

Inclusion of Pregnant Girls and Teenage Mothers in Ugandan Schools: A Proposed Phenomenological Research.

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Abstract



Background

Research is proposed to explore a new feature in Uganda's secondary schools because they have been advised and given guidelines to admit pregnant girls and teen mothers, a practice that is unprecedented in the country's educational history. Many schools have responded to give this cluster of girls an opportunity to continue with mandatory education. The advice and guidelines are founded on large numbers of girls who during the Covid-19 lockdowns became teen mothers. Available literature indicates that at least 644,955 teen pregnancies were reported during the Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. The ministerial advice for schools to admit pregnant girls and teen mothers has come with mixed reactions, particularly from religious leaders. It is due to those mixed reactions that a study is proposed to examine issues that have arisen as a result of those unprecedented developments.

Methodology:

The research is adopting phenomenology as an educational qualitative research design whose aim is to explore the experiences of the research population and their consciousness of the phenomenon. The phenomenon is motherhood, for an adolescent schoolgirl, and the issues around it. The study's research population is school teen mothers and pregnant girls.

Discussion:

To guide this study is the theory of metaphysical ethics which posits that moral order is rooted in the metaphysics of a human person. In this study, the right to education is conceptualized as the moral good that emanates from philosophical anthropology, and the dignity of a pregnant girl or a teen mother is proposed as the metaphysical justification for their admission to school to acquire what is their due. Strategies for pastoral care in education will be analyzed.

Email: alwangabuk@unik.ac.ug Date submitted: 01st/04/2022 Date accepted: 23rd/05/2022

1 Background of the Study Problem:

Studies by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) have indicated large numbers of teenage girls who drop out of school due to early sexual activity and turn into teen mothers as early as the age of 15 years. In 2015 a study concluded by the MoES closely linked teenage pregnancy and school dropout in Uganda. In the same year, the

Ministry issued Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Teenage Pregnancy in School Settings in Uganda. In the year 2020, the Ministry issued the Revised Guidelines for the Prevention of Pregnancy in School Settings in Uganda which are based on the right of everyone to have an education (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article, no. 26, MoES, 2020, p.11). The Guidelines recommend schools admit pregnant girls and teen mothers (MoES, 2020:17-21). Unlike in the past when

teen mothers designed their own ways of returning to school, and where many would move to a different school, the novelty in the Guidelines was the direct support by the Ministry that schools provide structures to accommodate pregnant girls and teen mothers who were lactating. This development is new and does not have any precedents in Ugandan educational history. About this the Minister for Education stated:

Although schools have been registering cases of teenage pregnancy, there has not been a systematic way of handling these cases to a conclusion. The revised guidelines, therefore, stipulate measures and steps that should be taken in the school setting to prevent and manage pregnancy and re-entry of child-mothers (MoES, 2020, p.5).

The Guidelines

The document of the instructional Guidelines is divided into 6 sections, central to which are sections 2 and 3. Section 2 focuses on principles and interventions by learning institutions, so as to prevent girls from becoming pregnant. Nevertheless, it advocates for upholding the do-no-harm principle so as to minimize discrimination against pregnant girls and adolescent mothers in schools. It also advocates for support for adolescent mothers and their children as a way of facilitating their long-term development (MoES, 2020, p. 15).

Section 3, provides guidelines for the management of pregnant girls in learning institutions. It calls for strong partnerships and linkages between schools and parents, the community, health workers, the police, civic society organizations, and religious and traditional leaders to abate the trauma that pregnant girls and teen mothers face, and to ensure their stay in school.

The guidelines look good on paper, but their application is encountering huge challenges, from the very people who are supposed to uphold them, because they were not prepared to embrace them. Secondly, they do not go far enough to propose concrete means to school administrators to manage the scenarios of pregnant girls and teen mothers and their many needs. This could have been the case because, perhaps, there were not enough consultations by the Ministry with key stakeholders, including religious leaders (URN, 2022).

The proposed study aims to explore the concerns which have arisen as a result of the Guidelines which are launching a new development that

is likely to radically change the Ugandan school cultures.

Pastoral Care in Education

This is in view of proposing them as suitable approaches that will turn schools into suitable settings for pregnant girls and teen mothers who are stigmatized due to cultural and religious prejudices. The mainstreaming into Ugandan schools of pastoral care in education has been long proposed by Bukenya (2007, p. 23). Let us discuss briefly the meanings of that concept.

Simply stated the term pastoral care in education refers to those strategies that schools adopt in order to enhance their learners' academic achievement. They do this by taking care of the learners' overall well-being. We ground this definition on Ojewunmi (2019) who described pastoral care in education as:

A whole school's strategic and operational approach to improve learners' attendance and foster an atmosphere that is conducive to learning and promotes tolerance, resilience, fairness, and equal opportunities for all, with due regard for protected characteristics. Such an approach to pastoral care should eliminate racism, inequality, discrimination, and other hindrances to learning, to create an ethos that culminates in engagement and academic achievement for learners.

The above exposition of pastoral care in education implies that the term pastoral care could be used broadly in education to refer to an aspect of a totality of aspects of schooling that address the personal and social needs of all learners as a person.

The proposed study will examine how professionally the schools that have allowed the re-entry of pregnant girls and teen mothers are addressing the concerns of the various stakeholders who include: the pregnant girls, the lactating teen mothers, teachers, and other learners who are not mothers, teen fathers who may be in the same school, the parents, and the community members.

2 Methodology

Setting:

For the purpose of the proposed study, we intend to carry out the study in Ugandan secondary schools that consented to abide by the requirements of the Guidelines by the Ministry of Education and Sports (2020) and allowed the re-entry of

pregnant girls and teen mothers. This is because they have the research target population. We shall also visit primary schools that admitted them, as well as institutions that have been set up to effect non-formal education programs as they take care of pregnant girls and teen mothers to prepare them for re-entry into schools.

The Districts, Schools and Institutions that we have so far identified include the following:

1. Kasimeri Day and Boarding Primary School, Moroto District;
2. Moroto High School, Moroto District;
3. St Kizito Secondary School Lorengedwat, Nabilatuk District;
4. Ediofe Girls Secondary School, Arua District
5. Hoima District
6. St Mary's Girls Secondary School, Soroti District;
7. Kasese District,
8. Amudat District,
9. Ngora Girls Secondary School, in Kumi District;
10. Kobwin Seed Secondary School, in Ngora District;
11. Mukisa Home for Pregnant Adolescents and teen mothers at Kitala in Wakiso District;
12. The Remnant Generation, Home for pregnant adolescents at Natete Kampala Capital City;

Participants:

The proposed study is about pregnant girls and teen mothers who are admitted to Ugandan schools following the Revised Guidelines, these comprise the research population. Therefore, they are the ones who are eligible to participate in the study. To select those to participate in the study we will need the support of the district and school administrators who know them.

Categories of respondents in the study will include pregnant girls and teen mothers, school administrators, teachers, school nurses, peers, and friends of the teen mothers, as will be pointed out by the gatekeepers,

We will surely need the support of the school administrators to access those respondents and participants in the research.

Period of the Research Process

Given the speed at which the human reproductive changes occur and given the pressure of time, we intend to carry out the fieldwork data collection in the months of July to the end of September 2022.

Ethical Considerations

By its very nature, the proposed study is categorized as sensitive. This is because it involves young females who are vulnerable because of the experiences they went through during the Covid-19 lockdowns that led to their getting pregnant and so acquired the status of motherhood as teenagers.

Dickson-Swift et. al. (2008) citing Lee & Renzetti, 1993:6) categorized sensitive research into four possible scenarios as follows:

2.1 Where research intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some

deeply personal experience; (b) where the study is concerned with deviance or social control; (c) where the study impinges on the vested interests of powerful persons or the exercise of coercion or domination; or (d) where the research deals with things that are sacred to those being studied that they do not wish profaned.

Matters of pregnancy and motherhood are very personal matters to a woman, and to a girl who may have experienced intrusion into her private space through male application of force, this makes the circumstances of pregnancy revive many intimate emotions. It is those considerations that essentially characterize the study as sensitive, and so require a lot of ethical considerations.

There are many taboos associated with their condition for which they were not prepared. They are all still children, and yet they are mothers. Some of them experienced incidents of sexual assault and aggressive abuse that traumatized them. This means that subjecting them to a research process may be a torturous experience that may bring painful memories and feelings and may lead to unsettlement. The study is sensitive also because it deals with personal histories and intimate matters that involve a lot of privacy and confidentiality. All these require an awareness of the moral responsibility to protect and uphold their dignity and self-esteem.

Given the sensitivity of the research, there is a need to have strong reasons to justify its progress. There are two main principles to follow, namely, the moral principles of beneficence and non-maleficence.

As researchers, we shall follow the principle of beneficence; this is the moral principle of seeking the ultimate good of all who are connected to the

research processes. The researchers are to work for the best interests of others (Levy, 2009: pp. 3-4) in this context these include the research population, the teen mothers, and the entire school population. The research process is envisaged as a service to enhance the good of humanity. The researchers will also adopt the principle of non-maleficence, that in all choices made they will aim at not causing harm (Wender, 2011) rather they will endeavor to prevent any harm to the participants and work towards creating beneficial results for the school communities. The research process will seek a sense of enrichment and not exploitation of the study participants.

We will explain the purpose of the study to the district education administrators, school administrators, and teachers and get their permission to enter schools to carry out the study. We shall also seek information on the nuances of cultural beliefs that define rules and taboos so that we will be alert and consider the cultural content when talking to such girls within their specific contexts. We shall seek the guidance of the administrators about the need for consent of the girls' parents and their guardians, following the Guidelines of the National Council of Science and Technology (2014:5.6, 5.7, and 5.8). It will be sufficient to follow the guidelines of the trusted persons that are known to protect the integrity of the research process and the good of the girls. This consent will be prioritized before we get the assent of the girls who will get involved in the research process.

3 Conclusion

The proposed research is as timely as it is urgent because it aims to explore issues that are urgent, controversial, and sensitive. This is so partly because of the nature of the Ugandan socio-cultural and religious character that has always been at the forefront in defining moral standards and particularly in processes that are associated with human reproduction. The research population of this study is the pregnant girls and teen mothers who have been given an opportunity to continue with their mandatory education. It will involve a number of other participants who are associated with the target population. The study is sensitive and so will require a lot of care in its preparation, designing, and implementation and later on in the data analysis and publications. Despite the risks, rigor, and

heavy financial expenses that will be invested in the research process, it is very much worth undertaking because of the foreseen benefits for the target population, the school administrators and educational officers including teachers, as well as the parents and guardians of learners as well as the policymakers in the Ministry of Education and Sports, and indeed the current and future generations of many Ugandans.

A Publisher details:

Publisher: Student's Journal of Health Research (SJHR)
(ISSN 2709-9997) Online
Category: Non-Governmental & Non-profit Organization
Email: studentsjournal2020@gmail.com
WhatsApp: +256775434261
Location: Wisdom Centre, P.O.BOX. 148, Uganda, East Africa.



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