

Books or and Babies: Pregnancy and young parents in schools

ROBERT MORRELL, DEEVIA BHANA & TAMARA SHEFER

Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2012

ISBN 978-0-7969-2365-3

236pp

Reviewed by: Tracey Feltham-King

From the outset, the title *Books or and babies: Pregnancy and young parents in schools* cleverly indicates the broad terms of reference for the investigation of the topic. The deliberate strikethrough of *or* being replaced by *and* frames the authors' critical approach. In refusing to stay within the taken-for-granted binary where pregnancy and parenting are considered irreconcilable with schooling, the authors move the focus away from the individual young woman in order to pay long-overdue attention to the broader context in which pregnancy and parenting happens in South African schools.

The book affords the reader an opportunity to try to understand the highly charged gendered environment in which school management, educators and learners endeavour to balance pregnancy and parenting with schooling. This has undoubtedly been a difficult undertaking not least of all because of the moral panic frequently generated in the media on this topic. The authors intend to show how these moralising discourses are utilised to exclude young women and deny them their right to education. They highlight the effects of these discourses so that the reader is left with the clear impression that at least some of the moral outrage usually reserved for young women would be more effectively used if aimed at the injustice associated with these acts of exclusion.

The focus on this topic is pertinent, since the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996) was formulated by the Department of Education (DoE) with the intention

Tracey Feltham-King

University of Fort Hare, Psychology Department

Tel: 043 704 7214

E-mail: tking@ufh.ac.za

of implementing a human rights framework in order to minimise discriminatory acts such as expulsion of pregnant learners or denying young parents access to schools. The five-year (2005-2010) collaborative project funded by the South African-Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD), on which the book is based, seeks to establish whether the progressive policy space created by the legislation had, in fact, translated into responsive and supportive contexts for young pregnant women and parents in schools.

The reader is afforded a rare opportunity to be privy to the varied perspectives of the major stakeholders in 14 urban secondary schools located in two South African cities, namely Durban and Cape Town. These schools were selected to reflect not only geographical differences, but also a variety of types of schools (an enduring remnant of the apartheid education system). These schools were not intended to be representative in any statistical sense, but rather managed to capture the diversity of raced, classed and gendered constructions of pregnancy and parenting among approximately 11 principals and 79 educators.

The six specific research questions, around which the research project was designed, provide the structure for the three sections of the book. The first section is concerned with examining the extent of the implementation of the South African Schools Act (SASA), which was formulated with the intention of promoting the educational performance of young women who attend school during pregnancy and after childbirth. We are given an insightful and rich, qualitative picture of the perceptions and reported practices of school management and educators towards pregnant and parenting learners.

In these interviews and focus-group discussions conducted with teachers and principals, it became clear that the formal commitments to women's and children's rights, as expressed in SASA, are unevenly and erratically implemented in ways that are often detrimental to the learners. The results show that often the presence of young pregnant women or parenting learners is at odds with some principals' and teachers' notions of authority, power, developmental norms and responsibility for care. The varied responses from administrators and educators ranged from ostracising, discriminatory attitudes in some schools to high levels of tolerance and care in others. As pointed out by the authors, this is a small, but hopeful finding that could suggest that stigma in respect of early reproduction is easing and shifting in some South African schools. Now that it has been identified, this small shift is, as the authors suggest, something that can be built upon.

The middle (and most substantial) section of the book deals with a quantitative measure of the perceptions of over 1,400 learners. The authors acknowledge that, despite media-fuelled impressions that there is a large proportion of pregnant or parenting learners in South African schools, there is hardly any clear evidence to that effect. The sample of learners who were surveyed, however, indicate that, compared to the accepted figures, fewer learners than expected are pregnant or biological

parents, even though a high proportion of them are involved in various kinds of substitute parenting.

In measuring the attitudes of learners to pregnant or parenting peers, it was found that there is still some support for gender-inequitable stereotypes about women and men with regard to pregnancy and parenting. The heteronormative construction of manhood, which situates men in the public sphere and positions them as material providers, is fairly entrenched. By contrast, constructions of femininity situate young women in the private sphere and as such they are positioned as nurturers. These essentialist constructions collude to create the expectation that young women carry the bulk of the responsibility associated with teen-aged pregnancy.

The third section of the book follows on from the quantitative measures by exploring the gendered constructions that influenced the experiences and practices of young parent learners. Twenty-six in-depth interviews were conducted, mostly with young mothers. The researchers note how challenging it was to identify young fathers who were openly parenting in a school-based context. Unsurprisingly, then, the main finding was that the experience of young parenthood in schools is profoundly gendered, with young women bearing the brunt of pregnancy, birth and parenthood. However, despite the traditionally stereotypically gendered power relations (further complicated by disadvantaged material conditions), there was evidence of some young men who took on care work and sought to be more involved with the nurturing of their children.

A comprehensive final section complements the rigorous research, on which this book is based. It discusses the implications of these findings for policy and school practice. This research highlights that it does not suffice to simply endow young pregnant and parenting learners with rights to non-discriminatory education. The shared assumptions concerning gender, class and raced relations of power do not disappear when well-intentioned rights-based legislation is promulgated, since it is the school management teams, educators and learners who ultimately determine how pregnancy and parenting are handled in schools. Endowing learners with the right to education within a non-discriminatory environment assumes not only a particular kind of relationship between management, educators and learners, but also an enabling context. The evidence presented in this section shows that despite the attention paid to gender inequalities (at the level of policy), there has been no revolutionary change with regard to gendered power relations that construct relationships and contexts within schools.

The final chapter of the book creates a striking visual backdrop in the form of a photographic essay by renowned South African photographer, Cedric Nunn. He merges his professional experience of being a photographer with his lived experiences of having been a young father, reflecting a touching personal engagement with his photographic subjects. Following on from these personal portraits, the authors conclude the book by offering their own biographic reflections of parenthood.

Together, these reflexive narrative and photographic accounts show how, despite the diverse and stratified contexts in South Africa, there are many shared commonalities evident in the daily challenges of parenting.

It is fair to say that the thick description of teenage pregnancy and parenting in South African schools constructed by the authors in this book steers away from locating the problem within the individual young woman. This critical approach is in line with an increasing number of feminist researchers who question the automatic problematisation of early reproduction and parenting as inevitably an individual catastrophe or deleterious social problem. Macleod (2014: 130) argues that this taken-for-granted assumption, which is sold by a great deal of social science research on the topic, should be tempered by feminist analyses of gendered power relations which are “vigilant about refusing an abstraction that pre-defines pregnant [and parenting] young women”. In this case, the refusal takes the form of focusing on the heteronormative gendered dynamics within schools that are oppressive to pregnant and parenting learners.

Public schools have an undisputed obligation to promote gender equality in pursuit of the creation of a fair and equal South African society. The research documented in this book is a useful resource for school managers and educators, because it is committed to that aim. It provides the starting point needed to engage critically with the multiple and contradictory discourses that reinforce gendered constructions of pregnancy and parenting in schools. Ideally, it should also provide sufficient impetus for school management teams, educators and researchers to intensify the pursuit of reproductive justice for young South Africans by insisting on the provision of non-discriminatory educational experiences to pregnant and parenting learners. This book goes some way towards making an argument for bringing about systematic interventions aimed at making schools places where learners have a reasonable expectation of reproductive justice and the necessary support to balance books and babies in fulfilment of their rights.

Reference

Macleod C 2014. ‘Adolescent pregnancy’: A feminist issue. In AL Cherry & ME Dillon (Eds), *International handbook of adolescent pregnancy: Medical, psychosocial and public health responses* (pp. 129-145). New York: Springer.