

The Impact of Teenage Pregnancy on Educational Attainment: Perspectives from Educators and Health Professionals in Pujehun District, Sierra Leone

Abstract

Background: Teenage pregnancy is a pressing issue globally, often linked to poor academic outcomes among adolescent girls. This study explores the impact of teenage pregnancy on the educational performance of girls through the lens of teachers, school administrators, and healthcare workers.

Objective: To examine the educational consequences of teenage pregnancy on school-going adolescents and to identify contributing factors to academic decline.

Methods: A qualitative descriptive approach was employed using interviews and observations across selected schools in Pujehun District. Perspectives were gathered from teachers, healthcare workers, school heads, and parents.

Results: Findings indicate a significant decline in academic performance among pregnant teenagers due to absenteeism, emotional distress, health-related fatigue, stigma, and inadequate support systems. School dropout was common, and those who returned to school struggled to regain prior performance levels.

Conclusion: Teenage pregnancy negatively affects academic achievement and school retention. Educational policies and support systems must be strengthened to improve outcomes for pregnant teenagers and young mothers.

Keywords: Teenage pregnancy, academic performance, school dropout, adolescent health, education, reintegration, Sierra Leone.

1. Introduction

Teenage pregnancy remains a critical social and educational issue in many developing countries. It is not a new phenomenon, but it is amazing to note that in this era of sexual literacy and availability of contraception, teenage pregnancy is still a major problem throughout the world.

Many countries continue to experience a high prevalence of teenage pregnancy regardless of the implementation of intervention strategies to reduce teenage pregnancy, such as sex education in schools and community awareness programmes (WHO, 2019).

Every year, an estimated 21 million girls aged 15–19 years in developing regions become pregnant and approximately 12 million of them give birth (Darroch et al., 2016). About 777,000 births occur to adolescent girls younger than 15 years in developing countries (UNFPA, 2015).

In Sierra Leone, the reported rates of teenage pregnancy range from 28.3% by Directorate of Health and Sanitation (DHS), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to 34% by Bash-Taqi et al. (2020) putting the country among the countries with high teenage pregnancy rates in the world.

Education is a basic human right that is entitled to every child and is the backbone to every country's economic, political and social development. In August 2018, Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) launched a phased Free Quality School Education (FQSE) initiative that provides free education to all children in government-approved schools (Kamara, 2020). At regional level, the proportion of teenagers who have started childbearing is highest in the Southern Region (33%) and lowest in the Western Region (18%) (UNFPA, 2019).

Adolescents who become pregnant often experience disrupted educational trajectories, which can have lifelong implications for their socioeconomic wellbeing. According to the World Health Organization (2022), complications from pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of death for girls aged 15–19 globally, and the educational fallout is equally profound.

This paper examined how pregnancy affects teenage girls' academic performance and school retention, drawing on field data from teachers, healthcare providers, and school administrators in Sierra Leone.

2. Methodology

A qualitative descriptive study design was purposively adopted to gain insights from various stakeholders. Twelve (12) participants included 3 teachers, 3 school heads, 3 parents, and 3 healthcare workers with each set living in the same community in the district. Participants were purposively selected based on their experience working with pregnant teenagers or teenage mothers in school settings. The only selection criterion was that participants had to be a member of staff at the school for a minimum of five years. It was assumed that they would have relatively good knowledge of the trends and influences of teenage pregnancy within the specific school.

A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions facilitated the face-to-face in-depth interviews that were tape-recorded during data collection. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the start of the data-collection process. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2014) was used to process the collected data. Different themes emerged during the process and these were coded, organized and interpreted to generate meaning from the collected data.

3. Results and Discussions

The findings are presented and discussed in relation to the objectives of the study. The objective was to explore the views of teachers, head teachers, health workers and parents on teenage pregnancy and how it affects school attendance. The following were identified as the main themes in relation to this study objective.

3.1 Decline in Academic Performance

Participants consistently reported that pregnancy had a negative impact on students' academic performance. Teachers observed that affected girls missed significant portions of school activities, including lessons, tests, and assignments. One mathematics teacher recounted how a previously high-achieving student failed the subject after becoming pregnant.

Health workers emphasized that teenage girls are often physically and emotionally unprepared for the responsibilities of motherhood, which can lead to fatigue, poor health, and mental distress, all of which undermine academic success. Maemeko et al (2018) and Barmao, et al (2015) also found similarly that the impact of teenage pregnancy on academic performance included poor academic performance after the pregnancy, increase dropout because of pregnancy related issues and negative feeling on schooling.

3.2 Emotional and Social Consequences

Emotional instability, particularly among girls who did not intend to become pregnant, was frequently mentioned. Some teens reportedly contemplated unsafe abortions or suicide due to fear, stigma, or lack of support. Teachers noted that girls who returned to school after childbirth struggled with motivation and concentration, often appearing sleepy in class and failing to complete homework.

Social stigma was also a major concern. Consistent with studies [Maemeko et al., (2018) and Barmao et al., (2015)], many pregnant girls dropped out of school due to embarrassment or peer judgment. Some never returned, opting instead for early marriage or informal work. According to one female school head, “Most girls who leave school due to pregnancy never come back.”

3.3 Behavioral Changes and Lack of Motivation

In line with the findings of Runhare et al. (2021), pregnant female students often face hostility, stigma, and ridicule from both teachers and peers, which diminishes their motivation to engage in learning. Participants observed changes in behavior among teenage mothers, including defiance and disinterest in academics. Early sexual activity, they noted, was often associated with poor academic outcomes and reduced educational ambition. Some girls lost the respect of their families and peers, further isolating them and lowering their self-esteem (Runhare et al., 2021).

3.4 Long-Term Educational Impact

Returning to school after childbirth does not guarantee academic success. Teachers emphasized that even short-term interruptions can have long-lasting effects. Girls returning from maternity leave often lag behind their peers, struggle to reintegrate academically, and in many cases, remain average or underperforming students. This aligns with findings by Shefer et al. (2018),

who noted that teenage mothers often become underachievers due to the dual burden of school and motherhood.

The study findings echoed those of Swann et al. (2007) and Duncan (2018), who associated teenage pregnancy with educational underachievement, poor mental health, social isolation, and increased school dropout rates.

4.0 Conclusion

The evidence from this study indicates that teenage pregnancy has far-reaching implications for the academic performance and future opportunities of affected girls. Contributing factors included health challenges, emotional distress, absenteeism, stigma, and inadequate support. Despite these challenges, some pregnant girls and teenage mothers remain in school or return after childbirth. However, their academic performance was usually compromised.

There is a critical need for school policies that support school re-entry, reduce stigma, and provide flexible learning options. Interventions such as school-based counseling, peer support programs, and parental engagement can play a significant role in helping teenage mothers complete their education.

References

1. Barmao, K.C., Nyaga, J.K. and Lelan, J.K. (2015) Impact of Teenage Motherhood on the Academic Performance in Public Primary Schools in Bungoma County, Kenya. *International Journal of Educational Administration and Policy Studies*, 7, 61-71.
2. Bash-Taqi R, Watson K, Akwara E, Adebayo E, Chandra-Mouli V. (2020) From commitment to implementation: lessons learnt from the first National Strategy for the reduction of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone. *Sex reproductive health matters.*;28(1):1818376.
3. Braun, V. & Clarke, V. 2006. Using thematic analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2): 77-101.

- 136 4. Creswell, J. W. 2014. Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods
137 approaches. (4th ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- 138 5. Darroch J, Woog V, Bankole A, Ashford LS. Adding it up: Costs and benefits of meeting
139 the contraceptive needs of adolescents. New York: Guttmacher Institute; 2016.
- 140 6. Duncan, S. (2018). Teenage Parenthood: What's the Problem? *Social Policy and Society*,
141 17(1), 51–63. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746417000404>
- 142 7. Kamara, A. B. (2020). The Government Commitment to Quality Education-an overview
143 of Free Quality School Education in Sierra Leone. *European Journal of Education*
144 *Studies*, 7(8).
- 145 8. Maemeko, E. L., Nkengbeza, D., & Chokomosi, T. M. (2018). The impact of teenage
146 pregnancy on academic performance of grade 7 learners at a school in the Zambezi
147 region. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(9), 88-100.
- 148 9. Runhare T, Kanaga-Majanga E, Mathebula RN. (2021) Resilience of pregnant and
149 parenting learners to pursue educational aspirations within a stigmatising school setting
150 in Rural South Africa. *Acad J Interdisciplinary*
151 *Stud.*;10(4). <https://doi.org/10.36941/AJIS-2021-0107>.
- 152 10. Shefer, T., Bhana, D., Morrell, R., Monzini, E., & Masuku, N. (2018). Teenage pregnancy
153 and schooling in South Africa. *HSRC Press*.
- 154 11. Swann, C., Bowe, K., McCormick, G., & Kosmin, M. (2007). Teenage pregnancy and
155 parenthood: A review of reviews. *Health Development Agency*.
- 156 12. UNFPA & Statistics Sierra Leone. (2019). Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey
157 2019: Key Indicators Report. Freetown, Sierra Leone: UNFPA. Retrieved from
158 [https://sierraleone.unfpa.org/en/publications/sierra-leone-demographic-and-health-](https://sierraleone.unfpa.org/en/publications/sierra-leone-demographic-and-health-survey-2019-key-indicators-report)
159 [survey-2019-key-indicators-report](https://sierraleone.unfpa.org/en/publications/sierra-leone-demographic-and-health-survey-2019-key-indicators-report)
- 160 13. WHO. (2019). Adolescent pregnancy. Available from:
161 <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/329883/WHO-RHR19.15eng.pdf?ua=1>.
162 Accessed June 10, 2025.

14. World Health Organization. (2022). *Adolescent pregnancy fact sheet*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int>

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the teachers, healthcare workers, and school administrators who shared their time and insights for this study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.