



OPPORTUNITY

10

Support young people to keep their grip on opportunity

MARCH 2022

BREAKING THE CYCLE: TEENAGE PREGNANCY AND SCHOOL DROPOUT

Although rates of teenage pregnancy in South Africa have been steadily declining, adolescent girls are still more likely to get pregnant in South Africa than in most low- and middle-income countries¹. Early and unintended pregnancy can severely disrupt a young person's chances of completing school with a matric certificate. One in three girls who become pregnant between the ages of 10 and 19 years do not return to school after giving birth². Once out of school, these girls are likely to experience more than one pregnancy, increasing their caregiving responsibilities and financial burdens. These statistics demonstrate the mutually reinforcing relationship between pregnancy and dropout: girls who become pregnant are more likely to drop out, and those who leave school are more likely to get pregnant.

To break the cycle, education role-players must (1) **pre-empt and address learner disengagement**, (2) **offer wrap-around support services** and (3) **implement policy and programmes** that support parenting learners to return to school.

To demonstrate what this looks like in practical terms, this learning brief draws on the work of the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW) and Masibumbane Development Organisation (MDO) – two non-profit organisations (NPOs) that partner with the Zero Dropout Campaign.

ABOUT THE ZERO DROPOUT CAMPAIGN

The Zero Dropout Campaign aims to halve South Africa's school dropout rate by 2030 by spurring individual and collective ownership of the problem. Established as a research project funded by the DG Murray Trust in 2015, the Zero Dropout Campaign has since grown into a national advocacy campaign with two dedicated programmes of action. Since inception, the campaign has collaborated with four NPOs operating in more than two dozen schools across the country to test dropout prevention models.

¹ World Bank Data. 2019. Drawn from United Nations Population Division, World Population Prospects. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.ADO.TFRT?locations=ZA>

² <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/1-in-3-pregnant-girls-aged-between-10-and-19-do-not-return-to-school-parliament-hears-20210907>

UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PREGNANCY AND DROPOUT

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT SCHOOL DROPOUT?

School dropout is a process through which young people become increasingly detached from their education. Dropout should not be thought of as a singular event; rather, it comes at the end of a long process of disengagement in which a learner is pushed or pulled away from school because of a convergence of risk factors at home, at schools and in communities. Education role-players can spot the early signs of disengagement when they intentionally and consistently track and monitor attendance records, academic performance and learner behaviour. Using learner-level data, schools can build early warning systems that signal when learners are at risk of dropping out. In turn, these early warning systems should trigger a strong referral network of psychosocial support services. Such referral systems are further strengthened by inter-sectoral collaboration between the departments of health, social development and basic education.

WHAT ARE PUSH AND PULL FACTORS?

Anele* was 21 years old and living in Gompo, in the Eastern Cape, when she shared her story with the Zero Dropout Campaign.

Her experience demonstrates how disruptions in households can pull learners out of school. Anele moved between different households. In some homes, she didn't get the care she needed. At other times, her family struggled to afford school-related costs. To protect her safety and independence after she became pregnant, Anele eventually left school to earn an income. As the extract below shows, Anele finished primary school, struggling for three years to pass Grade 7, which is a testament to her perseverance and commitment. But, even with all her determination, Anele couldn't do it alone. Learners like Anele should not be falling through the cracks. They need wrap-around support so that they can keep their grip on schooling.

FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT:

"I dropped out of school after Grade 8. I went to different schools during my primary school education. At first, I was staying with my aunt, but then she took me to live with my

* Name has been changed.

grandparents. That's why I changed schools. I didn't have a good relationship with my grandfather. He was always complaining about me, saying I wasn't listening. After some time, they sent me to my mother. But my mother didn't treat me well, so instead, I went to live with my father. I lived with him for 18 months. That shack was unsafe. It was not good for people to stay there. There was only a bed – no food or anything; no electricity. Nothing. He didn't have work. He would go out and find a job and come back with R50 or R30 to buy bread or something to eat. I didn't have toiletries. I didn't have food. No-one was helping me. I was 15. I was going to school with an empty stomach. I applied for a social grant, but it was hard for me to fetch it because I had to borrow transport money and travel to collect the grant from my aunt. I failed Grade 7 twice. After that, I went to live with my grandmother and eventually passed Grade 7. But I couldn't stay with her very long. So, I came back here, to Gompo, to do Grade 8. During that time, I stayed with my boyfriend at his home. It wasn't my intention to stay with him, but I was desperate to finish high school. It was like I was selling my body, because I had nowhere else to go. He was beating me, and doing anything he wanted, just because he knew that I didn't have anyone else. He was giving me a place to stay and food; he was helping me



with my school things. When I needed files or a uniform, he bought them for me. I became pregnant. Although I didn't want a baby, my boyfriend did. We started fighting and I went back to my father's shack. Eventually, I dropped out of school because I had to find a job. I had to work, so I could eat and do things for myself. My boyfriend said I could stay with him again. I was ashamed to go to school pregnant because all the teachers knew me, and they liked me. It was a hard decision to stop studying, because I love studying and wanted to be a doctor. You don't find a job without Grade 12. I dropped out because of my situation, not because I wanted to drop out. At that time, I didn't have food or a place to stay. Even today, I want to go back to school. But if I went back to school now, I'd feel too old in the class."

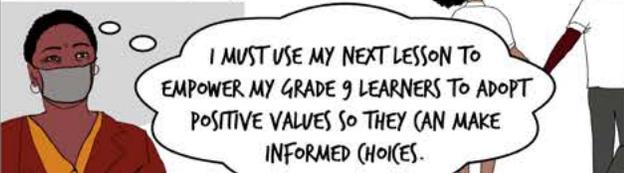
IT'S TIME TO RAISE THE ALARM!

1 in 3 pregnant girls drop out, but it doesn't have to be this way.

We must create safe and open spaces for young people to talk about consent, abstinence, sexual reproductive health and different contraceptive options. Teachers and school staff have a role to play...



Mrs Hlungwane knows that her learners are at an age where they might be sexually active. She wants to have an open conversation about safe sex to avoid unintended pregnancy



In her Life Orientation lessons, she discusses consent, safe sex, abstinence, preventing sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy



At a different school, Susan is followed home by a much older boy who is making unwanted advances and making her feel uncomfortable



Mr Nel notices that she is uneasy around this boy



Mr Nel decides to involve the Representative Council of Learners in hosting a Life Orientation session about sexual harassment and where to go for help



What can we do?

- ✓ We need to create safe and open spaces for young people to lead and participate in conversations that affect their health and wellbeing
- ✓ Learners need at least one responsible adult that they can talk to about safe sex whether it is their Life Orientation teacher, a youth centre counsellor, parent, guardian or older sibling
- ✓ We need to provide learners with information that will allow them to make informed choices about safe sex or abstinence
- ✓ All primary healthcare clinics should provide free sexual and reproductive health services: these include education, counselling and contraception/birth control options
- ✓ Schools must be access points for sexual and reproductive health services



To learn more go to www.zerodropout.co.za



TEENAGE PREGNANCY AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

Pregnancy is a cause and consequence of school dropout³. Not only can pregnancy prompt learners to leave school, but those who drop out are also at higher risk of becoming pregnant. For many girls and young women across the world an unintended pregnancy means social stigma and isolation, along with major disruptions to schooling. Having a child places added caregiving responsibilities and financial burdens on young women. Without the right type of support, caring for their child is often at the expense of their schooling. Building resilient systems of support around learners – in homes, schools and communities – can act as a buffer against these disruptions. Pregnancy can disrupt a learner’s schooling in the following ways:

- Pregnancy forces young women to take leave from school before and after their baby is born, as well as for regular clinic visits, disrupting their learning and making it more difficult to catch up;
- The shame and admonishment that pregnant learners face – both on the way to school and on school grounds – can keep them from the classroom; and
- Pregnant learners who are enrolled in school might be pushed out because of bullying and judgment, and those who become pregnant after dropping out might be discouraged from returning for fear of what their teachers and classmates might say.

Given the mutually reinforcing relationship between pregnancy and dropout, it is vital to have policy and programmes that support young women’s return to school after giving birth. Research shows that young mothers are more likely to return to school if they do so early.⁴ The longer a young mother waits to return to school, the more likely she is to drop out. But attitudes among school staff, as well as other learners, often keep young mothers from returning to school.⁵ Many young mothers experience prejudice and stigma from their fellow learners and teachers.

Newly approved national policy encourages pregnant girls to remain in school, and young mothers to return to school after birth. However, implementation of these recommendations varies across schools and provinces. In some places, national policy is completely ignored and pregnant learners are expelled. In many instances, schools follow an outdated government policy⁶ that prevents young mothers from returning to school

within a year of their child’s birth. Few schools have nursing, baby-changing or childcare facilities, and teachers, learners and parents can be hostile to pregnant learners and young mothers.

To make matters worse, some school-imposed measures that appear to be in the learners’ interest have created added barriers for pregnant learners, making it more difficult for them to stay in school. This includes the insistence, by some schools, that learners who are more than six months pregnant submit a doctor’s note to verify whether they are “fit to learn” or that pregnant learners are accompanied to school by a guardian.⁷

PREGNANCY IN A PANDEMIC: THE IMPACT OF A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS ON VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS

At a household level, Covid-19 lockdowns and school closures had the following impact on households in under-resourced communities:

- The economic shocks of Covid-19 lockdowns exacerbated the troubles of vulnerable households, with many running out of money to buy food, adding to instability in homes;
- Girls and young women lost the protection of the school environment, putting them at greater risk of sexual exploitation and pregnancy; and
- Access to contraception and sexual and reproductive health services were strained during strict lockdowns.

In September 2021, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) presented data on teenage pregnancies to Parliament. According to the data, 30% of teenage girls in South Africa were becoming pregnant⁸. The clear majority (65%) of these pregnancies were said to be unintended. It was further reported that about one in three girls aged between 10 and 19 who become pregnant do not return to school.⁹ The DBE report showed that unintended pregnancy can be both a contributor to, and an outcome of, young women’s vulnerability.

3 Stoner, M., Rucinski, K., Edwards, J. et al. 2019. The relationship between school dropout and pregnancy among adolescent girls and young women in South Africa: a HPTN 068 analysis. *Health Education & Behaviour* 46(6), p559-568.

4 Jochim, J., Groves, A. and Cluver, L. 2020. When do adolescent mothers return to school? Timing across rural and urban South Africa. *South African Medical Journal* 110(9), p850-854.

5 Stoner, M., Rucinski, K., Edwards, J. et al. 2019. The relationship between school dropout and pregnancy among adolescent girls and young women in South Africa: a HPTN 068 analysis. *Health Education & Behaviour* 46(6), 559-568; Pillay, N. 2018. Pathways to school completion for young mothers: are we winning the fight? *South African Journal of Child Health* 12(2b), p15-18.

6 Department of Education. 2007. Measures for the prevention and management of learner pregnancy. Available at: https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/learnerpregnancy0.pdf.

7 Mokoena, P. and van Breda, A. 2021. School dropout among female learners in rural Mpumalanga, South Africa. *South African Journal of Education* 41(3), p1-9. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15700/saje.v41n3a1842>

8 <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/33580/>

9 Ngqakamba, S. 2021. 1 in 3 pregnant girls aged between 10 and 19 do not return to school, Parliament hears. *News24*. Available at: <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/1-in-3-pregnant-girls-aged-between-10-and-19-do-not-return-to-school-parliament-hears-20210907>

IT'S TIME TO RAISE THE ALARM!

1 in 3 pregnant girls drop out, but it doesn't have to be this way.

So, how can we change this?
We need to provide support for pregnant learners so that they can return to school and complete their studies.



Sascha fell pregnant in Grade 10 and has returned to school

BEFORE HAVING A CHILD, I HAD MORE FREE TIME FOR FRIENDS. BUT NOW I HAVE PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES.



I USE MY FREE TIME TO ATTEND TO MY STUDIES AND TAKING CARE OF MY BABY, BUT IT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY.



Sascha is now in matric



MY TEACHER DISCUSSED OPTIONS TO RETURN TO SCHOOL SO I FELT SUPPORTED TO COME BACK.

Mary's school has a support group for mothering teenagers to provide help and advice



I AM SO GLAD I CAN TALK TO ALL THESE GIRLS ABOUT WHAT IT'S LIKE. I SOMETIMES FELT ALONE AND MISUNDERSTOOD BEFORE THESE MEETINGS.



Schools can help by watching out for learners who need help

I NOTICED MARY IS ABSENT A LOT LATELY. DOES SHE HAVE HELP WITH HER BABY OR SHOULD WE SEND HER WORK HOME FOR HER WITH HER SISTER?



What can we do?

- ✓ We need to create safe and open spaces for young people to lead and participate in conversations that affect their health and wellbeing
- ✓ Learners need at least one responsible adult that they can talk to about safe sex whether it is their Life Orientation teacher, a youth centre counsellor, parent, guardian or older sibling
- ✓ We need to provide learners with information that will allow them to make informed choices about safe sex or abstinence
- ✓ All primary healthcare clinics should provide free sexual and reproductive health services: these include education, counselling and contraception/birth control options
- ✓ Schools must be access points for sexual and reproductive health services

ZERO DROPOUT

To learn more go to www.zerodropout.co.za



BREAKING THE CYCLE: PRACTICAL INTERVENTIONS AT SCHOOLS

Masibumbane Development Organisation (MDO) partners with the Zero Dropout Campaign to implement the Check and Connect programme in several schools in the Eastern Cape. Check and Connect is a structured mentoring programme focused on learners who display early indicators of disengagement. One of the learners enrolled in the programme was Noluthando*, who was 17 years old and living in Gonubie in the Eastern Cape when she shared her story with the Zero Dropout Campaign. Noluthando became pregnant after dropping out of school, but with the support of a mentor, she re-enrolled after giving birth.

FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT:

"In 2018, I dropped out of school for a year. It was a difficult time. I behaved badly at school because I didn't have good friends. When I dropped out, my parents were very disappointed, but they kept on encouraging me to go back. It made me feel very sad I had disappointed them. After I dropped out, I became a mother at 15. I don't think



* Name has been changed.

I would've become pregnant if I didn't drop out of school. But having a daughter turned things around. I knew she would look up to me and that I wouldn't have a future if I didn't go back to school. I want to be a doctor. I want my daughter to get a good education and be successful in life. After I had my daughter, the Check and Connect mentor helped me get back to school. She would call me almost every day and encourage me. She would tell me to come back, change how I behave and focus on my studies so I can be somebody in the future. My mother looks after my daughter while I'm at school now. Becoming a mother changed me. Before I had a child, I was always in the street visiting friends. Now that I have a child, I'm always at home and I'm focusing on my studies. Now that I'm back at school, my parents are very proud of me and encourage me not to drop out again. My favourite subjects are maths and isiXhosa. I have good teachers whom I like. I like my teachers because they are always encouraging me and I understand what they teach me. I think school is important because I'll end up in the street or working as a domestic worker if I don't focus. What I see is life's not easy for them. I feel like I got a second chance. It's easy for me to be motivated now. When I see other kids who have dropped out and haven't come back, I feel sad. When I talk to them they say that school is boring and they don't see the point of school. But I can see school is a gateway to something better."

PRE-EMPTING AND ADDRESSING DISENGAGEMENT

The National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW) aims to prevent dropout by providing in-school services to vulnerable learners. The NACCW operates in several schools in the rural Midlands of KwaZulu-Natal, training Child and Youth Care Workers (CYCWs) to support learners with their psychosocial and other needs.

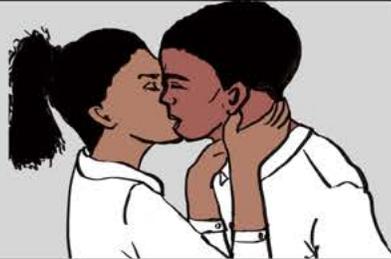
In the mornings, afternoons and break times, CYCWs look out for signs that learners might be struggling. In addition to tracking absenteeism, they pay attention to learners who are regularly sick in the morning; show sudden changes in behaviour; often look tired; or who are always wearing a jersey, even when it's warm.

Some learners are referred to CYCWs by their teachers, while others approach CYCWs themselves. In one of the schools, a Grade 10 learner approached a CYCW and disclosed that she was pregnant. She asked the CYCW to be with her when she shared the news with her family, fearing that her dad would kick her out the house. The CYCW was able to support both the learner, and her family, to move forward as a team.

IT'S TIME TO RAISE THE ALARM!

1 in 3 pregnant girls drop out, but it doesn't have to be this way.

This is a story about Sizwe and Tasneem. They just had their first kiss after Sizwe confessed that he had a crush on her.



Sizwe's older brother speaks to him about safe sex and abstinence.



We need to build supportive and trusting relationships with young people like Sizwe and Tasneem so that they feel comfortable talking to adults about safe sex and sexuality. This is what supportive spaces look like...

Tasneem is close with her teacher Mrs Hlungwane and confides in her about her relationship with Sizwe.



Sizwe gets free condoms at the local clinic and speaks to a healthcare professional about how to practice safe sex when the time comes.



The next time they see each other they are both able to have a conversation about safe sex to protect themselves from STIs and unintended pregnancy.



What can we do?

- ✓ We need to create safe and open spaces for young people to lead and participate in conversations that affect their health and wellbeing
- ✓ Learners need at least one responsible adult that they can talk to about safe sex whether it is their Life Orientation teacher, a youth centre counsellor, parent, guardian or older sibling
- ✓ We need to provide learners with information that will allow them to make informed choices about safe sex or abstinence
- ✓ All primary healthcare clinics should provide free sexual and reproductive health services: these include education, counselling and contraception/birth control options
- ✓ Schools must be access points for sexual and reproductive health services

ZERO DROPOUT

To learn more go to www.zerodropout.co.za



MONITORING BEHAVIOUR

Because of their proximity to learners, school-based CYCWs can identify learners who may be at risk of becoming pregnant, based on their behaviour and attendance records. These learners are then enrolled into structured programmes such as Vhutshilo, which is an HIV-prevention and sexual and reproductive health programme. The programme — open to boys and girls — teaches young people how to stay safe from sexually transmitted diseases and become confident adults.

SUPPORTING PREGNANT AND PARENTING LEARNERS

CYCWs also keep track of pregnant learners’ progress, supporting them to attend school and keep up with their clinic appointments. They ensure that teachers are informed of learners’ upcoming clinic days and that learners receive the day’s classwork so they don’t fall behind. CYCWs also conduct regular home visits (or connect with learners virtually) to support them through their pregnancy and their ultimate return to school after birth. Home visits also allow CYCWs to assess a learner’s support structure and any challenges they may be facing at home.

In one of the schools, the CYCW conducted a home visit for a 17-year-old Grade 11 learner who had not returned to school after giving birth. During the home visit, the CYCW learnt that there was no-one at home to care for the learner’s baby as they all had to go to work. The CYCW connected with a local daycare centre and, with the learner’s consent, shared the learner’s challenges. The daycare centre agreed to care for the child while the learner attended school. The learner returned to class and began to show improvements in school.

CYCWs run a range of structured support programmes. Vhutshilo aims to teach young people skills that will not only help them negotiate safer sex, but will also increase their decision-making abilities and boost their confidence. CYCWs also form Buddy Beat groups for young mothers, where they discuss several topics ranging from sexual and reproductive health, to attachment, immunisation and breastfeeding.

PARTNERSHIPS AND STAKEHOLDER BUILDING

CYCWs refer pregnant learners to external stakeholders, such as clinics, for HIV counselling and testing, antenatal care and family planning services. CYCWs also run school campaigns where they invite experts (such as nurses) to go to school and share information about contraception. In addition, the CYCWs bring in stakeholders such as the Department of Social Development and the South African Police Service to educate and inform learners about sexual abuse and sexual exploitation; how to report abuse; and information about available support services. Finally, the CYCWs run awareness campaigns that include parents and community members and are aimed at creating awareness around teenage pregnancy and how it can impact learners’ education.

CONCLUSION

Many parenting learners want to return to school but lack the support needed to keep a grip on their education. Too many pregnant or mothering learners are bullied by teachers and peers, and discouraged or banned from attending school. After giving birth, many parenting learners want to return to school, but are not supported to do so. Even though one in three pregnant girls drops out of school before completing matric, it doesn’t have to be this way if we have policies and programmes that support parenting learners and their children. It’s evident that schools, households, neighbourhoods and policymakers have a role to play in determining whether a young mother returns to school.

This brief was edited by **Rahima Essop**, Communications Lead for the Zero Dropout Campaign, with contributions from the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW) and Masibumbane Development Organisation (MDO).

This is the learning experience of:



WWW.DGMT.CO.ZA