the understanding and interpretation of that which was emerging. Finally data from both the individual and group interviews was integrated to form a global picture that answers the question at hand.

11. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data generated from the participants is presented and discussed below under respective subheadings.

Awareness of the Policy

The participants indicated that they are aware of the policy that allows pregnant school girls to go on maternity leave and come back to school after delivery. The study participants revealed that they got to know the policy through various means depending on their status. Students indicated that they knew of the policy through their guidance and counseling lessons at school and through experience. One student had this to say, “one student at our school fell pregnant and went on maternity leave, delivered and came back after a year to continue with her studies”. Similarly another participant had this to say “I heard about it from our guidance and counseling teacher, she taught us about the policy, that’s how I came to know of it”. The above responses are an indication that student participants are aware of the policy and they got it from credible sources.

Teachers and parents also indicated that they are aware of the policy but their sources of knowledge were different from that of students, “yes am aware of the policy, as teachers we were informed through a circular and through meetings” said one teacher participant to the study. Similarly one head of school said, “yes I am aware of the policy, I got to know about it through a circular and through a meetings by the district education officer (DEO). On the other hand parents were not well informed as their sources of information are rather dubious as many of them indicated that they got the information on the policy from the grapevine, through rumours and were not aware that the boy child is also affected by the policy. These findings compare well with studies by Runhare (2010), Mutshaeni et al (2015) and Omwancha (2012) which indicated that educators, head teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders have heard but not seen the pregnant learner management policy.

Key Stake Holders’ Reaction to the Policy

Key stakeholders have expressed mixed reactions on the policy as outlined below.

Positive Reactions to the Policy

An array of the benefits of the policy was raised by the participants. Among these benefits are that it gives a second chance to the girl child to continue with her studies, recognizes that both the boy and the girl children are equally responsible for the pregnancy ,hence it attempts to give equal opportunities to both children. This view is supported by Sithole et al (2013) who argue that the policy has brought about gender equity on the girl child and has increased the completion rates of the girl child. Among other reasons it prevents abortions and that it caters for the proper upkeep of the child since the mother and father have a chance to go to school and have prospects of getting good jobs to enable them to take care of the child. Similarly, Runhare and Vandeyar (2012) argued that education is important for pregnant learners because it would allow them to be independent even if they remained single mothers.



Negative Reactions to the Policy

On the negative, the policy is susceptible to abuse as students may deliberately fall pregnant knowing that they will be given a second chance. “Such a policy promotes immorality among learners as students may deliberately fall pregnant, thus increasing the number of young mothers in schools consequently compromising the learning environment in schools”, said one teacher. Such feeling aptly sums Umutesi (2014)’s view that ‘a rotten apple spoils the barrel’. A pregnant teenager should stay home until she gives birth so that her presence won’t be an encouragement to her peers to also indulge in pre-marital sex just because they won’t be sent away should it happen to them. In the same vein one participant (teacher) commented that “it is bad because whilst this girl is away (on maternity leave) the syllabus continues and it does not wait for her and when she comes back she will be forced to go back to the previous level, hence leading to delayed completion of the course as time is lost during the time on leave and breast feeding”. Furthermore, it (policy) is being seen as promoting bad behavior among learners, hence the comment, “student end up thinking that they are at par with teachers and not respecting them thus promoting an increase in disciplinary problems in the schools” commented one parent. This assertion is in line with studies by Akhire and Madanda (2011) which reveal that teachers’ resistance on retention of pregnant girls in school is that, their bad influence will spread to the rest of the girls; the pregnant girls cannot concentrate well in their studies and that result in poor performance in such girls.

Challenges Encountered in Implementing the Policy

There are a number of challenges which have been encountered in implementing the policy on pregnant school girls and some of them are discussed below.

Treatment of the Girls Returning from Maternity Leave

Among the challenges on the smooth implementation of the policy on pregnant school girls is the treatment the returnee student receives from other students and the staff members. The study participants indicated that students returning from maternity leave are viewed as aliens, odd figures and are ostracized, despised and ill-treated by other students. Asked about the problems affecting schoolgirl mothers in schools, teenage respondents identified social isolation (34%) and stigmatization (20.4%) as the major challenges faced by schoolgirl mothers in the re-entry process (Onyango et al 2016). One student participant commented on one returning student thus, “they ill-treated her as a mother, called her names, and said a lot of bad things about her...they showed a negative attitude towards her and did not want to play with her fearing that they will end up being pregnant as well”. Such treatment is detrimental to the successful implementation of the policy as students do not want to associate with those returning from maternity leave. The negative effect of such treatment are confirmed by one student participant thus, “other students laughed and mocked at her, called her names, in fact they hated her and she ended up bunking lessons, staying at the dormitories while others went for lessons”. Such treatment was discovered by Malahlela (2012) who reported that pregnant learners usually suffer from inferiority complex, low self-esteem and lack of confidence based on the thinking that others are laughing or gossiping about them hence limiting their association with their peers any more. This kind of stigmatization does not auger well for the implementation of such a noble cause.

Administrative Challenges

One head of school had this to say on the returning student from maternity leave, “the policy benefits the individual but not the school nor the community because the returning student becomes a bad example among other students. This has a big impact on the learning environment, think of a situation where two or more students are visibly pregnant and remain in school until they go on leave; ultimately the pass rate goes down because of naughty individual students.” This view compares well with Sithole et al (2013) that identified three main arguments that were opposed to the inclusion of pregnant learners in formal schools, namely that the policy could be the cause for the increase in teenage pregnancy, school indiscipline and poor educational standards in schools. Administratively, participants said that the policy lacks clarity on the resumption of the leave, the duration of the leave i.e. at what point should the student go on leave before delivery, and after how many days does she come back to school after delivery. This is confirmed by Mashishi and Makoelle (2014) and Omwancha (2012) who reported that some officials and head teachers expressed the view that the re-entry policy was not clear and they were unsure on how to implement it. There were particularly conflicting views about how to interpret the guidelines, and different practices with regard to when teenage pregnancy was discovered, when pregnant girls should leave school for delivery, how long should pregnant girls be absent from school and re-entry to school after delivery among others. One school administrator had this to say, “we were not trained on handling such new and complicated responsibilities of nursing and catering for pregnant school girls. Both at teacher and the administration levels we are unable to offer appropriate physiological and



psychological needs which are easily and expeditiously provided in hospitals/clinics.”Such a new demand strains the administrative proficiency of school personnel as their training did not cater for these new challenges of managing pregnant students thus compromising the proper implementation of the policy.

Tutorial challenges

In terms of teaching and learning situation the study participants indicated that the policy poses a challenge in that on return the young mother would have missed a lot of time and content while at home, hence catching up for examinations becomes problematic .They indicated that she is expected to work extra hard which however may not be easily possible since she could still be weak, and still would need to balance her school time/work with motherhood obligations. This compromises her chances of a good performance, thus she may find herself performing poorly. Alternatively she may opt to repeat grades but still that means more schooling years before completion. Some young mothers eventually pull out of school due to failure to manage school and motherhood responsibilities, hence the policy though progressive is not easy to implement.

The other teaching learning challenges is that of indiscipline, the presence of young mothers and young fathers in the school in general and in the classroom in particular is a cause for concern. “The young parents do not not easily give in to the authority of the teachers, they behave as if they are outside the confines of the school rules and regulations thus becoming poor role models as younger learners tend to follow them” said one teacher participant.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the above findings the study recommends that:

- ❖ The government of Zimbabwe revisits the policy and reform it to make it clear on when does the maternity/paternity leave begins, (how many days/weeks before delivery, and when does the student come back) and on return does the student continue from where she left or does he/she starts from a lower level or at an alternative school.
- ❖ The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education launches awareness programmes in schools to equip the students with the details of the policy so that they respond positively to the aims of the policy
- ❖ The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education trains school administrators on how to handle pregnant girls before and after delivery
- ❖ The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education assist the pregnant students due for examinations prepare for the examinations while on maternity leave
- ❖ The government of Zimbabwe engages communities on the existence of the maternity leave policy for pregnant school girls so that they can guide and counsel their children.
- ❖ The government of Zimbabwe trains teachers on how to handle young mothers and young fathers in schools so that rapport and respect are achieved during teaching and learning process.

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