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ABSTRACT

In many Sub-Saharan African countries, there are concerns about high rates of pregnancy-related school dropouts. Data from the 1988 Botswana Family Health Survey, in conjunction with focus group interviews, were used in this study. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the impact of family life education on schoolgirl pregnancy, and to identify the factors that facilitate the return to school of girls who drop out because of pregnancy. Since independence in 1966, Botswana has experienced a dramatic expansion and improvement of educational facilities. The commitment of post-independence governments to provide universal basic education resulted in a rapid increase in primary and secondary enrollments. This impressive record of educational progress is hampered by high "leakage" rates after primary school and after junior secondary school, due to schoolgirl pregnancies. This study shows that pregnancy caused 7.8% of the women aged 15-49 to drop out of primary school, as well as 19.7% of those who attended secondary school. Recent family life education efforts that have been instituted have affected this rate somewhat, but there is a continued need to strive for more comprehensive and higher quality family life education programs as well as a need for policies that encourage and facilitate the return to school of pregnant students who dropped out. (RJM)

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PREGNANCY-RELATED SCHOOL DROPOUTS
IN BOTSWANA

Final Report Submitted to the Spencer Foundation

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In many Sub-Saharan African countries there are concerns about high rates of pregnancy-related school dropouts. Schoolgirls who become pregnant tend to have fewer opportunities for socioeconomic advancement, especially because few such girls return to school to complete their education after the birth of their first child. Many African governments have included family life education programs in the school curriculum in an attempt to reduce premarital adolescent pregnancies, including schoolgirl pregnancies.

Widespread concerns about seemingly continued high rates of schoolgirl pregnancy (and the resulting dropouts) have raised important questions about the relative role of schools, the media, and parents in providing adolescents with family life education. As yet, little if any information is available about the extent to which various forms of family life education efforts have been effective in reducing the prevalence of schoolgirl pregnancy. This study uses data from the 1988 Botswana Family Health Survey in conjunction with focus group interviews to evaluate the impact of family life education on schoolgirl pregnancy, and to identify the factors that facilitate the return to school of girls who did drop out because of pregnancy.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Since independence in 1966, Botswana has since experienced a dramatic expansion and improvement of educational facilities. The commitment of post-Independence governments to provide universal basic education resulted in a rapid increase in primary and

secondary enrollments, and a corresponding increase in school facilities. This impressive record of educational progress is hampered by high "leakage" rates after primary school and after junior secondary school, and by high levels of schoolgirl pregnancy. Many girls are not able to complete their education because they become pregnant, and thus they are not able to fully exploit their opportunities for social advancement, and valuable public educational resources are wasted. Our study shows that pregnancy caused 7.8 percent of the women aged 15-49 to drop out of primary school, as well as 19.7 percent of those who attended secondary school. The Botswana government is trying to reduce the incidence of schoolgirl pregnancy by incorporating family life education in the school curriculum. In order to ensure a continued commitment to enhancing the quality of these programs, it is important to demonstrate the impact of existing family life education efforts on pregnancy-related school dropouts.

Levels and Trends in Pregnancy-Related School Dropouts

In Botswana, the progress in terms of female primary and secondary school enrollment has been nothing short of spectacular. In this study, we used life table analyses to study grade progression. The results confirm that there is a high wastage after primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary school. However, comparison of different birth cohorts shows that there has been a substantial improvement in grade progression for female students in Standards 1 through 6, but not for higher classes. For higher classes, grade progression has declined

somewhat. The latter finding is not surprising given the increase in the standard of education and the ongoing expansion of the educational infrastructure. A large number of students who previously would only have attended primary school are now able to stay in school until they complete junior secondary school, or even senior secondary school. The rapid expansion of primary and secondary school enrollment has created a need to increase the number of schools, particularly secondary schools, that has not been fully met (see Ramatsui 1993). Because of the limited number of places in senior secondary school, not all junior secondary school graduates are able to gain admission to senior secondary school. The same problem exists for senior secondary school graduates. In other words, improvements in primary school progression have increased pressures on secondary school resources. Indeed, because of these improvements, 75 percent of a cohort of female Standard 1 students will now complete Standard 7, and 30 percent of that cohort will complete junior secondary school.

Factors Associated with Pregnancy-Related School Dropouts

This educational progress implies that women stay in school at later ages, and that sexuality and reproduction will increasingly interfere with women's education. Schoolgirl pregnancies are one of the main obstacles to further improvements in women's education. In Botswana, primary and secondary schoolgirls who become pregnant are required to drop out of school until their child is one year of age. Although the

published annual pregnancy-related dropout rates appear to be quite low, life table analyses show a very different picture. Because schoolgirls are at risk of pregnancy as long as they stay in school, the risk of dropping out due to pregnancy is cumulative. Our findings show that among young women, 10 percent of a cohort of female Standard 1 students dropped out due to pregnancy before completing primary school, over .25 percent before completing junior secondary school, and over 40 percent before completing senior secondary school. Although these figures imply a substantial improvement over the situation for older women, it is evident that schoolgirl pregnancy is a major problem.

Factors Associated with Women's Ability to Return to School After a Pregnancy-Related School Dropout

While there is an increasing recognition that family life education is needed to resolve this problem, there has been much uncertainty and disagreement (in Botswana as well as in other African countries) about the issue of who should be responsible for providing such information. School authorities have been reluctant to provide family life education because they feared parental opposition, parents have been reluctant to take responsibility because they were not allowed to do so traditionally and because they lack the necessary knowledge, and religious organizations have been reluctant to go beyond moral teachings. This study has demonstrated that parents are unlikely to be efficient in preventing pregnancy-related school dropouts.

Communication between parents and their children is poor, and because of traditional rules prohibiting children from talking about sexual issues with their parents, this is unlikely to improve in the near future. Moreover, even in those rare instances where parents do talk to their children about family life issues, it has no effect on the incidence of pregnancy-related school dropouts.

Providing family life education in schools appears to have much more potential. The most important factor reducing pregnancy-related dropouts is whether an adolescent used contraceptives at first intercourse. Primary and secondary schoolgirls who used contraceptives when they became sexually active are only half as likely as other girls to drop out of school due to pregnancy. This finding demonstrates that fears that knowledge of family planning methods will only perpetuate the schoolgirl pregnancy problem are unfounded.

The data do not yet show a significant impact of access to mass media on schoolgirl pregnancy. However, it should not be overlooked that there were no formal family life education programs on either radio or television when the Botswana Family Health Survey was conducted. Nevertheless, focus group participants did indicate that the media, particularly radio stations, are becoming an important source of information for adolescents. Considering the rapid increases in the number of households who own a radio and/or television, we agree with previous studies (see Dynowski-Smith 1989; National Institute for

Development Research and Documentation 1988) that the potential of mass media information has not yet been fully exploited.

Educational Progress of Returnees Who Had Dropped Out of School Due to Pregnancy

The negative implications of schoolgirl pregnancy can be mediated if young mothers are able to return to school. Scattered studies indicate that few of the girls who drop out of school due to pregnancy return. That is also the case for Botswana. In Botswana, girls are not allowed to re-apply for admission to school until their child is one year of age, and they are not allowed to return to their former school. Information from both the survey data and the focus group interviews indicate that parental support is a crucial factor in enabling girls to return to school. Parents who are angry about their daughter's pregnancy are more likely to encourage her to find a job during the mandatory leave period, which then reduces her chances of returning to school subsequently. Parental resources could also be an important factor in whether or not girls who dropped out of school due to pregnancy will continue with their job or return to school, and this issue merits further investigation.

For most countries, there is no information on the educational progress of those girls who do return to school after dropping out due to pregnancy. Our study indicates that in Botswana most returnees are quite successful. Only about one in four returnees did not make any progress. Most returnees stayed in school until they completed either primary, junior secondary,

or senior secondary school. Although it may or may not be true that good students are more likely to return, it is reassuring to observe that those who do return are able to perform well even though they have been out of school for at least one year.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that although female education has improved dramatically in Botswana, the problem of schoolgirl pregnancy may be much more severe than is commonly assumed. While there is evidence that recent family life education efforts are starting to have the desired effect, there is a continued need to strive for more comprehensive and higher quality family life education programs, as well as a need for policies that encourage and facilitate the return to school of girls who dropped out because of pregnancy.



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