



**Thesis**  
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the Western  
Cape**

**An exploratory study of experiences of  
parenting among a group of  
school-going adolescent mothers  
in a South African township**

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**2010**

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**An exploratory study of experiences of parenting among a group of  
school-going adolescent mothers  
in a South African township**

**Thesis presented for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts: Women  
and Gender Studies, University of the Western Cape**

**Sisa Ngabaza**

2010

Supervisor  
Professor Tamara Shefer  
University of the Western Cape

## DECLARATION

I declare that 'An exploratory study of experiences of parenting among a group of school-going adolescent mothers in a South African township' is my own work and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been acknowledged by means of complete references.

S NGABAZA

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## ABSTRACT

Adolescent pregnancy and motherhood have been given considerable attention in the South African education system. Before 1994 pregnant adolescents were expelled from school (as the policy then stipulated) until they delivered their babies. With the adoption of new national legislation, current policies, the South African Schools Act no 84 of 1996, and the Department of Education 2007 policy on management of learner pregnancy in schools emphasise that equal education must be provided for all learners, thus abolishing the exclusion of pregnant learners from mainstream education. Although pregnant learners have been retained in schools, a handful of studies reveal that schools' management of pregnant learners is fraught with inconsistencies. This study explored adolescent girls' subjective experiences of being young mothers in school, focusing on their personal and interpersonal relationships within their social contexts. Participants included 15 young black mothers aged between 16 and 19 years from three high schools in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. Conducted within a feminist social constructionist framework, the study adopted an exploratory qualitative structure. Data were collected through life histories that were analysed within a thematic narrative framework. The narratives revealed that the young mothers found motherhood challenging and overly disruptive of school. Although contexts of childcare emerged as pivotal in how young mothers balanced motherhood and schoolwork, these were also presented as characterised by notions of power and control. Because of the gendered nature of care work, the women who supported the young mothers with childcare dominated the mothering spheres. The schools were also experienced as controlled and regulated by authorities in ways that constrained the young mothers' balancing of school and parenting. Equally constraining to a number of adolescent mothers were structural challenges, for example, parenting in spaces that lacked resources. These challenges were compounded by the immense stigma attached to adolescent motherhood. The study recommended that the Department of Education work closely with all the parties concerned in ensuring that pregnant learners benefit from the policy. It is necessary that educators are encouraged to shift attitudes so that communication with adolescent mothers is improved.

## KEY WORDS

**Gendered experiences, motherhood, adolescent pregnancy, learners, schooling, Khayelitsha, feminist qualitative methodology, life history narratives, interviews, narrative thematic analysis.**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my gratitude to the following people and institutions for their support in the production of this work:

My supervisor, Tamara Shefer, for your selfless, conscientious, insightful guidance and support. I feel privileged to experience your indispensable support

My participants, the 15 young mothers from schools in Khayelitsha, who agreed to participate in this study, and all the Life Orientation teachers who assisted in different ways

The Department of Education, Cape Town for allowing me access into the schools, and the parents and guardians of the participants who permitted me to talk to the young mothers

Colleagues and friends for their interest and support. Thanks particularly to Frank, Tamsanqa, Tuba, Nomsa and Bongiwe for assistance, encouragement and support when I was losing confidence

My family, especially my mother, who has always encouraged me to transcend multiple barriers life sets particularly for women

Noel and the children, Vu, Momo and Mandy, for your support and understanding during my research journey

Codesria for financial assistance in thesis writing

My editor, Anna Strebel, who sacrificed her busy schedule to edit my work

**CONTENT PAGE**

DECLARATION.....ii

ABSTRACT.....iii

KEYWORDS.....iv

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....v

**CHAPTER ONE.....1**

INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION.....1

Introduction.....1

ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD: A GENERAL OVERVIEW .....2

THE EDUCATION OF PREGNANT GIRLS IN SOUTH AFRICA .....7

GENDER EQUITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS.....9

POLICY FRAMEWORK AND ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD .....13

OUTLINE OF THE THESIS.....16

**CHAPTER TWO.....19**

THEORISING MOTHERHOOD .....19

Introduction.....19

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM.....20

A social constructionist view of motherhood .....22

MOTHERHOOD AND FEMINISM.....24

A brief history of motherhood and feminism.....25

MOTHERHOOD IDEOLOGIES: CONCEPTUALISING MOTHERHOOD .....29

Medicalising and technologising discourses on motherhood .....29

The idealisation of motherhood .....31

Motherhood as achievement of feminine identity within patriarchy.....33

Motherhood as gendered: motherhood = femininity .....37

PARADOXES IN MOTHERHOOD .....40

MOTHERHOOD IN SOUTH AFRICA.....	42
Conclusion .....	46
<b>CHAPTER THREE.....</b>	<b>48</b>
ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD.....	48
Introduction.....	48
UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENCE.....	48
ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY.....	53
The gendered nature of adolescent sexuality .....	53
Adolescent sexuality within the school arena.....	59
Research on adolescent pregnancy and motherhood .....	61
Psychosocial consequences of adolescent pregnancy .....	65
Pathologisation and the gendered nature of adolescent motherhood .....	67
Adolescents' subjective experiences of motherhood.....	71
Conclusion .....	74
<b>CHAPTER FOUR.....</b>	<b>76</b>
MAPPING THE METHODOLOGICAL PROCESSES.....	76
Introduction.....	76
DELINIATING THE METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK.....	76
USING A FEMINIST RESEARCH METHOD .....	79
NARRATIVES IN QUALITATIVE APPROACHES .....	80
NARRATIVES AND LIFE HISTORIES IN FEMINIST RESEARCH .....	85
THE STUDY AND THE PROCESS OF RESEARCH .....	87
Aims and the research questions .....	87
Positionality and situated knowledges.....	91
CONDUCTING THE LIFE HISTORY INTERVIEW .....	95
Repeated interviews.....	95



THEMATIC NARRATIVE ANALYSIS.....	97
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	99
Conclusion .....	100
<b>CHAPTER FIVE.....</b>	<b>101</b>
MOTHERHOOD NARRATIVES: THE VOICES OF ADOLESCENT MOTHERS.....	101
Introduction.....	101
PREGNANCY EXPERIENCES .....	101
The context of pregnancy.....	101
Pregnant and scared.....	102
Pregnant at school: ducking behind walls and dodging educators.....	110
RECONSTRUCTING THE SELF: UNDERSTANDING AND EMBRACING THE NEW ROLES OF MOTHER AND LEARNER.....	113
Ambivalences associated with taking on the identity of mother .....	113
Adolescent motherhood as deviancy.....	118
Concluding remarks.....	121
<b>CHAPTER SIX.....</b>	<b>123</b>
ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD AND PRACTICES OF PARENTING.....	123
Introduction.....	123
GENDERED EXPERIENCES AND THE PRACTICE OF CARE .....	123
Dominance of female relatives.....	125
CULTURAL FRAMEWORKS AND PATTERNS OF OWNERSHIP.....	132
The role of partners in childcare.....	133
EXPERIENCES AT SCHOOL .....	136
Mothers at school: juggling the roles of learner and mother .....	136
FORGING AHEAD: MERGING INTO SOCIAL CIRCLES AND ENCLAVES .....	145
Experiences with peers .....	145

Concluding remarks.....	149
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN</b> .....	151
KEY FINDINGS.....	152
KEY CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	160
Social construction of teenage pregnancy and parenting.....	160
Gendered constructions of motherhood and the fluidity of adolescent parenting .....	162
Structural challenges and framing of experiences.....	164
Power relations and the complexity of being a young mother .....	164
Reproductive rights .....	165
CRITICAL REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY .....	168
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	172
Informed consent for participants.....	204
APPENDIX TWO .....	207
Informed consent letter for parents .....	207
APPENDIX THREE.....	209
Learner consent letter (Xhosa) .....	209
Learner consent form (Xhosa).....	210
APPENDIX FOUR .....	211
Parent consent letter (Xhosa) .....	211
Parent consent form.....	212

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION

### Introduction

Adolescent pregnancy and motherhood have been accorded global attention, and scholarship in this area is gradually increasing. In South Africa, adolescent pregnancy and motherhood have long been a focus for researchers, with most work proliferating around the late 1970s and 80s (Macleod, 2006; 2003). Before 1994, black schoolgirls did not have access to compulsory education in South Africa. Among those who attended school, pregnancy dropout rates were very high (Martineau, 1997). The policy then stipulated that pregnant girls be excluded from mainstream schooling until they delivered. In most cases, they never returned thereafter (King & Hill, 1993). With the adoption of new national policies, black South African adolescents have been drawn into the debate on teenage pregnancy and motherhood. Teenage pregnancy and motherhood have been given high on the agenda for consideration in the South African education system. The South African Schools Act (SASA) no 84 of 1996 emphasises that equal educational opportunities must be provided for all learners, thus abolishing the exclusion of pregnant learners from mainstream schooling. In 2007, the Department of Education formulated a policy on managing learner pregnancy in schools. The policy requires pregnant learners to remain at school as long as is medically advisable, and then obtain learning material from the school for the remainder of the pregnancy. Besides the emphasis on retaining adolescent mothers in mainstream learning, a child support grant is also available to single mothers. In schools, Life Orientation teachers are supposed to work hand in hand with pregnant and mothering adolescents to assist their progress and success at school.

The fact that young girls have a constitutional right to be in school during pregnancy has created considerable controversy around adolescent pregnancy and motherhood, with repressive moralistic discourses sounding strong undercurrents of disapproval in different social contexts, academic debates and in popular culture, including the media. The main contention is that adolescents should not be indulging in sex in the first place, yet the liberal policies in place have encouraged the responsible ministries and departments to set

up intervention and regulatory measures that ensure that learner adolescent mothers remain in mainstream education.

It is within a feminist framework of a commitment to gender transformation and women's empowerment that the thesis adopts a feminist social constructionist theoretical framework applying a qualitative methodology to focus on the experiences of pregnancy and parenting among a group of teenage mothers at school. The study explores participants' subjective experiences and their social context, in order to unpack their personalised experiences of being young mothers attempting to continue with their education within the current framework, which both promises support and encouragement, yet is apparently undermined by moralistic discourses on teenage sexuality and pregnancy. Exploring adolescent pregnancy and motherhood is an implicit investigation into adolescent sexuality, and adolescent mothers' constructions of motherhood are equally informed by the broad conceptions of femininity, womanhood, and motherhood in their social and cultural contexts. What motherhood means to them and how they experience being mothers at school calls for a deeper investigation and understanding of the way in which young women and girls' gendered identities and sexuality are socially constructed, both within the school and in their communities. These issues are unpacked in detail in Chapter Three. Importantly, in order to assist in understanding adolescents' experiences of motherhood, it is also imperative to unravel theories that inform the constructions of motherhood broadly, which is the focus of Chapter Two.

This chapter introduces the key questions the thesis seeks to answer and highlights the frameworks within which these questions are answered. This comprises an overview of adolescent pregnancies that locates the thesis within the broad research landscape on the phenomenon. In addition, the chapter will attempt to provide an historical context, by elaborating on the education of girls in South Africa prior to and after 1994; particularly focusing on issues of gender equality in schools, since any study on young mothers at school needs to be located within a critical analysis of broader issues of gender transformation in educational contexts.

### **ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD: A GENERAL OVERVIEW**

Adolescent motherhood has not received much attention as an independent entity in research, as it is largely considered within a myriad of other concerns in different social discourses and frameworks. For example, in Africa, adolescent sexuality has

predominantly been explored within the reproductive health domain, particularly as a major concern in issues of HIV and AIDS, and in matters pertaining to the efficacy of contraception among youth. In the United States of America and the United Kingdom, adolescent pregnancy and motherhood have been given attention largely within the context of social welfare. Studies that distinctively focus on subjective experiences of adolescent mothers are very limited, yet they are critical for intervention purposes (Human Sciences Research Council [HSRC], 2009).

According to the HSRC (2009), numerous interventions and prevention measures on adolescent sexual behaviour are in place in South Africa. These incorporate 'school based sex education, peer education programmes, adolescent friendly clinic initiatives, mass media interventions and community level programmes' (p. 7). Once again, the focus of these programmes has been solely on HIV prevention and regulation. This indicates that there are gaps regarding issues that look specifically at adolescent pregnancy and motherhood. It is therefore imperative to investigate what motherhood means to young mothers, and how they experience and negotiate mothering in this particular time of their lives - as schoolchildren within a distinct framework. Research has generated assumptions and conclusions on adolescent motherhood and adolescents' parenting skills and behaviour in general, but these assumptions have failed to take into account the subjective voices of young mothers. The intention of the study is to project adolescent mothers' voices in ways that would provide a substantial base from which policy could draw. Because this exploration takes place within the school arena, it is equally vital to highlight the dynamics of the education of particularly girls in both pre-democratic and the current context, in order to situate their experiences both historically and culturally.

Globally, a large body of literature has addressed adolescent pregnancy and motherhood as endemic and open to investigation at different levels (see for example. Geronimus, 1991; Hockaday, Crase, Shelley & Stockdale 2000; Jewkes, Vundule, Maforah & Jordaan 2001; Kirby, 2007, 2001; Rutenberg, Biddlecomb, Macintyre, Brown & Karim, 2003; Selman & Hosie, 2005; Shanigwa, 2007).

Klein and The Committee on Adolescence (2005) highlights how the United States has the highest adolescent birth rate among comparable first world countries, with 51% of pregnancies resulting in live births, 35% in induced abortions and 14% in miscarriages or stillbirths. Most of the pregnancies seem to occur among older teenagers of 18 to 20 years.

Moreover, a higher birth rate is observed in black as compared to white adolescents. Although pregnancy rates are believed to be declining (Santelli, Lindberg, Finer & Singh, 2007) a large number of adolescents are still falling pregnant (Hockaday et al., 2000; Ventura, Martin, Curtin, Mathews & Park, 2000). The United Kingdom is considered to have the highest rates of teenage conception in Western Europe (Smith & Pell, 2001). These high rates of teenage pregnancy have prompted governments to set future reduction targets (see Furstenberg, 1991; Hayes, 1987; Ventura, Abma, Mosher & Henshaw, 2008). The reasons behind the pregnancies and the implications are contextual and culturally situated, but concerns common to most contexts include negative outcomes for mother and child, including lower educational attainment and a trajectory of generational poverty.

Trends in adolescent motherhood further show that sub-Saharan Africa has the highest number of adolescent pregnancies in the world (HSRC, 2009). Two key factors contributing to this high rate of adolescent pregnancy and parenting are reported to be increased independence among youth within rapidly transforming contexts that are driven by democratic and liberal-humanist frameworks; and structural features within societies, which negatively influence the daily survival of adolescents, including poverty and limited job prospects (Blum, 2006; Makiwane, 1998; Makiwane & Udjo, 2006).

The effects of urbanisation also appear to have influenced premarital early sexual activity. This impact has shifted what has been seen as the dominance of premarital abstinence, which reportedly previously characterised many African societies (Zabin & Kiragu, 1998). More so, increased school enrolments, repetitions and retentions of adolescent girls in schools means that sexual activity is popularised among older adolescents (Grant & Hallman, 2006). This increase in pregnancy and parenting is reportedly further exacerbated by the seeming reluctance of stakeholders to discuss adolescent fertility and sexuality. The silences around adolescent sexuality, and barriers in the provision of family planning services, have been viewed as contributing to high rates of early pregnancies (Dickson, 2003; Makiwane & Udjo, 2006; Sigh, 1998; Wood, Maforah & Jewkes, 1998; Zabin & Kiragu, 1998). These factors and the cultural and gendered context of unsafe sexual practices among young people will be explored in more detail in Chapter Three.

Pregnancy and fertility rates have been used interchangeably in various contexts pertaining to fertility trends, regardless of their distinctiveness. Fertility rates refer to pregnancies that have resulted in live births, whilst pregnancy rates also include those pregnancies that have

been terminated (HSRC, 2009). In this context, I refer to both fertility and pregnancy as they have been defined. Fertility levels are shaped by the education levels and socio-political status of the country. The assumption is that an increase in access to both academic and reproductive health education for girls and women tends to reduce fertility rates, which illuminates the key role education plays in influencing fertility levels. Also importantly, the political situation of the country arguably contributes significantly to shaping fertility rates (Grant & Hallman, 2006; HSRC, 2009).

Looking specifically at young pregnancy and parenting in South Africa, the recent HSRC study (2009) conducted for the National Department of Education also reveals that South Africa has the lowest total fertility rate in sub-Saharan Africa. Also importantly, in spite of the widespread popular belief that teenage pregnancy is rising, teenage fertility rates are statistically declining, albeit in a very slow and inconsistent manner. While rates appear to be dropping, they are still significant, and continue to reflect historic apartheid divides in South Africa, so that poorer, black communities have higher rates of adolescent pregnancy. This possibly reflects differences and inequities in resources and education, as well as perhaps cultural normative practices with respect to termination of pregnancy.

On the other hand, an Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN) report of March (2007) argues that adolescent pregnancy rates have continued to double in South Africa, and increases are evident in some provinces at least. For example, cited examples in this report show an increase in numbers of pregnant schoolgirls from 1 169 in 2005 to 2 336 in 2006 for the Gauteng province (p.1). In a separate newspaper report, the Department of Education disclosed that 72 000 girls aged between 13 and 19 failed to attend school in 2006 due to pregnancy (Dommissie, 2007). Furthermore, official figures from provincial departments showed that 5 868 learners from KwaZulu-Natal and 1 748 in the Free State had fallen pregnant in the same year. About 5 000 were reported in Limpopo, and 2554 in Gauteng between 2005 and 2006 (Dommissie, 2007), figures that are higher than those of the IRIN report (2007). These figures further emphasise that even if there has been a decline in overall fertility rates, a point highlighted earlier on, adolescent pregnancies are still escalating in certain areas and communities.

Research in adolescent pregnancy shows that there is high prevalence in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Limpopo provinces. Poorly resourced schools, and particularly those

located in poor neighbourhoods, seem to be the most affected (HSRC, 2009), and African<sup>1</sup> and coloured communities form the majority of such neighbourhoods. As a result of these structural factors, adolescent fertility figures in South Africa are racialised, with current figures showing that fertility levels are at 71 per 1000 adolescents among blacks, 60 per 1000 for coloureds, 14 per 1000 among whites and 22 per 1000 for Indians (HSRC, 2009, p. 6). Earlier studies (for example, Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1989) have equally linked adolescent pregnancy and motherhood to social environments, in particular the intersection of culture and class (as will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three).

No matter how one interprets the current somewhat controversial figures regarding adolescent pregnancies and parenting, even if rates are dropping, there are still a substantial number of young people who get pregnant and parent while still at school, and it appears that there is some link between pregnancy and drop out especially for female learners (HSRC, 2009). This link has challenged intervention measures, creating a moral panic for various sections of society, particularly the National Departments of Health and Education. The main concern is that provisions have been set in place for educational inputs and resources to support safe sexual practices among young people at school, but it is suggested that adolescents have failed to capitalise on these provisions, to the detriment of the entire process (Ehlers, Maja, Sellers & Gololo, 2000). However, the Department of Health (DOH) and the Department of Education (DOE) have continued collaborative intervention strategies, which include 'school based sex education, peer education programmes, adolescent friendly clinic initiatives, mass media interventions and community programmes' (HSRC, 2009, p. 14 & 15). Although these strategies have tended to be directed primarily at impacting on the high rate of HIV and AIDS within the adolescent population, they also target a combination of areas of reproductive and general adolescent health promotion, as well as the prevention of unwanted pregnancies (see Department of Health, 1998; 1999). A focus on adolescent sexual practices, which accounts for pregnancy and motherhood, remains the main concern and target of interventions.

Media reports have tended to exacerbate rather than assist with challenging the circumstances leading to unwanted early pregnancies and parenting, by presenting an

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<sup>1</sup> The South African landscape is still characterised by the apartheid racial categories. Although there is no racial categorisation anymore, the population is still viewed in the categories of African black, coloured, Indian and white, as these still impact on people's lives and experiences.



alarmist picture of an increase in teenage pregnancy and an associated moralistic discourse that flags continued social stigma regarding adolescent sexuality and pregnancy. The sensational and alarmist tone of media reports generates emotive sentiment around adolescent pregnancy and motherhood in schools. For example, the *Herald* newspaper (29/08/2008) carried an article that read 'Uitenhage school hit by spate of pregnancies'. Furthermore, the article lamented that the school was 'losing the fight,' against teenage pregnancy, as 15 girls had already given birth and 11 were pregnant at a particular time. The school principal was also quoted as associating the school's poor results with the disruptive tendencies of adolescent pregnancy and motherhood. In another article (*Mail & Guardian*, 29/08/2007, p.1 & 2), a 'baby boom' was reported at one high school, and at yet another in George, in the Southern Cape, 26 girls were reported to have been pregnant at a particular time, forcing the school principal to seek the services and assistance of the DOH (*Mail & Guardian*, 29/08/2007). This nature of reporting creates an ominous picture of adolescent behaviour that positions schools at war with the pregnant learners, thus demonising and pitting the young mothers against the school authorities. This scenario strongly projects the school authorities' attitudes against adolescent girls being mothers in school.

### **THE EDUCATION OF PREGNANT GIRLS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Adolescent pregnancy is currently given a large amount of attention in the education system in South Africa. The Department of Education has set up measures to monitor and regulate pregnancy and parenting in schools (HSRC, 2009). For example, in 2006, the Gauteng Education Department proclaimed that it would place adolescent pregnancy and motherhood at the top of its list of priorities, after the province recorded the highest number of adolescent pregnancies in its schools (Khupiso, 2006, p.8).

With the South African Ministry of Education's policy of equal education opportunities for all, and the retention of pregnant and mothering students in mainstream schooling, more pregnant and mothering adolescents are in mainstream schooling, and their overall achievement frequently surpasses that of other adolescents at school (Kaufman, de Wet & Staedler, 2001). Parallel to the education policy is the state social policy, which focuses on the provision of a Child Support Grant [CSG] to children born to mothers in poor households. Initially introduced in 1998, the grant catered for children aged between 0-7years. It was revised in 2003 to cater for children up to 14 years. Recently in 2009, it was

further revised to cater for children up to 15 years. The CSG has been mired in controversy, with the public and some scholars considering it a perverse incentive encouraging adolescent pregnancies (Lloyd, 2006). However, recent studies (Makiwane & Udjo, 2006) refute this assumption, arguing that in fact most of the grant recipients are women 35 years and older and not adolescents. Of all the grant recipients, they found that adolescent mothers constituted a very insignificant number. Adolescents however do benefit from the grant, although the payment amount of R240.00 per month is generally considered inadequate for child sustenance.

Within this broad context of adolescent pregnancy and motherhood in South Africa, I focus on the lived experiences of adolescent girls as they 'juggle' schoolwork and motherhood. Generally, current trends on a global level reveal that adolescents are given a chance one way or the other to further their education, even if this is dependent on different state policies regarding pregnant and mothering schoolgirls.

In South African schools, Life Orientation [LO] offers a diversified curriculum that explores various issues, which include 'guidance, life skills education, health promotion, physical development and movement, environmental education, citizenship and human rights education and religion education' (Francis, 2010, p. 314). LO teachers are expected to work hand in hand with adolescent mothers within an environment that allows teachers considerable responsibility and control over their school experience. In 2007, the Department of Education also introduced guidelines on the prevention and management of learner pregnancies (Department of Education, 2007). These guidelines were a further enhancement of sexuality education as delineated in the Life Orientation syllabus. Many HIV and AIDS programmes have been introduced in schools, as the Department of Education works in collaboration with the Department of Health and outside agencies. Some of the key projects in schools include LoveLife programmes, which focus on peer education and leadership in both schools and communities. Primary health care clinics and other mobile services have continuously provided contraception, and there has been a dramatic increase in the use of these services (HSRC, 2009).

Conversely, it is apparent that there are differing perceptions surrounding contraceptive use in different communities in South Africa. Thus, research has shown that adolescent girls in certain communities have been encouraged to have children (Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1989; Wood & Jewkes, 2006), because fertility is highly valued in many African

communities. Adolescents are equally faced with additional pressures from religious leaders in certain communities that prohibit contraceptive use for those in their congregations (Wood & Jewkes, 2006). It is evident that attitudes and myths within particular cultural contexts need to be addressed if intervention programmes are to be effective.

The unaccommodating attitudes of some medical personnel have also reportedly impacted on adolescents' ability to avoid unsafe sexual practices and utilise existing resources. These perceptions underscore the notion that any intervention strategies should not only focus on adolescents, but be cognisant of their social and political contexts as well (Kirby, 2007) if they are to be effective. The effectiveness of intervention strategies is further significantly challenged by perceptions regarding adolescents' capacity to make decisions about their lives and sexual practices. In spite of the joint efforts of the Departments of Health and Education in setting up and managing intervention programmes, adolescent pregnancy and motherhood continue to be regarded as areas of concern in South African schools. This concern is presently exacerbated by the prevalence of HIV and AIDS, hence the collaborative efforts of the DOH and the DOE. Subsequently, adolescent pregnancy and motherhood have been accorded significant attention within the broader context of HIV and AIDS, and so are related intervention strategies.

For an in depth understanding of adolescent mothers' education in South African schools, one needs to understand the framework in which the schools operate, and the policies that inform the activities of schools. Before exploring the policies, I will investigate the issue of gender equity in education, assuming that gender equity underpins the policies that guide the education of girls in schools.

### **GENDER EQUITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS**

Before 1994, education in South Africa was highly racialised, with different racial groups exposed to curricula that were characterised by inequalities in access, learning resources and output. This section briefly explores the history of education in South Africa, as a way of locating the study within a broad educational context. The participants in this study involved 15 adolescent girls from three high schools in Cape Town's Khayelitsha Township, and data were collected from within the schools. An understanding of the operation of the schools will therefore require a detailed exploration of the socio-political context of the participants, which also interrogates the history of education in South Africa,

since this history underlies the current state of the education of girls and women in South Africa.

A glance at the literature on early education of black girls and women in South Africa reveals that it was severely limited. The state policies at the time ensured that black children had access to education that allowed them to obtain manual skills only (Gaitskell, Kimble, Maconachie & Unterhalter, 1983; Kallaway, Kruss, Fataar & Donn, 1997; Samuel, 1990; Unterhalter, 1992). Furthermore, most of these basic skills were strongly gendered, as girls were steered towards syllabi that emphasised 'cleanliness, punctuality, honesty, respect and courtesy' among others (Martineau, 1997, p. 384). The emphasis was on skills that prepared them for service-based labour. One distinct factor though was the parity of boys and girls in enrolment at primary school, a feature that was very different from most other African states at the time. Despite the gender balance at enrolment and in primary school, only a very small percentage of girls completed secondary education, as most of them had dropped out. Marked disparities continued into the 80s and 90s, with black women remaining clustered in the helping professions like teaching and nursing. Immense gender discrepancies were also noted in the technical colleges. Most women were doing correspondence education in areas like education, language and social sciences - no black women were enrolled in engineering in the early 90s (Kallaway et al., 1997; Martineau, 1997; Nkomo, 1990).

Historical factors play a significant role in the education of black girls and women even today. The fact that South African women are not as educated as their male counterparts also has its roots outside the education system and the apartheid era. Parental expectations of male and female children in African societies tend to have an influence on the education of their children, with boys usually given schooling preference over girls (Martineau, 1997). Families also have a tendency to be more protective of girls than boys, to the extent of keeping them at home rather than exposing them to unforeseen violence on their way to school or in their interaction with boys and male teachers (Martineau, 1997), particularly in rural areas where they have to travel long distances to school. Gevisser and Morris (2002) reinforce this observation by asserting that girls are directly discriminated against in the education system through violence and abuse, which constitute highly sexualised verbal degradation, violence, and rape. In addition 9 (3) of 1996 underscored that 'the state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds

including ... pregnancy'. Deriving from this, SASA emphasises that equal educational opportunities must be provided for all learners, abolishing the exclusion of pregnant learners from mainstream schooling. Pregnant schoolgirls now remain in school and the Department of Education is still working on improving and developing additional policies that will inform further development and performance of pregnant learners (Pandor, 2006). Following these new policies, a strong and visible advocacy for gender equality has ensured gender parity at both school and tertiary levels. Currently the education system has gone beyond parity, to the extent that girls are in the majority at secondary school level (HSRC, 2009). The main concern is the retention of not only girls but also all learners. In a recent analysis of the final matriculation results of the 2009 class by the teachers' unions, South Africa Democratic Teachers' Union, National Professional Teachers' Organisation and SA Onderwysersunie, it was noted with concern that of the 1 444 018 learners who were enrolled in the first grade in 1998, only 552 073 sat for the matric exams (Chuenyane, 2010, p. 4). This indicated that almost a million learners dropped out. However, these figures are challenged by the 2007 Ministerial committee on Learner Retention in South African Schooling System, which criticises the report as exaggerated and failing to consider a number of consequential issues. The argument here is that most of the learners could still be in the system repeating grades. The main concern however is the high rate of dropout, and the Ministerial Committee affirms that dropout rates tend to escalate with grades, with those in the upper levels leaving school more frequently.

Furthermore, dropout rates are also racialised, with the highest rates noted among coloured learners, followed by blacks, and the lowest rates among whites (Chuenyane, 2010, p. 4). Followed up of some of these former learners revealed lack of finance, pregnancy and repeating grades as reasons for their dropping out. These same reasons have been cited elsewhere, with emphasis on incomplete schooling as being a high risk factor not only for pregnancy but for HIV and AIDS as well (HSRC, 2009).

Despite all the milestones achieved in the development and provision of education, South African education is still reflective of the salient inconsistencies of apartheid education, which was characterised by inequality across the board. Focusing on the education of black girls and women, with regard to gender issues the system is still strongly grounded in conventional customs and practices, which openly privilege boys over girls. Whilst girls exhibit high enrolment rates at high school they are still underrepresented in natural

sciences and technical subjects. Yet, freeing the potential of girls is cogently associated with ensuring equal access to education (Gevisser & Morris, 2002).

In addition, principals and teachers are products of a system that legitimises the differentiation between girls and boys, and being the custodians of learners, teachers are bound to transmit their own views, values and norms to the learners, if only inadvertently. Besides, in the process of curriculum interpretation and implementation, teachers' principles tend to dictate. In the classroom, it is the teachers again who take control of what happens to boys and girls. Practically the whole school structure, including disciplinary methods, is teacher centred and gendered (Wolpe, 2005). Empirical evidence illustrates that women are overrepresented as teachers but underrepresented in middle and upper management (Gevisser & Morris, 2002). This also implies that positions of power in schools are still predominantly the privilege of men.

This dispensation further permeates the social organisation of institutions. Gender is entrenched in multiple institutional arrangements that constitute societies, and schools are generally reflective of these structural patterns. They also function as bases where gendered constructions are continuously recreated and reinforced. Gendered labour divisions within families are perpetuated within the school, as learners are socialised into various sex categories, including with regard to subject orientation (De La Rey, 2002). For example, with the advent of AIDS orphans, young girls are still obligated to leave school and parent their siblings or other members of their families (Gevisser & Morris, 2002), because of the gendered assumptions that associate girls and women with nurturing and care work. Generally, ensuring equitable access challenges gender sensitivity, particularly in those who manage the learning spaces.

On the other hand, it is evident that principles of gender equity have also been included in recent education policies. For example, in 1996 a Gender Equity Task Team (GETT) was entrusted with investigating and advising the DOE on issues that included identifying and correcting gender imbalances in key areas like enrolment, dropouts, subject choice, career paths and performance. It also focused on addressing sexism in curricula textbooks and teaching, including looking into affirmative action strategies for increasing the representation of women in professional leadership. Gender mainstreaming in all policies was equally underlined (Wolpe, 2005). However reporting on the outcomes of the task team, Wolpe (2005, p. 126-7) highlighted 'the lack of enthusiasm and understanding' of

what is meant by a gender equity plan at various levels of management. Parallel to this realisation, apparent gender differentiations tacitly illuminate cultural and ideological beliefs among learners. Whilst there is a general understanding of the constitution and basic human rights, how these influence men, women, girls and boys differentially tends to be misunderstood, posing further challenges to the effective implementation of intervention strategies among key stakeholders.

### **POLICY FRAMEWORK AND ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD**

South Africa is one of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa that has taken steps to protect young mothers' right to education. An accommodating teenage pregnancy policy has ensured that pregnant adolescents remain in mainstream schooling or return to school after giving birth, but this has not guaranteed retention. Whilst this shift promotes open access to education for girls, the main point of concern is the implementation of the policies in various schools. There is lack of clarity on how schools should manage pregnant schoolgirls. This inconsistency in the application of Department of Education policies in schools has been linked to a number of issues, which include misunderstanding the policy, or disagreeing with it altogether (Bhana, Clowes, Morrell & Shefer, 2008). This is further complicated by frustration among teaching staff, as they are expected to manage pregnant and mothering students with no proper or clear policy guideline (Bhana, Morrell, Shefer & Ngabaza, 2010). This situation is further complicated by uneven policy implementation across schools, in some instances resulting in expulsions of adolescent mothers. These inconsistencies in policy application and implementation are revealed in a range of media reports across provinces in South Africa. For example, the principal of a high school in KZN sent home thirteen pregnant learners (Ndlovu, 2008, p. 4). In addition, in 2006 another senior secondary school in Cape Town made headlines in the media after the principal expelled a pregnant learner. Research has also shown that pregnancy has generally been disruptive of schooling, with around 66 000 to 86 000 learners between 2002 and 2006 reporting that their schooling had been disrupted by pregnancy (Jewkes, Morrell & Christofides, 2009).

In 2007, the Department of Education implemented guidelines to manage learner pregnancies. Key in these guidelines was the provision of the possibility that adolescent mothers may leave school for up to two years, and must not return to school in the same year that they left school to have the baby, which schools appeared to take up as a directive

rather than a possibility (Govender, 2007, p. 3). Whilst this policy was implemented in schools across the country, the DOE is currently considering prompt resumption after the birth of the baby, in a move to keep adolescent mothers at school. Research has shown that most of those learners who left school did not return, and for every year spent at home, there were higher chances of them not returning (Grant & Hallman, 2006), and even higher probability of subsequent pregnancies.

Whilst this is perceived as problematic, debates further abound as to whether teenage mothers drop out following a pregnancy or the pregnancy follows dropping out (Imamura, Tucker, Hannaford, da Silva, Astin, Wyness et. al., 2007). Either way, school dropout is a major concern for policy makers. A number of studies have examined factors around drop out among schoolgirls, and come up with numerous causes that heighten chances of dropout. Some of these views include the observation that there is a strong association between the household economic structure, prior school performance and drop out. Grade repetitions and grade levels also influence the likelihood of remaining in school longer than expected (Fuller & Liang, 1999; Grant & Hallman, 2006; Hunter & May, 2002; Jewkes & Christofides, 2008; Meekers & Ahmed, 1999). Although the economic structure seems to be the underlying factor in this regard, other issues like the resident parent (that is, who the schoolgirl resides with at the time of pregnancy) have also been noted to contribute towards drop out. Thus it is suggested that drop out is most likely for a girl who resides with the father alone as compared to the one who has a resident mother. In addition, increased educational attainment within households and access to childcare support increases the girl's chances of remaining in school (Grant & Hallman, 2006).

The many changes and adaptations to the policy indicate that the DOE views adolescent pregnancy as a key concern. Thus, there is an urgent need for scholars to conduct research that will inform policy. It is hoped that this study will enhance understanding the subjective experiences of adolescent parents in school. The assumption is that such revelations will contribute to intervention programmes for these and other similar contexts.

Kirby's (2007) study outlines guidelines on methods of intervention in adolescent pregnancies in the United States. The emphasis is on the fact that intervention strategies should be cognisant of the key factors that affect the adolescent's sexual behaviour; in this case, the underlying assumption is that adolescent sexual behaviour is significantly



impacted on by various structural factors that shape their lives. Some of these factors include family, peers, and their communities (HSRC, 2009).

Thus this thesis explores how adolescent girls experience motherhood as learners at school, in their families and communities. Central to their narratives is the role played by their parents, partners, peers, schools and communities. The study is not only concerned with the subjective experiences of participants, but also wishes to unpack the key structural factors that frame their social context, as well as their practices and experiences of parenting. It hopes to contribute towards knowledge production in this sphere. While there has been a considerable amount of research on teenage pregnancy (see Macleod, 2001, for review of earlier work), and a number of studies have been conducted in this area more recently (for example, Bhana et al., 2008; Davies, 2000; Jewkes et al., 2001; Kaufman et al., 2001), we do not know enough about the experiences of young learner parents, particularly their subjective voices in the South African context. This exploration will also assess the impact of gender equity in education, in particular the intersection of policy and practice: that is, how policy impacts on what schools actually do, and what pregnant and parenting learners actually experience. The study also hopes to contribute to the sparse literature on qualitative experiences of motherhood in South Africa, and particularly in South African schools.

Whilst school based intervention programmes have effectively imparted knowledge and influenced adolescent mothers' attitudes about sexuality, the effectiveness of the programmes remains problematic, in that the intervention strategies fail to target the values that underlie adolescent sexual behaviour (HSRC, 2009). The probability of achieving positive change is maximised if these values are addressed. This study explores motherhood experiences of adolescent mothers in a context that examines fundamental values that shape the learner mother's daily activities.

This chapter has traced general trends in adolescent motherhood, highlighting concerns and problems as shown in research. The research terrain also shows topical issues and intervention endeavours around the regulation of adolescent motherhood, particularly in South Africa. It is in this broad domain that I locate and underline the significance of this study. I explore adolescent motherhood within the broad context of motherhood. This requires an in depth understanding of theories that shape motherhood broadly. The

following chapter pursues this concept, mapping out the theoretical framework and debates that have influenced motherhood theorising broadly.

## **OUTLINE OF THE THESIS**

Chapter One has provided the broader context and focus of the thesis and argued for the value of the study. I review trends in adolescent pregnancy, fertility and motherhood, as a way of reporting on prevalence, but also to problematise the issue of prevalence by highlighting the somewhat inconsistent reporting of pregnancy rates. Thus while teenage pregnancy rates appear to have decreased in national statistics; they appear to be significantly high enough in certain areas of the country to raise concern. The chapter explores the style of reporting that has characterised adolescent pregnancy in the media and popular culture, so that despite the decreasing rates the media still sensationalises any reports on adolescent pregnancy and constructs it as an inevitable problem. The chapter is most concerned to highlight the broad educational framework of girls and women in pre and post-democratic South Africa, exploring the policy framework that shapes the education of pregnant adolescents and mothers. Whilst the DOE has provided guidelines on managing adolescent mothers, the implementation of these guidelines and policy has many gaps. This is a key question for the thesis – how, if at all, are these policies impacting on the lived experience of those who get pregnant and become parents while at school? It is evident that such subjective experiences are under-reported in the literature and therefore constitute a key rationale for the study. Gender equity remains a priority in education, and pregnancy and parenting is one area that has historically and arguably still continues to undermine the successful progress of female learners in particular. Regardless of the progressive policies in place, schools are predominantly sites where socially constructed gender identities and normative gender roles are recreated and reinforced. These structures shape the way the adolescent mothers understand themselves and their roles therein. These are the concerns the chapter raises, and constitute the key research questions of the thesis, serving further to provide a foundation for the understanding of the voices of the participants in Chapters Five and Six.

Chapter Two explores the theoretical framework for understanding teenage pregnancy and parenting that represents the underlying philosophical framework of the thesis. Initially the chapter outlines the philosophies that shape a social constructionist theoretical framework, with a view to understanding motherhood from this perspective, whilst challenging

essentialist and deterministic notions of motherhood. The chapter further explores various feminist theories and perspectives on motherhood, highlighting how these have come to shape debates on motherhood. An exploration of motherhood in South Africa contextualises and locates the thesis in contemporary debates, with a view to providing a backdrop to the understanding of the meanings participants attach to their own experiences of learners and mothering outlined in Chapter Five.

Chapter Three examines empirical debates on adolescent pregnancy and motherhood both internationally and locally. Initially the chapter explores adolescence as a developmental stage in psychology that has been problematised by critical theorists working on early pregnancy and parenting. Empirical studies on adolescents are reviewed, with a focus on sexuality and general trends in research. Some of the concerns the chapter investigates encompass psychosocial issues and the pathologisation of adolescent motherhood. Whilst the chapter broadly locates the study in debates on adolescent mothers in general, further emphasis is on school-going adolescent mothers in the South African context.

Chapter Four locates the thesis in its methodological framework and outlines the methodology utilised in the study. Writing from a feminist qualitative approach, I explore the use of life histories and narratives in qualitative research, underlining points of intersection and polarisation. Narrative analysis is outlined as a framework within which the adolescent mothers' narratives are discussed. I also outline the research process, reflecting on the interaction between the participants and the researcher, highlighting how these shaped the entire research process.

Chapter Five and Six present the discussion on the analysis of the participants' experiences of motherhood. The findings are divided into two key thematic areas. Chapter Five explores the adolescent mothers' gendered experiences of being pregnant and becoming mothers in their social context, i.e., how the young mothers understand and give meaning to their experience of pregnancy in the contexts of their families, communities and school. The chapter is also concerned with how young mothers construct and understand their new roles of mother. Their social context is unpacked, with the understanding that their identities, what motherhood means to them, is broadly shaped by these contexts.

Chapter Six explores the networks and contexts of care that are set up for the adolescent mother participants by their families to deal with the young child, and how these

arrangements are experienced by the participants. This section also explores the cultural frameworks within which parenting is practised, with a particular focus on how parenting impacts on the lives of adolescent mothers, their schooling and responses at school. The chapter further unpacks the impact of parenting on their schoolwork, and shows how parenting shapes their relationship with their peers, parents and the community broadly.

Chapter Seven presents the conclusion to the thesis. The chapter reviews the central threads, and highlights what the findings mean for contemporary understandings and debates on adolescent pregnancy and motherhood at school in South Africa.

Recommendations are specified on the potential of the study for both policy intervention programmes as well as educational strategies.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORISING MOTHERHOOD

#### Introduction

The thesis is located within a social constructionist framework, which is guided by feminist principles. I aim to contribute to the body of scholarship that explores motherhood from a feminist social constructionist perspective. The fact that women are biologically able to fall pregnant, give birth to and breastfeed children, has been used as the springboard for discourses that view motherhood as natural and essential. Feminist scholarship argues that motherhood is socially constructed in the same way that gender is. Social constructionism as a theoretical orientation therefore challenges the notion of gendered binaries in the organisation of society and social relationships, regarding gender as a product of negotiated meanings that transpire in daily interactions among people. Since motherhood is practised within these contexts, our meaning of motherhood is therefore shaped by both our culture and environments, as it remains specific to these circumstances. My thesis grounds its argument in this sphere of focus, as I explore a group of young mothers' experiences of motherhood within their specific contexts.

It is also important to highlight the fact that the multiple voices and ways of viewing motherhood reflected in the debates I explore are in fact tantamount to the complexity and dynamism of the institution. I also believe that there are multiple points of entry into these debates, and that these points are determined by one's positioning and focus. That is, what I deem to be key debates in motherhood might not be considered so by other scholars, as our points of view are greatly shaped by the questions we set out to ask, including our interests and biases as scholars (Kaplan, 1992). My point of entry is governed by my central research focus - the experiences of motherhood among school-going teenage, unmarried mothers. I therefore commence with those debates that focus on motherhood experiences in feminist frameworks, governed by the different debates that significantly influence my study. The contestations also reveal that what could have been regarded as

dominant views by some scholars could possibly vary for others – a further indication that understandings of motherhood are replete with diversity and multiplicity; so are the varying points of entry into motherhood debates.

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical framework within which the thesis is grounded. I then investigate motherhood and feminism, illuminating how the two intersect. Furthermore, I highlight how feminist researchers have tackled the issue of motherhood within their frameworks. Key in debates about motherhood is the notion of motherhood as identity; I explore this line of thought, unravelling the contradictory identities that define women as mothers, how they are simultaneously demonised and celebrated, lauded and denigrated. Finally, I look at empirical work on constructions of motherhood in South Africa, exploring the notions of motherism in apartheid times, and investigating contemporary debates that shape motherhood.

### **SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM**

Social constructionism is a multidisciplinary theoretical orientation that has its ‘cultural backdrop in Postmodernism and Social Psychology’ among other fields (Burr, 1995, p. 4). Social constructionists challenge the positivist stance that perceives the world as based on objective and unbiased truth. They believe that truth is historically and culturally variable. Moreover, it is positioned as a product of multiple negotiated meanings that are borne through social processes within particular social groups, thus disputing the concept of a single meaning of reality and truth (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990). In this case, knowledge is constructed through the daily interactions of people, as they make meaning of the world around them; i.e. it is an artefact of social interaction, that which we agree to call truth. The descriptions of the world sustain some patterns of social actions whilst also rejecting others (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Bohan, 1997; Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985). For example, within a social constructionist framework, the significance, definitions and meanings of motherhood would vary according to different societies and cultures, and the historically specific times within which motherhood and mothering occur. Thus women are not born mothers, but mother is a product of ‘social interchange’ (Bohan, 1997, p. 39), that which society constructs, out of the practice of motherhood, and agrees to. Consequently feminists would then argue that individual experiences be explored ‘from the point of view of the historically and culturally situated individual’ (Schwandt, 2000, p. 200). This line of thought has encouraged some feminist social constructionists to challenge universalist

theories of motherhood (see in depth review of this debate later in the chapter), arguing for the specificity of women's experiences (Stacey, 1993). Human beings' experiences are therefore shaped by and change due to modifications in their social circumstances. According to social constructionists, these modifications and changes are primarily articulated through language and language-like systems.

Social constructionists use language as a form of social action, that is, language is the medium of constructing meanings out of social interactions among people, a notion that disputes the scientific belief of knowledge being discovered. In this way, we are able to construct our own versions of reality. These versions of reality are however negotiated within social interactions, and this process results in multifaceted versions of meaning. The exceptionality of language and its fluid nature remain central to social constructionism. It is through language that we make sense of our reality; who we are, how we think, feel and experience our worlds. Language enables and structures people's thoughts and experiences of their world. That is, people and their language are closely bound, the way 'that language is structured therefore determines the way that experience and consciousness are structured' (Burr, 1995, p. 32-33). It is also through language that these experiences can be made available to others. Social constructionists emphasise the centrality of language and language-like systems in determining meaning. Accordingly, there tends to be a very close connection between people and their language, as it is through language that people become conscious of themselves as they negotiate their interactions with others and the world (Burr, 1995; Lupton, 1995; Rogers & Rogers, 2001; Wick, 1996).

Social constructionism has been drawn on by feminists to challenge discourses of biological determinism. From this perspective, feminists challenge the 'fixity of the biological model of gender difference' (Stacey, 1993, p. 68), as they argue that the position of women in society is socially produced and not biologically given. The assumption is that women's position is determined through certain aspects of 'social and cultural forces which can possibly be challenged' (Stacey, 1993, p. 68). Thus, gendered actions are equally shaped by the social locatedness of the women. The biological model has been fundamental in tagging and screening people, and social constructionism challenges these constructed notions as misleading, questioning why all categories of people have been determined by this kind of grouping. Following the sexual difference debate, feminists have concentrated on transformations at the level of gender (Burr, 1995; Grosz, 1994;

Lorber, 2001; 1994). It is within this broad framework that I look at how motherhood experiences of adolescent mothers are structured and shaped by their social and cultural contexts, and explore what these meanings imply for them as adolescent mothers.

Having outlined the major theoretical framework that guides this study, I proceed to review a social constructionist perspective of motherhood, using this framework of analysis as entry point into the understanding of debates on motherhood from the past century to the present, and making sense of my own work in the broader context of this framework. By so doing, I hope to provide a conceptual and contextual framework for current meanings of motherhood, borne out of the experiences of young mothers who have chosen to continue school whilst mothering their children. The review picks up some of the most significant threads that shape debates in motherhood in feminist frameworks, as highlighted. Even though some debates like that of Chodorow's (1978) 'reproduction of mothering' and Ruddick's (1980) 'maternal instinct', might be regarded as being over-used, the reason why we keep revisiting them to make sense of what we are doing today is because of their continued relevance to understandings of motherhood. Debates around motherhood and patriarchy might appear to have shifted and changed over time, as we currently stress the issue of power and negotiation in the way people interact. However, I argue that patriarchy still has a strong influence in mothering contexts, and it appears that previous debates on motherhood and patriarchy seem to underlie many of the current perspectives and ways of seeing. In the process of unpacking these debates, I hope to locate my study in broader theoretical, conceptual and empirical frameworks.

### **A social constructionist view of motherhood**

Social constructionist feminist thinking focuses on the way in which motherhood takes on its meaning in social and historical contexts, and deconstructs the dualism of the mind and the body in understandings of gender and motherhood. The notion that the female body is a constraining factor in women's opportunities is challenged, as social constructionists argue that women are not biologically predetermined to be mothers. While it is assumed that a material body exists, social constructionism is more concerned with the way social and political systems organise and give meaning to the 'sexually specific body' (Grosz, 1994, p. 17). Thus, the social representation of the female body is what needs to be understood and deconstructed in theorising motherhood and other gendered identities and practices (Grosz, 1994; Lorber, 2001; 2000; Silva, 1996; Smart, 1996).



Silva (1996, p. 12) emphasises that ‘people are made by other people and bodies are necessary in order for people to be made’. Although she considers this to be a universal truth, Silva affirms that what varies is the extent to which different people and bodies are involved in this making. She is careful to clarify that the fact that people are born from women’s bodies does not make all women mothers, as there are many biological ‘truths’ to challenge this, such as the case of surrogacy. However, historically it has been the biological ties of women and the children they bear that have often given rise to the dominant naturalising of the institution of motherhood. Arguing for a deconstruction of essentialised and naturalised motherhood, Smart (1996) refers to a chain of events presumed to be natural and inevitable for motherhood. These she presents as:

‘sexual activity → pregnancy → birth → mothering → motherhood’ (p. 39). She emphasises that each activity does not necessarily lead to the other, but each stage is characterised by different choices and options, which remain historically and culturally specific. Smart challenges this set of normative and fixed relations between certain practices and identities, and rejects motherhood as a natural condition, arguing that the ‘end point of motherhood’ is not given or inevitable or necessarily a ‘natural’ outcome of the practices that go before it.

Within social constructionist understanding, people practise gender through a process of negotiation of identity and social realities, their understandings of self, including their notions of gender, based on their social networks and interactions, and the discursive framework of these (Lorber, 2000). This thesis explores how a group of young mothers construct motherhood and what they understand it to mean in their particular contexts. Exploring motherhood within a social constructionist framework therefore means an exploration of the social contexts in which motherhood occurs. These encompass the historical and cultural underpinnings that are specific to the context (Burr, 1995). A social constructionist understanding of motherhood therefore underscores motherhood as historically and culturally specific. This thesis investigates motherhood within a particular culture, context and historical phase – the findings are not representative of all women in this context, but are an illumination of the subjective experiences of a group of women in this particular social context, and an attempt to unpack what this says about the broader context of social meaning attached to motherhood, and in particular young motherhood while at school. The emergence of social constructionism within feminism has afforded

feminists the means with which to challenge the biological explanations of women's positions in their societies (Stacey, 1993). In this framework, the following section looks at how feminist approaches to motherhood have shaped theorising about motherhood over centuries.

### **MOTHERHOOD AND FEMINISM**

Since the social constructionist perspective applied here will be located within a feminist framework, it is important to unpack feminist approaches to motherhood. This encompasses a vast body of literature, since motherhood has been a key preoccupation of especially second wave feminism, which to a large extent saw motherhood as constraining of women's opportunities in patriarchal societies. Much of the literature on motherhood in early feminist work around the 60s and 70s is grounded in western contexts, with most theoretical work and empirical studies based on the concerns and perspectives of white middle class women in northern and western countries (Richardson, 1993; Smart, 1996).

It is equally crucial to stress that feminism is constituted of multiple voices. There are many differences in feminism (Jaggar, 1983; Nicolson, 1993), which denote the existence of multiple and diverse feminist points of view. American early feminists were divided on the role of the family in the context of women's oppression. The general feeling was that women were subordinated and domesticated within the family, yet in African-American settings, the family was valued as a significant unifying force within the broad landscape of exploitation and slavery. The family was perceived differently within different social and cultural contexts. Issues of race and culture have to be considered in any explorations of the family. Some feminists completely condemned the family, denouncing it as being the source of women's oppression, rejecting the notion of equality in difference (Nicolson, 1993). These differences in feminist viewpoints have been recently categorised under second and third wave feminisms, in line with their political and theoretical standpoints. What these debates demonstrate are feminists' attitudes towards patriarchal institutions within which motherhood transpired.

In addition, there have been different debates and diverse views from different feminist theories. In the sphere of cultural feminism, motherhood is celebrated by women as an institution of love and compassion. Yet on the other hand, liberal feminists have advocated for a situation that perceives men and women as equal. For example, rationalist feminists

believe that women are more similar to than different from men, advocating for a sphere where differences between men and women should be completely minimised or ignored. Women and men are expected to have equal opportunities in all spheres of life, as motherhood is considered as one of the many roles men and women play in societies (Kruger, 2006).

In feminist frameworks, the debates have shifted from concerns around mothering conditions, women's experiences of motherhood, and the concerns about the mother-child dyad, to women's subjective experiences, agency and sexualities. This shift also implies that more attention is given to 'mother as subject'. Work around this shift has been shaped profoundly by powerful ideologies that have been transformed over a period (Kruger, 2006). Kruger emphasises that it is within these ideological contexts that psychologists and other professionals work with mothers. An exploration of some of these ideological constructs will trace how the debates on motherhood have been shaped over decades in various contexts. The most profound and broadly documented ideological frameworks that shape motherhood are those in the western context and particularly in the American situation.

The following section reviews the broad strands in this theoretical framework, honing in on some of the key arguments. This review highlights the complexity of feminist thinking on motherhood and contestations within feminist thinking internationally.

### **A brief history of motherhood and feminism**

Snitow (1992) gives an American timeline on early works on motherhood and feminism, highlighting landmark works between the 60s and the 90s that have characterised theorising on motherhood by feminist thinkers over time. While I use this timeline as the basis of this history, I will also bring in other relevant works that featured during the same time elsewhere. The initial work was from liberal feminists like Betty Friedan (1963), who focused on women's lived experiences of motherhood. Writing within a British context, Gavron (1966) contributed towards this debate. The main thread of contention was the assumption that the conditions in which women mothered broadly rendered motherhood 'oppressive' and 'unacceptable' (Richardson, 1993, p.124) in numerous historical contexts. What these early studies found, and what feminists then highlighted, was profound frustration, compounded by the lack of fulfilment among most mothers.

The 70s were characterised by the works of Firestone (1971), identified as a radical feminist, which denounced motherhood, calling on women to relinquish the institution altogether. Firestone argued that the very fact that women and not men mothered was the basis of oppression, and the only way to free women from oppression was to remove them from the process of pregnancy and birth. She advocated for artificial reproduction, which also started a sequence of debates among feminists, as they explored how reproductive science and technology continued to subordinate and oppress women (Nicolson, 1993). Snitow (1992) argues that Firestone's work opened up debates on feminism and motherhood. This work was followed by the work of Juliet Mitchell (1971), Rich (1976), Dinnerstein (1977), Kristeva (1977), and Chodorow (1978) among others. Snitow emphasises that these debates concentrated on the experiences of mothering and the institution of motherhood. The 80s were characterised by the work of Ruddick (1980) which ushered in debates on maternal thinking and the practice of mothering. What these debates covered were issues of essentialism and constructionism around motherhood. These early works highlighted different views on motherhood and these were premised on feminists' different standpoints. The following section highlights these views from the early feminists.

Second wave feminism took an interest in women's reproduction, personal relationships and personal identity (Rogers & Rogers, 2001). It focused on the distinction between sex and gender, as a way of challenging beliefs that considered women inferior to men. These authors' main concern was separating the biological body 'sex' from the cultural/socially constructed body 'gender' (Chadwick, 2006, p. 239). Because women's oppression has been central to feminism, feminists attempted to explain the cause of oppression from their different standpoints. Radical feminists believed that because men controlled reproduction, the institution of motherhood was therefore regulated by patriarchy and this subordinated women. Ferguson (1986) places these feminists in a continuum beginning with De Beauvoir (1952), Firestone (1971), O'Brien (1981), Rich (1980), Ruddick (1980) and Hartsock (1983). According to Stacey (1993), these debates were enhanced by those of French feminists like Luce Irigaray (1985), Helen Cixous (1981) and Julia Kristeva (1977).

Whilst radical feminists viewed motherhood as controlled by patriarchal regulation of women's bodies, Marxist and socialist feminists focused on the relationship between

patriarchy and capitalism in understanding motherhood as the root of women's oppression (Stacey, 1993). They ignored the reproductive differences between sexes, choosing to assert social reproduction instead of biological reproduction. Delphy, cited in Stacey (1993) argues that there were two modes of production, the industrial and family. Within these modes, men were believed to benefit from the unpaid childcare and domestic service offered by women, thus exploiting women for both reproductive and productive labour. In this way, women were seen as servicing men, and at the same time reproducing the workforce through motherhood. Capitalism benefited from reducing women to an essential function, and new reproductive technologies were viewed as assisting in turning more women to motherhood (Amos & Parmar, 2005; Gimenez, 1991; Rogers & Rogers, 2001; Stacey, 1993; Weinbaum, 1994). Key Marxist feminists included Juliet Mitchell, Christine Delphy, Maria Rosa Dalla Costa and Carla Lonzi (Stacey 1993). The main concern of this review is to foreground those studies that focus on how women experienced motherhood, since this is the key question of this study. Thus, this brief review of feminism and motherhood will further flesh out key works that have a bearing on the thesis.

Of considerable significance in these early studies was the feminist focus on the role of motherhood as limiting and constraining women's efforts towards equality. Theorising from a context that challenges various representations of the female body, radical feminists argued that the female body was the real source of women's oppression. This body of work challenged motherhood as restrictive in that it inhibited women from competing publicly with men, as they were obligated to domesticity and childcare in the confines of their private realms. The underlying assumption in this debate was that the capacity of a woman's body to reproduce was defined and controlled by men and therefore presented as the very core of women's oppression.

Oakley's (1979) founding work on motherhood was based on in-depth interviews with 66 middle class first time mothers in West London. The focus of the study was to illustrate 'experiences of coming to motherhood,' (Reid, 1983, p. 2). Key underlying issues in this study included the notion that the way birth was managed affected the material experiences of motherhood. The study underlined that pregnancy and birth were medical events but could only be understood through the social conventions framing them and that the practise of motherhood could only be understood as a cultural reality (Reid, 1983). Because of the centrality of patriarchy in framing practices of motherhood, the study found that

motherhood was deemed unfavourable and depressing for many women. Such negative experiences were understood as primarily due to losses women felt they sustained in the process of becoming mothers. Some of the losses included issues of 'identity, employment, and more personal and individual concerns' (Richardson, 1993, p. 6).

The early documenting of motherhood experiences was enhanced by the writings of Mary Boulton (1983) whose focus was on the relationships of mothers and their children. At the same time there was a body of literature (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991; Ribbens, 1994; Riley, 1983; Walkerdine, 1984) that problematised the synonymousness accorded to the issue of motherhood and childcare. Mothers and children were portrayed within a dyad, with children taking fundamental focus within the context of mothering. The subjective roles of mothers were blurred, as mothering was associated with taking care of and bringing up socially acceptable children. Also contentious in the social organisation of childcare has been the idea of mother as sole caregiver. Although caregiving is culturally specific, feminists foregrounded how across cultures, biological mothers generally carry the bulk of childcare.

Psychology as a discipline and authority on gender, sexuality and human development, has been challenged by feminists for reinforcing such gendered constructions of motherhood and childcare. Some of these include the reinforcement and legitimation of deterministic notions such as the assumption that mothers' childcare skills emerge instinctively. Mothers are also expected to bond with their children, as mother love is considered natural. Despite a long history of feminist critique of this discourse, large numbers of manuals produced by psychologists continue to inundate the popular realm. These instruct and prescribe the best ways of bonding with and ensuring fulfilling relationships with the baby (Marshall, 1991; Phoenix & Woollett, 1991). This body of literature further intersects with that which challenges motherhood as identity from the point of biological imperatives (Rogers & White, 1998).

These early studies directly speak to the focus of this study, in that they introduce the debates on motherhood experiences, a key question explored in the study. They also usher in debates that have defined and shaped knowledge production on the institution of motherhood over the centuries in various feminist forums. The following section explores some of these debates in detail, looking at what the contesting views were at a particular

time and how these views contributed to shaping theorising on motherhood, and what impact they exert on contemporary theoretical work in this area.

### **MOTHERHOOD IDEOLOGIES: CONCEPTUALISING MOTHERHOOD**

Rothman (1989) defines an ideology as a way a group views the world. How people see the world themselves and experience their bodies and lives, as members of a particular group, is determined by ideologies that are present in their social world. As has emerged above, these may shift and change across time and context. In this way, ideology has the potential to place people outside their experiences, possibly leaving them with contradictions between what they experience and what the group thinks. Ideologies are inextricably bound to power, since the dominant ideology symbolises the values and beliefs of the dominant group in any particular society, and this group endeavours to validate their dominance by making the existing order seem inevitable (Glenn, 1994). Understanding motherhood from an ideological perspective means recognising that what are believed to be biologically determined motherhood practices are internalised and normalised in such a way that women identify with these socially constructed notions of motherhood, which control and regulate the mothering process.

### **Medicalising and technologising discourses on motherhood**

Rothman (1994) highlights how certain ideologies have shaped motherhood in 20<sup>th</sup> century North America, which arguably has been globalised as a dominant ideology, given the power of North American discourses internationally. She asserts that the most dominant ideology, patriarchy, has been buttressed by technology and capitalism. Rothman affirms that patriarchy not only controlled mothers but it also emphasised the significance of the 'seed' - 'the part of men that grows into the children of their likeness within the bodies of women' (Rothman, 1994, p. 141). The system emphasised genetic ties in issues of paternity. In a similar vein, Oakley, cited in Glenn (1994), projects the motherhood myth as the belief that all women want to be mothers, that all mothers need their children, and that all children need their mothers. Oakley and Rothman ground their perceptions in patriarchy, with Oakley emphasising that the social and cultural training which women are exposed to in these ideological contexts propels them into internalising these myths. The ideology of the self-sacrificing and all giving mother (Kruger, 2006), and the intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996), both find their anchor in the belief that mothers and their children need each other, as the mother in this ideology is completely devoted to the well-

being of the child. For Rothman and Oakley motherhood in such ideological constructs is perceived to be 'natural' thus 'locking mothers into biological reproduction' (Glenn, 1994, p. 9). Glenn further asserts that this perception of motherhood as natural feeds on the psychoanalytic myth that considered that all normal women desired a child, blaming all those who did not as rebuffing femininity.

Rothman further outlines the capitalist ideology as conscious of the autonomy women possess with respect to their bodies, but this does not prevent a close monitoring of pregnant women at multiple levels, which also points to the collusion of medicine with patriarchy. Whilst the ideology of technology emphasises the duality of the mind and the body, the medical ideology ironically views the woman's body as 'the container of the children' (Rothman, 1994, p. 145). This ideology views motherhood as work and children as products of that labour. On the other hand, Kruger (2006) describes how the medical discourse on mothering objectifies the pregnant woman as a patient, completely separating the female body from the entire birthing experience. She postulates that the entire process of pregnancy and labour is monitored and regulated to ensure that babies are delivered in stability.

Psychological and medical discourses and professions have equally been attacked for putting women and their children under constant surveillance. Women have been subjected to monitoring and intervention from pregnancy to delivery through the services of psychologists and the medical personnel (Barber & Allen, 1992; Jacobus, Fox-Keller & Shuttleworth, 1990; Kent, 2000; Kruger, 2006; Turner, 1995). Maternal labour and childcare are broken down into phases and stages, and women are expected to comply with the universally idealised stages all women go through. Any differences are considered deviant and pathologised. The main concern is that unregulated childbearing may be unmanageable, and every responsible woman needs to yield her body to medical personnel (Chadwick, 2006; Earle & Letherby, 2007; Kruger, 2006; Lupton, 1995; Rothman, 1989). The general conviction is that bodies at the same phase should be in synchrony with each other, and those who fail the tests are considered 'immature, psychopathological and unfeminine' (Chadwick, 2006, p. 234).

The medicalisation of the female body has been extended to childless women as well. In cases of involuntary childlessness, women have been assisted to conceive through in vitro



fertilisation. Rothman (1989) would view this as a way of covering up for men's infertility, but one should not overlook issues of agency in such contexts. In vitro fertilisation has equally been attacked by feminists for exposing women to pain and indignity. In a study carried out by Barbara Burton in New Wales, one woman on the IVF programme commented:

It is embarrassing. You leave your pride at the door when you walk in and pick it up when you leave. You feel like a piece of meat at the meat works. But if you want a baby badly enough you will do it  
(Scutt, 1990, p. 188).

Feminists have challenged such ideologies that medicalise motherhood, advocating for a need for women to take control of their bodies. Furthermore, whilst the medicalisation of women's bodies has negatively redefined women, it has consistently subverted the extent of women's agency (Fox & Worts, 1999). It should also be realised that women seek medical advice for these medical problems. Therefore, any analysis of the medicalisation of the woman's body should consider both the socially constituted body (Turner, 1995) and the physical body. Whatever choices women make should be understood and analysed within the framework of their experiences and the time and space in which these occur (Earle & Letherby, 2007).

### **The idealisation of motherhood**

Psychological research has attached the significance of mothers to the welfare of their babies (Leonard, 1996); at the same time, these psychological theories on normative motherhood and the issue of childcare have proliferated. Noteworthy are psychoanalytic theories, which have reinforced the popular view that motherhood is based on innate instinctual drives (the debate will be reviewed later in the chapter), and of considerable significance in this debate are attachment theories as espoused by theorists like Bowlby (see Phoenix & Woollett, 1991). The main concern in this debate has been the effects of mothering on children, with mothers and children drawn into scientific theories of maternal behaviour. More so, mothers are expected to provide favourable foundations for the development of their children, not only at infancy but also throughout all stages in their lives. In all this, the mother is indiscernible. Normative motherhood has been constructed solely around the conception of childcare (Leonard, 1996; Nicolson, 1993; Phoenix & Woollett, 1991; Ribbens, 1994) and not women's subjective experiences. This concept of

the ideal mother challenges and jeopardises motherhood and mothering altogether. On the other hand, criticism mounted against the normativity of motherhood, with some theorists denouncing the construction of the normative mother as based on experiences of white middle class mothers (Hill-Collins, 1994; 1991) and therefore not applicable to the situations of mothers across differences of class, race, culture, and so on. The main reasoning behind this criticism is that mothering and childcare contexts are not only varied but equally shaped by other factors like class and race and therefore cannot be universalised to all mothers.

In the psychoanalytic framework, the ideal mother is considered to be the all-caring mother with the interest of her child at heart. Ideal motherhood is also envisaged in the context of a marriage. The normative discourse of the good mother has been extended to depict a culture and class-bound model against which all mothers are assessed. Social constructions of motherhood around this notion at times imply that singleness and perhaps any difference from a western normative notion of mothers in the nuclear family (single mothers, lesbian mothers, teenage mothers etc.) is fraught with problems (Kruger, 2006). It is further constructed as an abnormal situation, since it is assumed that children need the normative base of two parents, which marginalises the experiences of many mothers (Marshall, 1991). Therefore, mothers who do not subscribe to this assessment are pathologised and stigmatised. Supporting this notion of motherhood is the proliferation of deviancy discourses, which derive from the normative mother ideology (Arendell, 2000). Feminists have challenged the deviancy discourses for causing distress among mothers, as they constantly evaluate their mothering skills and expectations against these set standards (Kruger, 2006).

On the other hand, contemporary feminism has shifted to acknowledge diversity in mothering due to different mothering contexts. The rhetoric on the situatedness of the researched has been instrumental in feminist research frameworks and an acknowledgement of mothers' social, cultural and historical contexts have all emerged as developments in the landscape of motherhood and mothering. These developments have also given rise to new understandings (Christian, 1985), which have significantly contributed to mounting criticism of deviancy discourses.

A new trend has therefore emerged in feminist theorising, which has influenced conceptualisations of motherhood. Grand theories are slowly being substituted with an inclination towards ‘more detailed small scale analyses which are more sensitive to differences between women rather than constructing women as monolithic ... feminist theory has also had to begin to accede to the idea of differences amongst women’ (Smart, 1996, p. 2). However, outside of feminist theorising and scholarly writings, popular books and magazines have continued to flood the market with prescriptions and guidelines on ideal ways of mothering, parenting and raising children, which suggest universalised normative notions of motherhood and mothering.

### **Motherhood as achievement of feminine identity within patriarchy**

Feminists have shown how motherhood has been seen as identity, and also conflated with feminine identity – you only become a woman when you show you can mother. In some African contexts, motherhood has been challenged for being imposed on women, not only as their sole identity above all others but as a prime function too (Christian, 1985). This debate is comparable to early feminist critique of the conditions of mothering as underscored earlier on. The main point of concern in the African context is that, despite the fact that motherhood occurs parallel to other roles, women’s identity as mothers is often considered above all others, thus creating an ‘all-encompassing’ mother. This type of mother becomes the central figure in the family, but ironically, the mother remains powerless in this powerful position (Glenn, 1994). Similarly, Campbell and Posel, cited in Walker (1995, p. 421), describe the position of some African mothers as ‘the pivot of family life’, but still emphasise that ‘women’s power in the family falls within the boundaries of male dominance’. This concern was illuminated in early radical feminist writings when Rich (1976) affirmed the power women exerted at bringing forth life in childbirth. Her major concern was that this power was controlled by patriarchy. The general assumption is that mothers are burdened with a status that obligates them to men’s subordination, as they remain powerful, but captive in their traditional roles. What these arguments highlight is the contention between the idealisation of motherhood and the centrality of motherhood in patriarchy. This contentious nature of motherhood is further discerned in those discourses that celebrate motherhood.

Whilst motherhood is challenged as a form of women’s identity for its reductive propensity, in some contexts the fact that it is considered a woman’s prime identity is

celebrated. Radical feminists like Adrienne Rich found something positive in women's productive capability. Rich, (1976, p.13) argued that the power of women was in their capacity to reproduce, yet patriarchy controlled women's reproduction both socially and ideologically. More so, motherhood has been glorified as a source of and symbol of women's power (Christian, 1985). In this debate, the capacity of the womb is regarded as the source of power that brings about rewarding and fulfilling experiences. Being a mother is argued to be a rewarding experience for many women (Boulton, 1983; Nicolson, 1993; Rich, 1976; Richardson, 1993). On the other hand, feminists have challenged this perception, arguing that although the power of the womb might be a source of some agency, the womb is also rendered a source of powerlessness as motherhood is socially compulsory (Hanmer, 1993). Hanmer argues that socially women have been largely pressured to have children. Women have to be prepared to endure 'emotional and physical pain, distress and effort to achieve successful pregnancy'. Even if women have been open to a diversity of life options in contemporary times, motherhood is hardly a choice, as it remains largely 'circumscribed' (p. 232). More so the power of authority and control that mothers have over their children is turned against them as they continue to mother in patriarchally defined spheres. Women are expected to realise that all this power and contentment in motherhood is entrenched in patriarchy.

Theorising from an Afrocentric perspective, Hill-Collins (1994) argues that motherhood can be used by black women as a symbol of powerful coalitions among oppressed women. This was characteristic of motherhood in African-American societies during slavery, when motherhood became a battleground for struggles against racism and sexism (Christian, 1994). During slavery, African women were valued for their capacity to bear and nurture children. During separation times, the mother ensured that both the physical and spiritual survival of the children was her sole responsibility, a process that positioned her at the core of her children's lives (Christian, 1985; Hill-Collins, 1994). Even when these societies were exposed to gender ideologies and practices of the slave owners, it remained impossible for them to adopt these ideologies because of the nature of their exploitation. As a result, the distinguished fields of providing for the family- a male domain, and nurturing children – a female domain, did not suffice. Instead, women had to draw from black women's culture and tradition, and infuse these elements and themes with the new meaning of their roles. As a result collective motherhood and social activism afforded these women power and active agency as community and social mothers and not individual

mothers. Numerous childcare contexts emerged as women's efforts to balance motherhood and slavery (Hill-Collins, 2000; 1994).

Another example of this could be the notion of 'motherism' in South African women's organisation during apartheid. Black women organised on the basis of motherhood, to fight against oppression, alongside their male counterparts. In this process, they occupied prestigious roles, which gave them approbation as mothers of the nation (discussed in more detail later in the chapter). At the same time Afrikaner women mobilised for the cause of Afrikaner nationalism ('volksmoeder' - mother of the nation), creating an ethnic consciousness that blurred the actual class divisions dominant at the time (Walker, 1990). This view also emphasises motherhood as a terrain within which women experience power and active agency as a unified body and not in their individual capacities (Gordon, 1990). In a later article, Walker (1995) shows the complexity of social identity as opposed to individual identity, arguing that such an exploration of motherhood projects mothers as agents operating within a distinct social group, mothers. However, whilst this concept of the social and individual mother valorises the social mother, it simultaneously obscures the experiences of the individual mother, as she remains absorbed in group visions.

Nonetheless, this further demonstrates the perception that motherhood has been celebrated at both micro and macro levels. At an individual level it is assumed to 'open up the joy of intimate contact with a growing infant and strengthen the sense of importance that nurturing holds' for most women (Hoffnung, 1998, p. 164); yet at the social level, the primacy of motherhood is one value that societies appear to share, whatever their differences (Christian, 1994). Christian goes on to assert that in African societies the significance of mothers is a universal value attributed to shared spiritual beliefs. Furthermore, the mother is regarded as a spiritual anchor who is acclaimed for the perpetuation of the human race. However, the same societies have been criticised for ostracising and denigrating involuntarily childless women for their failure to measure up to ideal motherhood. The fact that motherhood is denigrated and lauded conveys the paradox around how societies perceive mothers. This paradoxical nature of motherhood is attributed to the reality that motherhood is centralised within patriarchy. 'The role of 'mother' has not evolved in a 'natural' way, outside culture and free from ideology. It has been socially constructed within patriarchy through a complex set of power relations,

which ensure that women become mothers and practise motherhood, in narrowly defined ways' (Nicolson, 1993, p. 204).

A number of feminists have challenged the celebration of motherhood, blaming the whole notion for having its roots in patriarchy. The assumption is that a motherhood mandate is serviced by a belief surrounding notions of maternal instinct – women's desire to have and nurture babies (Nicolson, 1993). Sara Ruddick (1997) argues that maternal practice shaped and expressed maternal thinking. For Ruddick, the actual experience of mothering grew out of practising motherhood. Maternal practice in mothers, she argues, is governed by the interest to 'preserve' the life of the child, 'foster' their growth and 'nurture' them into acknowledged children (Ruddick, 1997, p. 589). Ruddick affirms that as soon as conception is confirmed, women take it upon themselves to ensure that the infant is preserved. Once born, the mother and those around her expect child responsibility to be hers primarily. For Ruddick, maternal thinking can symbolise resilience and strength to deal with motherhood in the midst of all the challenges of the mothering context. Furthermore, maternal practice is assumed to develop skills and encourage intimate relationships through interacting with children, and mothers are tasked to create these meaningful connections with their children (Arendell, 2000; Oberman & Josselson, 1996). Feminist theory has however successfully challenged and problematised deterministic notions of motherhood. Such debates that aim at projecting motherhood as natural and essential have been criticised for overlooking women's subjectivity as mothers. Kaplan (1994, p. 134) underscores this conception when she asserts that 'the mother's own body, along with it her subjectivity are sidelined to make the foetus central ... foetal interpellation displaces the mother from the centre.' On the issue of the centrality of patriarchy in motherhood, Kaplan further questions how mothers are able to discern reality, that is, what mothers really want, from what patriarchy prescribes for them. She argues for the notion of collusion with patriarchy, thus depicting the complexity of the relationship between mothers' experiences and the institution of motherhood as socially constructed within patriarchy.

Similar to the essentialist notion of the maternal instinct above, but applying the psychoanalytic theory to the comprehension of the reproduction of mothering, Nancy Chodorow (1978) draws on the dynamics of the mother-daughter and mother-son relationship to explain what she terms the cyclical reproduction of mothering. Chodorow

argues that women mother because their identification with their mothers predisposes them to mother. Subsequently, their daughters, through associations with their mothers, were prepared for mothering in a way that was different from the way that mothers associated with their sons. Through this association, Chodorow argues that girls are socialised to desire motherhood and subsequent childcare. Mothering practices then result in gender differences in identity and personality for adults. Consequently, the social structure produces gender identities that recreate this structure (Chodorow, 1978).

Both Ruddick and Chodorow have been extensively challenged regarding their theories, which are assumed to centre on a constricted social and class base of experiences, presumably their own (Glenn, 1994; Kaplan, 1992). Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1990) consider that Chodorow's critics overlook the fact that Chodorow located the psychodynamics of personality within a western industrial capitalism (Kruger, 2006). Beyond this criticism, such theories remain important in posing a challenge to the institution of motherhood. Feminists keep on revisiting and reformulating psychoanalytic theories, and this has ensured an illumination of the implications and intricacy of mothering (Arendell, 2000; Barnard & Martell, 1995).

Some of Chodorow's critics have argued that men do not want to be involved in issues of childcare because of the privileged power bases within which they operate, reducing the socialisation debate to the power of patriarchy within motherhood, as is the case with various other debates on motherhood. Whilst these debates have contributed significantly to earlier debates in mapping out motherhood and mothering, contemporary contentions on motherhood and mothering still strive on as women largely find themselves mothering under patriarchal dominated spaces.

### **Motherhood as gendered: motherhood = femininity**

Of significance in the debates on motherhood is theoretical work on gender in feminist theorising. Feminist constructionists view motherhood as 'dynamic social interactions and relationships located in a societal context, organised by gender and in accord with prevailing gender beliefs system' (Arendell, 2000, p. 1193). From a social constructionist perspective, gender is the pervasive division of people into unequal categories that tend to create the inequalities produced in these categories (Lorber, 2000). Everyday life is structured by gender, including all the roles and duties undertaken. Structurally gender is

the division of people into binaries that call for different types of roles and behaviour. Whilst the principle remains the same, the content and thrust changes as other major aspects of the social order change (Bohan, 1997; Lorber, 2000; Shefer, 1999). Because motherhood transpires in these contexts, modification in the societal structure directly influences mothering experiences. Motherhood meanings and definitions equally shift with these changes in the structural contexts in which women mother.

Feminists have attempted to deconstruct motherhood as women's sole identity, arguing that there are numerous other roles at play in women's lives at the time they mother. Walker (1995) argues that some of these roles might not have anything to do with mothering, but tend to exist alongside the identity of mother, and still define the woman at that particular time. Motherhood as an identity therefore involves contrasting levels of operation that may not always be in harmony with each other. A new psychology of women as advocated by contemporary feminists would emphasise that this incongruity in the motherhood role, in relationship to other roles, occurring at the same time with mothering, is what shapes the mother's identity and not 'separation and differentiation' (Kruger, 2006, p. 192). Separation and differentiation find strength in the social organisation of societies where gender becomes the organising factor, and feminists would argue that such situations encourage gendered identities that are linked to socially constructed femininities. Therefore, further calls have been made for feminists to shift the focus from the individual only perspective to the individual within a particular context (Bohan, 1997). Therefore, the mother's identity in this instance is either enhanced or contained by the other multiple roles that occur at the same time within the context in which it occurs (Walker, 1995).

Critics of motherhood as identity discourse therefore argue that developmental psychology, in particular, overlooks the experiences of women (see McMahon, 1995; Oberman & Josselson, 1996; Rogers & White, 1998; Ross, 1995; Ross & Van Willigen, 1996) and their identity as individuals and other social identities that women who mother may have. They dispute the continuous focus on certain concepts of motherhood, that is, the mother child dyad, biology as deterministic of women's role (Kruger, 2006; Nicolson, 1993; Phoenix & Woollett, 1991), and motherhood as a social identity (Christian, 1994; Walker, 1995). Exploring mothers' experiences ushers in the exploration of their social and cultural contexts, and any investigation into these experiences would warrant examining the



intersection between the personal and cultural mothers, i.e. the subjective and the social mother - as highlighted earlier on. Whilst the self is personal and individualised, the mother is actually positioned in a social context, and the mothers' realisation of this grounding (Walker, 1995) encourages them to understand their experiences broadly. Allowing women to voice their subjective experiences draws attention to the subjective dimension of motherhood (Walker, 1995).

Rationalist feminists continue to defy the perceptions that seem to link motherhood with any other role, calling for 'an independent, autonomous, separated, differentiated, individual' (Kruger, 2006, p. 190). Kruger goes on to highlight that rationalist feminists have been critiqued for calling on and expecting mothers to exert themselves excessively against limiting social circumstances. These additional expectations result in overburdening and stressing women who are mothers, in that they are expected to transcend boundaries that may be beyond their reach, especially when other factors such as illness and poverty undermine their ability to fulfil ideal motherhood (see also Long, 2009).

It is significant to highlight that early 19<sup>th</sup> century feminists entertained the notion that there were fundamental differences between the male and female, and their focus was more on equality in difference. Whilst their main concern was the fight against women's domesticity, the main source of contention was the notion that women were best suited to domestic work and childcare as compared to men (Nicolson, 1993). This perception of motherhood associates it with notions of femininity. In this view, mothering and gender are inextricably intertwined, and because of this attachment, popular understandings assume motherhood as a natural role for women. Because it is so interwoven with notions of femininity, motherhood is deemed, 'natural, universal and unchanging' (Glenn, 1994, p. 3).

The attachment of women to femininity and motherhood further poses a challenge to the identity of motherhood, as it projects motherhood as gendered. Women are equally perceived to be complicit in reproducing gendered scripts, in that they 'do gender correctly', thus legitimising the regulatory quality of motherhood (Bohan, 1997, p. 39). Because the situational parameters within which women mother are gendered, and because mothering occurs within these gendered frameworks, the gendered experiences of mothers are sustained, as they remain circular. It is of concern to the goal of gender equality then

that women continue to perform gender in ways that conform to the gendered contexts of mothering (Bohan, 1997).

### **PARADOXES IN MOTHERHOOD**

There are multiple and contesting elements within contemporary ideological constructions of motherhood (Glenn, 1994). The dichotomised social constructions of motherhood reveal that mothers are viewed as central to the lives of their children, but at the same time, they are blamed for being excessively involved, and any problems that their children experience are inevitably viewed as a failing on the part of the mother. They are depicted both as ‘all powerful,’ and in control of their children, and ‘all powerless’ as they are ‘subordinated to the dictates of nature’ (Glenn, 1994, p. 11). Yet Nicolson (1993) attributes the construction and regulation of these contradicting images of motherhood to patriarchy and the increasing extension and technologies of scientific knowledge. The role of mother is socially constructed within patriarchy through power-regulated structures that ensure that motherhood is practised in specific ways.

Medical and psychological sciences have equally contributed to the concerns of motherhood by prescribing normative standards of mothering against which all mothers are judged. The normative standards not only inform or signify but also reinforce the needs of the dominant ideology. In this case, women are made to feel like failures if they have not lived up to the normative standard (Nicolson, 1993; Phoenix & Woollett, 1991; Silva, 1996; Smart, 1996). At the same time, these normative constructions have also been criticised for sending ambiguous and contradictory messages to mothers (Magwaza, 2003).

While contemporary ideology determines the ideal circumstances in which women will have to bring up children, the family has long been romanticised as a private institution. The irony is that the family and other institutions inhabited by children are open to constant state surveillance (Glenn, 1994; Phoenix & Woollett, 1991; Ribbens, 1994; Smart, 1996). Constant surveillance means that mothers are invariably exposed to attacks and blaming discourses from institutions operating in the terrains of health, mental health, education and others.

Empirical research has equally shown that ‘mother blaming’ has been an issue of concern in feminist circles. Jackson and Mannix’s (2004) study on ‘mother blaming’ in Australia found that mothers were blamed for various incidents which included ‘problematic’

children, children with allergic reactions, and even in cases apparently out of their control, when their children were victims of sexual abuse or rape. Contemporary media also plays its role in the proliferation of blaming discourses related to mothers. For example, an American talk show (McGraw, 2009) flighted a programme on ‘angry moms’ on a local television channel (15/11/2009), in which mothers blamed themselves for failing to deal with their anger, which the programme and the mothers suggested was impacting negatively on their children. ‘Mother blaming’ has been criticised by a number of scholars as representing the broader social tendency to see women as totally responsible for their children, as well as to set up inappropriate expectations regarding the impact that mothers may be able to have on their children’s well-being (see Caplan, 1990; Chesler, 1990; Jackson & Mannix, 2004; Knowles, 1990; Siegel, 1990).

Numerous gains have been achieved in the struggles of feminist scholars to liberate the institution of motherhood from patriarchal and hegemonic reproductive ideology, yet such ideologies are still dominant in many social contexts today. Most of the perceptions and arguments that dominated the motherhood terrain in early feminist writings are still evident in contemporary research and knowledge production. The argument that patriarchal relations of power continue to regulate motherhood through normative discourse and ideologies broadly resonates in contemporary research and theory on motherhood and evidence for such claims are found in popular discourse as well. In South Africa, for example, young motherhood continues to be largely viewed as deviant, while ideal motherhood is envisaged to occur within an idealised nuclear family, even though such a family is not by any means the norm in South Africa (see for example, Bozalek, 2004).

Motherhood is still shaped by multifaceted ideologies that hinge around the binarism of gender and in which women are conflated with motherhood. As a result, the entire terrain of motherhood is gendered. Power relations within family contexts dictate that women carry the burden of childrearing, a notion that still renders motherhood oppressive and restraining in numerous contexts. The mothering terrain is rife with perceptions that lock women into socially constructed feminine roles, that are characterised by an assumption that sees women in possession of an inherent desire and capacity to mother; and childcare continues to be assigned almost exclusively to women and biological mothers, because they are in the main associated with care work and nurturing (Glenn, 1994). Patriarchy still

presents as the bedrock of the sex/gender difference debate that permeates multiple other debates in feminism (see Gordon, 1999; 1990; Lorber, 2000; 1994).

While these persistent hegemonic ideological conceptions continue to characterise the dominant discourse on mothering in South Africa today, I do not mean to imply that such ideologies remain static. Rather, ideological shifts have also been highlighted in feminist research, and importantly there has been a widespread acknowledgement of the diversity of women's experiences (Kruger, 2006). Moreover, within contemporary feminist theorising on motherhood there is concern that our work should facilitate women's agency, for example to assist mothers to trace and recount their experiences to each other, rather than to set up a new set of normative expectations. Feminist paradigms, it is suggested, can also serve to alienate 'ordinary' women from their experiences, setting up new judgements, instead of facilitating the extension of understanding and acknowledgement of the multiple possibilities for women (Kruger, 2006). Understanding how women themselves define and experience motherhood is crucial to contemporary feminist theorising, and should not be neglected in the attempts to challenge the oppressive framework of motherhood historically. The following section explores the thinking about motherhood in South Africa, broadly tracing historical work and mapping out key theoretical work that speaks to a critical understanding of motherhood in contemporary South Africa.

### **MOTHERHOOD IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Research on motherhood in South Africa has tended to focus on 'deviant' populations and 'deviant' mothers, and in this respect has fallen into the global framework of regulatory discourses on motherhood. These populations include those that are pathologised or problematised, like teenage mothers, mothers suffering from depression, mothers in prison, etc. (Dickerson, 1995; Kruger, 2006). Kruger emphasises that this research is profoundly shaped by what she terms instrumentalist mothering discourses, which strongly underline the concept of the 'good mother', key to dominant discourses on motherhood internationally, as outlined above. This discourse does not only objectify the good mother, but it is also intersected by concerns of womanhood, gender identity and issues of childcare (Walker, 1995). The practice of motherhood is consequently informed and ordered by this very discourse. Walker further applies an intersectional lens that takes into account differences of race and class. She asserts that the dominant discourse for white and middle class women is that which still views the good mother as the mother who

physically and emotionally cares for her children. On the other hand, for black and working class mother she argues how this discourse emphasises rather the mother's day to day 'care of their children as much as their responsibilities for financial support and discipline' (p. 425).

Also evident in South Africa is a body of literature that explores motherhood in pre-colonial times, projecting an early model of South African motherhood centred around political organisation (see Brink, 1990; Gisela, 2004; Hansoon, 1992; Hassim, 1991; Lewis, 1992; Walker, 1995; 1991; 1990). Walker emphasises that theoretical debates on motherhood in South Africa have been articulated more within political frameworks than in the daily experiences of mothers.

South African women's history shows how black women organised on the basis of motherhood to fight against oppression alongside their men counterparts, a movement later termed motherism (Fester, 1997; Walker, 1995; Wells, 1991). As an ideological function, motherism organised women on the basis of motherhood, with motherhood constructed as an heroic and core identity for women in their political struggle – women as mothers of children but more importantly as 'mothers of the nation'. Fester (1997) and others, for example, Hendricks and Lewis (1994) have seen motherism as a form of South African feminism. However others such as Wells (1991, p. 4-5) have argued against the inclusion of motherism under the broader rubric of feminism:

Motherism is clearly not feminism. Women swept up in motherist movements are not fighting for their own rights as women but for their rights as mothers ... motherist movements must be limited in scope, duration and success in achieving their goals.

There have been further criticisms around motherism as a form of South African feminism, in that whilst women organised and mobilised around political issues, the organisation generally remained disempowering, in that women broadly remained subordinated to men, and solely in charge of their families within the broad nationalist project (Hassim, 1991). However, the agency on the part of women as mothers demonstrated in this nature and magnitude features as an indisputable landmark in the history of women and motherhood in South Africa. Women who were on the lowest rung of employment as domestic servants in

the corporate world found themselves as chairpersons and presidents within these organisations (Fester, 1997), facilitating empowerment and agency for many women. Moreover, there is no doubt that women in South African have made huge contributions as leaders in the struggle and in transformation since 1994, and that their role as leaders has also facilitated the inclusion of gender equality as a primary goal in South African reconstruction and transformation. Moreover, it should be emphasised that there is no single feminism. Feminist perspectives are divergent and at times contradictory and it is perhaps around issues of motherhood that South African feminism continues to be fraught with divides and contestations. Nonetheless, the history of women's role in the struggle for national democracy, and the centering of their role as mothers in framing this struggle, has served political ends, but may also have served to entrench and reinforce certain normative discourses on the role of mothers (and fathers) that remain operative in contemporary South Africa, and are not always in the interests of women themselves.

It has not only been amongst black women and within the broader anti-apartheid struggle where the idealisation of motherhood has been so dominant, but has also been evident in the historical construction of motherhood amongst other groupings in South Africa, notably Afrikaner women, who also historically have had to draw on such discourses in struggles for their survival and freedom. Women's ascribed roles conferred on them identities and social prestige, as evidenced by the ideology of the Afrikaner 'volksmoeder' – mother of the nation, as an acclamation to the successful homemaker (Walker, 1995). And more recently Elaine Salo (2007) has highlighted the power of 'moeders' (mothers) in gang-torn areas like Mannenberg, where older women are ascribed with significant moral leadership and control over young men, usually in the protection of young women.

Mothering experiences of South African women are quite different and largely shaped by the socio-cultural and political histories of the national context. Similar to mothering in the American context in the 90s, South African mothering has persistently been understood as intersected with other social identities and lines of divide including race, class and gender (Arendell, 2000; Hill-Collins, 1994; Kruger, 2003; Magwaza, 2003). Notions of universalism in motherhood can therefore be viewed as problematic, since motherhood denoted different meanings and meant different experiences across the differences of race and class. For black, working class mothers, motherhood meant mobilised militancy, yet in the Afrikaner nationalist discourse, motherhood was considered home-centred and

fundamentally passive. Overall, the way motherhood was practised in these different contexts across different historical and political contexts created both the personal and social meanings attached to the mothering practice. Importantly, shifts in the social, economic and political contexts in which women mothered justified the change in their mothering practices. With the changes in the political landscape bringing about the fall of motherism, South African motherhood needed a new understanding and definition.

In 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa motherhood is still significantly shaped by the effects of apartheid, and any analysis of mothering practices should consider how race and social and economic situations underlie mothering contexts, impacting both on ideological and experiential contexts. Social and cultural expectations of mothers may indicate some commonalities across racial divides, but stark differences remain. There is however, a general assumption that promotes an elevation of men as a homogenous group, and it is through this assumed understanding that mothering and motherhood are considered feminine. More so, mothers are expected to find fulfilment in their mothering practices across the differences of race, class and other social disparities and difference (Magwaza, 2003).

Magwaza compared perceptions of motherhood among black and white mothers in Durban, and found that whilst social and cultural expectations were common issues, stark differences were evident, particularly in the constitution of families or households in which mothering occurred. Whilst most white families took the western nuclear family of mother, father and two to three children as the normative expectation in the realm of mothering, black women were expected to mother not only their children but all those from their extended families as well. In such contexts, mothering is constructed as a communal practice (Magwaza, 2003). This practice is characteristic of mothering in various African and African-American contexts, as indicated by Hill-Collins (2000), Christian (1994), and Stack and Burton (1994). Furthermore, Magwaza's (2003) study shows that mothering in the South African context is largely gendered, with mothers bearing most of the weight of childcare. However, African mothers do appear to have more support with childcare. The support is predominantly from other women within the extended family, which is not the case with their white counterparts.

Conspicuous in the historical South African context, and still apparently of salience in contemporary South Africa, is the value placed on fertility among black women (Mkhwanazi, 2010; Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1992; Walker, 1995). Both women and men appear to consider fertility valuable as a marker of women's successful achievement of womanhood. As a result, the stigma of single motherhood has continued to decline, causing a number of women to opt for single motherhood outside of marriage. Walker (1995) alleges that such a situation disqualifies the equation of motherhood with a submission to patriarchy.

It is within this historical and current context of political and social imperatives related to femininity and mothering that I address the meanings that a group of young mothers attach to their experiences of motherhood. The significance of some of the ideological and historical contexts outlined here emerges in the findings of this study.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted key debates that have been integral to feminist and other social responses to the institution of motherhood in South Africa and internationally. Early feminist concerns were primarily centred on the oppressive and unfavourable conditions under which women mothered. Because of the shifts in ideology and transformations at various social and ideological levels, debates on motherhood have equally shifted, and different concerns have come to the fore. The ideological construction of motherhood as central to (all) women's identity has continued to raise challenges to the meanings of motherhood in different contexts and societies. Some societies have celebrated motherhood for affording women power and active agency in both their private and public spheres, yet dominant discourses and practices around motherhood have also been criticised for locking women into biological determinist and essentialised roles. Patriarchal ideology is evident in the framing of normative expectations for women to assume pivotal roles as the nurturers in their societies, and such roles are regulated and controlled in ways that continue to undermine women's power and benefit men. However, in many social contexts, such as the historical mass democratic struggle and the growth of motherism in South Africa, women have used the idealising discourses on motherhood to take political power and make contributions that go far beyond the assumed domestic realm of motherhood.



In South Africa, ideological constructions and theoretical work on motherhood remains a contested terrain, in which mothers are imbued with much power and yet are set up for failure, given the mass of expectations of what they can achieve in their own homes and the broader social context. Thus, in the realm of HIV/AIDS, for example, it has been shown how women are seen as both responsible for the epidemic and viewed as the ones who must ensure that the epidemic is halted and the impact is mitigated (see for example, Shefer, 2007). The multiplicity of mothering contexts, including the intersections of race and class, cultural imperatives of fertility, and many other material and dialogical contexts, need to inform any investigation into motherhood. One of the key areas to have emerged as missing in the literature is work that focuses on the subjective meanings of mothers themselves. As Kruger and others have argued, mothers' and women's voices are seldom represented in the literature. It is in this respect that this work hopes to contribute to the larger terrain of knowledge production on motherhood, and in particular on teenage mothering, by foregrounding the subjective experiences and meaning making of a group of young mothers.

The following chapter reviews literature on adolescent motherhood. I explore in particular studies that reflect the highlighted ideological constructions, flagging major discourses that shape young motherhood within South Africa, with the prospect of creating a framework within which to understand the young mothers' constructions of motherhood presented in Chapters Five and Six.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD**

#### **Introduction**

Adolescent motherhood has been characterised by a great deal of attention the world over. Scholarship has continued to grow, leading to a plethora of views and opinions on the phenomenon. In some contexts, adolescent motherhood emerges as a social problem within the broader context of addressing HIV and AIDS, but it has also historically been a major concern within the social welfare domain. This chapter critically reviews both theoretical and empirical research in the field of adolescent pregnancy and parenting. The review begins with a focus on the construction of adolescence as a separate developmental stage in psychology, and investigates the general psychologisation of adolescence within social sciences and the helping professions. The chapter continues with a focus on adolescent sexuality and early pregnancy, illuminating the key role that gender is now understood to play in unsafe sexual practices among young people. Understanding constructions of sexuality and gender provides a context within which participants' constructions of motherhood, as presented in Chapters Five and Six, may be understood. The final section of the chapter explores trends in adolescent motherhood research. These are presented through three themes: psychosocial consequences of adolescent pregnancy and parenting; the pathologisation of adolescent pregnancy and parenting in dominant literature; and literature on adolescents' subjective experiences of pregnancy and parenting.

#### **UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENCE**

Macleod (2003) argues that if attention is to be given to adolescents in whatever forum, then teenage-hood needs to be accepted as a separate stage of development. As a separate stage of development, adolescence finds extensive coverage in the field of developmental psychology. However, criticism has been levelled against this field for projecting the stage as 'natural' 'inevitable' and 'universal' (Macleod, 2003, p. 420). Macleod (2011) further emphasises that adolescence is actually a social construction and not a 'natural' state. This construction, she emphasises, is primarily to blame for the problematising discourses on teenage pregnancy. The argument is that such a presentation obscures the social and political contexts of human development. What complicates adolescence as a separate

stage of development is the meaning attached to the stage in various cultural and historical contexts. Adolescence therefore needs to be understood within such contexts, but defining and theorising adolescence remains a contested terrain among scholars.

Traditional developmental psychology considers adolescence as a stage between childhood and adulthood. It is equally regarded as a process by which transition from one to the other is achieved. The physiological changes that come with puberty are considered the landmarks of adolescence, but understandings of what psychological developments accompany these have not always been agreed upon (Rogers, 1985; Schoefield, 1994; Shefer, 2008). Other scholars emphasise that the end to adolescence is not clearly identified, although characterised by the adolescent attaining independence from parents (Noller & Calla, 1991). As a separate stage of development, adolescence is further regarded as a time when one is confronted with the problem of self-identification; this time marks the process through which the adolescent is expected to achieve the attitudes and beliefs needed for effective participation in society (Kroger, 1989). Adolescence is also defined through chronological age (Rogers, 1985). Rogers affirms that there is no clear time when adulthood begins. This, she further contends, is dependent on how various states treat their citizens.

What these psychologists underscore is that adolescence has been widely understood as a separate stage of development. In this stage, adolescents are not regarded as children, and yet they have not yet attained adult status. Numerous theories have continued to evolve around adolescence, with theorists building on or refuting earlier works, as they progressively elucidate how adolescents are transformed into adults within this 'constructed' stage.

Socio-culturally, adolescence has been considered a period when society ceases to regard one as a child but does not accord one adult status either, rather, an 'interim between biological maturity and socio-cultural adulthood (Rogers, 1985, p.10). These assertions are a reflection of the contentious nature of adolescence. As a separate stage, adolescence is further characterised by certain behavioural traits that are associated with adolescents, and many theorists present varying and contesting theories pertaining to the understanding of adolescent behaviour within this stage.

Key developmental theories address different domains within adolescence, namely, physical, cognitive and psychosocial; the assumption is that changes in one domain usually lead to changes in other domains (Allen, 2000; Jaffe, 1998). Whilst the physical domain focuses on the bodily changes associated with maturity, the cognitive domain focuses on the development of mental and intellectual abilities that afford adolescents the ability to think critically about their daily experiences and the world around them. The psychosocial domain focuses on the interplay of personal and social factors. This domain underlines that adolescent development is best understood in terms of stages and crisis points encountered within these stages (Allen, 2000; Jaffe, 1998).

Developmental theory assumes that adolescence is the most crucial stage of a person's development because most resolutions of identity, at least according to key psychosocial development theorists like Erikson (Allen, 2000), need to be fulfilled, for the achievement of a stable adulthood. Key in this stage is the construction of personal identity, believed to be strategic in the construction of who adolescents are, in addition to what other people see them as. Erikson presents eight developmental stages in a continuum with adolescence occupying the fifth and strategic stage of development. In this stage, adolescents are expected to deconstruct their childhood and reconstruct their future adult identities. The stage involves successfully reconciling both the previous childhood stages and what the adolescent aspires to be in future. Otherwise, failure to reconcile these pushes the adolescent into what Erikson terms an identity crisis. Identity crisis has become a common term in psychology, but Erikson coined it to refer to adolescents' rigorous searching of who they are and the meaning of their existence. Successful reconciliation of this stage is believed to result in certain outcomes, which accelerate or delay identity resolution, i.e., a fulfilled adult with a functional role.

One of the negative outcomes of Erikson's stage in this case is 'identity confusion'. Identity confusion is characterised by the adolescent's uncertainty about what they want in life, and this is manifested in aimlessness and continuous shifts and changes in courses the adolescent undertakes. Mixed outcome, that is being stable in some domains but not in others, is also a characteristic of Erikson's fifth stage. The main emphasis in Erikson's epigenetic principle is that each stage contributes towards the achievement of the subsequent stages. Personal identity in this particular stage is achieved through the merging of three components: the ego identity, the aspect of identity which defines who we

are and is perceived as having continuity over time; the personal dimension identity, which constitutes our norms, values and beliefs; and the social dimension of identity, which focuses on social roles and relationships, similarities and differences to others (Allen, 2000; Jaffe, 1998; Shefer, 2008).

A review of dominant developmental theory in psychology therefore highlights the construction of adolescence as a separate and crucial stage of development, which accounts for the final product, a normal and socially accepted human being. Adolescents are expected to pass through stages, and achieve outcomes and statuses within these stages if they are to be 'normal adults'. Anything that does not yield the envisaged results is labelled deviant and problematised. Adolescent pregnancy and motherhood have also been approached within a framework of deviancy and crisis, as adolescents are assumed to have failed to attain normal adulthood in the 'proper' way. That is, the general expectation is that they be adults first before they are mothers. This line of thought is discernible in perspectives that assume that adolescent motherhood subsumes adolescents in adulthood (as elaborated upon later in the chapter). As a result, adolescents encounter stigma and exclusion, as they are generally believed to have erred.

However, criticism has been levelled against these theorists for having based their analysis on white middle class American adolescents, as these stages and behavioural characteristics described are not universal. Further, as already highlighted, social and political contexts are not emphasised in understanding how adolescents attain accepted adult status. Contemporary theories of identity and post-modern concepts of subjectivity continue to project identity as fluid and pliable across cultures (Shefer, 2008), as they challenge this universalist and deterministic approach to understanding adolescence.

In the South African context, childhood and adolescence cannot be viewed outside of the complex intersections of the history of apartheid, class inequalities and culture. These intertwined contexts are in turn affected by various practices like cultural initiation rites, and the legislative instruments that shape and define meanings of children, adolescents and adults. Over and above this, adolescence in South Africa is determined by chronological age (Macleod, 2003), which further affirms Rogers' (1985) contention that constructions of adolescence are dependent on how various states treat their citizens.

The concept of family has been contested and deconstructed in academic and psy professions (Bozalek, 2006), because most families in South Africa do not match the idealised universal nuclear family of mother, father and a few children. The history of South African apartheid and imposed migrancy meant that many families were divided, with one or both parents in urban areas and children with grandparents or mothers in rural areas. Moreover, extended families have long been a feature of many communities in South Africa historically and in contemporary contexts. With the advent of HIV and AIDS, child headed households have become a common feature in many communities, and the demands of such family structures challenge how society determines and shapes the meaning of adolescence. Furthermore, socio-historical circumstances are central in the understanding of adolescence within the South African context, that is, the historical imbalances of the apartheid era have continued to define communities, families and individuals. Subjectivity among the adolescent population is constructed out of the manner in which adolescents live, experience and make meaning of their daily lives. Further, their experiences are also shaped by dominant socially designed tasks and expectations associated with their stage. Thus, adolescence as a stage in South Africa attains its meaning from what society makes of it, which is culturally situated. Yet, material conditions also impact on what may be expected of an adolescent, which may set up contradictory demands on what an adolescent should be and do. It is precisely in this contradictory space that teenage parents may find themselves, and that is a focus of this study.

Having assessed key arguments in developmental psychology, regarding the definition and construction of adolescence, and highlighted some of the problematic implications of dominant definitions, the study will however continue to approach adolescence as ‘a separable stage of development’, where the adolescent is no more a child but not yet an adult (Macleod, 2003, p. 20), a boundary between childhood and adulthood, which is actually a developmental process, physiologically, biologically, socially and culturally. Macleod (2011) is very critical of the notion of adolescence as an in between state, arguing that it is a social construction and not a natural state. She sees this construction as primarily at the root of the problematising discourses on teenage pregnancies. Positioning adolescent mothers this way draws attention to their location in this transitional stage from childhood to adulthood. Following other researchers on teenage pregnancy and parenting such as Breheny and Stephens (2007), I consider development through this stage as a process of simply adding years to the young woman’s age rather than necessarily a stage where

particular life skills need to be negotiated. Furthermore, any work on teenage pregnancy and parenting necessarily needs to be sensitive to how the construction of meaning around adolescence in South Africa, as elsewhere, is shaped by history, ideology and culture (Macleod, 2003).

## **ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY**

Teenage pregnancy has been read as a sign of young (hetero) sexuality (Bhana et al., 2008; Bhana & Pattman, 2010; 2009; Macleod, 2006, 2003) and (hetero) sexuality has been powerfully problematised in South Africa, especially in the light of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Any study of teenage pregnancy and parenting must therefore unpack the social context of adolescent sexuality in order to adequately contextualise social responses and meanings of the former. There has been much work exploring the complex intersections of gender and other social inequalities in the negotiation of sexuality among young people and there has been some work unpacking how adolescent sexuality is understood and responded to in the schooling context. These two areas are elaborated below.

### **The gendered nature of adolescent sexuality**

As has been shown, early pregnancy and childbearing, and therefore adolescent sexuality, is highly prevalent among young South Africans (HSRC, 2009), as are high rates of HIV/AIDS. A Human Science Research Council's survey has shown that there are 5% more girls and women living with HIV/AIDS as compared to men (Shisana & Simbayi, 2002). A more recent survey further underscores that African females 20-34yrs are more at risk (33%) compared to males (32.7%) (Shisana, Rehle, Simbayi, Zuma, Jooste, Pillay et al., 2009). Despite the proliferation of numerous intervention programmes, it does not look like increased education and knowledge on reproductive health have assisted much in preventing early and/or unsafe sexual activity. Rather, a wide range of research highlights the many challenges that young people face in negotiating safe and equitable heterosexual sexuality (Shefer & Foster, 2009). This is further complicated by the abundant pressure that adolescents experience from their partners and peers, as they are drawn into unwanted sexual activity (Buga, Amoko & Ncayiyana, 1996; Campbell & MacPhail, 2009; Harrison, 2008; Harrison, Cleland & Frohlich, 2008; MacPhail & Campbell, 2001; Varga & Makubalo, 1996). Research also shows that young people are becoming sexually active at a young age, and scholars attribute this to an array of factors, which include peer pressure,

and availability and accessibility of contraception among others (Hudson & Ineichen, 1991; Jewkes et al., 2001; Wood et al., 1998).

Adolescent sexuality in South Africa has been primarily researched within the framework of understanding and challenging the high rates of HIV and AIDS among young people. Within this framework, adolescent sexual behaviour is problematised, and the main concern is that adolescents are engaging in risky sexual behaviour, which leaves them vulnerable to HIV and AIDS infections. However, within this broad disease framework there has been space to explore the complex intersection of gender with adolescent sexuality, and to unpack the way in which hegemonic practices of gender and gender power inequalities impact on adolescents' social environments and relationships (Eaton, Flisher & Aero, 2003; Lesch & Kruger, 2005; Varga, 2003). These studies have exposed key factors that shape adolescent sexuality. The intersection of gender with other forms of social identity, cultural practices, age and poverty in particular, has also been a key focus in this research (see for example, Bhana & Pattman, 2010; Lesch & Kruger, 2005).

However it has also been pointed out that the focus on adolescents and young women as victims of male power has tended to reproduce traditional deterministic constructions of femininity as passive and submissive (Shefer, 2009). Moreover, the dominant focus on 'risk', constructing sexuality as a site of danger for young women, has led to a plea for researchers to shift the focus to that which explores adolescent sexuality through discourses that discourage shaming and blaming, and also appreciate young sexuality as pleasurable and positive in some contexts (Bhana & Pattman, 2010; Francis, 2010; McFadden, 2003).

Notwithstanding the caution of critical and feminist researchers, it has also been important to acknowledge the power dynamics in the sexual relationships between young men and women, and the way in which this impacts on their reproductive health and well-being. Richter's (1996) survey of reproductive health among African black youth in South Africa found that teenagers become sexually active from as early as 13 years. Further research shows that by 16 years more than 50% of them are sexually involved (Burgard & Lee-Rife, 2009; Eaton et al., 2003). Moreover, empirical evidence indicates that more than 35% of 19 year olds in South Africa have been pregnant (South Africa Demographic & Health Survey, 1998). Studies have highlighted much resistance to condom use and general



contraceptive practices among adolescents (MacPhail & Campbell, 2001). For many women a focus on condom use highlights the 'problematic dynamics of heterosexual negotiation' (Shefer, 1999, p. 106), which is complicated by a general negative view of condom use within the South African context (see, MacPhail & Campbell, 2001; Richter, 1996; Taylor, Dlamini, Nyawo, Huver, Jinabhai & De Vries, 2007; Varga & Makubalo, 1996; Wood & Foster, 1995). Discourses on condom use generally illuminate stereotypical notions of sexuality that associate condoms with promiscuity. As a result both men and women view condoms as inappropriate in their long-term partnerships. The assumption is that the use of condoms is reserved for strangers and casual partners (Maforah, Wood & Jewkes, 1997; Shefer, 1999; Stephenson, Breakwell & Fife-Shaw, 1993; Waldby, Kippax & Crawford, 1993; Wood & Foster, 1995; Wood, Maepa & Jewkes, 1997).

Gender roles and power inequalities have been argued to be pivotal in the negotiation of safe sex (Shefer, 2009; Shefer, 1999; Strebel, 1992; Varga, 2003; Varga & Makubalo, 1996), and these are equally crucial in shaping adolescent sexuality broadly. Varga (2003), for example, in a study based in KwaZulu-Natal showed the centrality of gender and culture in determining adolescent sexualities. The cultural construction of the African woman in this community was illustrated in the adolescents' descriptions of what was expected of them as partners in these relationships. Fundamental in these constructions was the gendered issue of respectability (*ukuhlonipha*) (p.168). Adolescent girls gained respect from their male partners by being sexually available, but at the same time allowed their partners to make all decisions concerning sex. They were also expected to demonstrate shyness, fidelity and to make sure that they did not fall pregnant. On the other hand, it was permissible for their male partners to have multiple partners and exercise dominance in sexual decision matters. Adolescent boys also referred to access to resources and wealth as key to their constructions of masculinities (see also Bhana & Pattman, 2010; Pattman & Bhana, 2009). These masculinities were fundamental in shaping their sexual practices. Whilst girls were expected to make sure that they did not fall pregnant, they were ironically not expected to initiate condom use, as doing so would jeopardise their respectability. In this way, gender roles played a fundamental role in underlining the meaning of and shaping practices of sexuality among adolescents.

These findings are echoed in an early local study by Varga and Makubalo (1996) which illustrated men's expectations of power and control over their women partners in sexual

negotiation and condom use. There was little or no space for negotiations reported, and these authors argued that this non-negotiation facilitated a normative context of sexual coercion and violence within youth relationships. Eaton et al. (2003) emphasise that discourses around women and girls' subordination in such communities reveal biological deterministic notions of men having 'needs' and 'rights' (p. 161).

In a similar study which also highlights the power of cultural contexts in framing normative sexual practices, Preston-Whyte and Zondi (1992, p. 236) found that boys demanded full intercourse as proof of a girl's faithfulness, and this was further complicated by the fact that boys equally needed to show their 'virility'. Thus, contraception had to be compromised. The same study ironically found that female respondents were wary of using contraceptives, as they were equally keen to prove their fecundity. In a different study, further highlighting the cultural importance of fertility, adolescents reported how their partners tore up their health facility continuity cards as an attempt to stop them from using contraception (Wood et al., 1998). In some studies, participants have reported giving up contraception use out of fear of losing their partners (Jewkes et al., 2001; Richter, 1996). On the other hand, there are also reports of adolescents resorting to secretive methods of contraception like injectable contraception, highlighting the desire to prevent conception yet also to make sure it is hidden (either from partners or parents) (Jewkes et al., 2001). Cultural beliefs have also been drawn into concerns about contraception. Some studies indicate that adolescent girls would take contraceptive breaks, fearing that the injectable contraceptives could cause amenorrhea, which might then become a challenge in a cultural context that believes in menstruation as a mode of body cleaning (Jewkes & Wood, 1999), thus compromising their protection from pregnancy.

In the light of the above findings, it is evident that rural South African teenagers, living within stronger African cultural frameworks than those in urban areas, are in a particularly challenging position with respect to normative gender roles, cultural practices and expectations. Resisting early pregnancy is made more difficult in a context in which fertility as a cultural value is reified, and serves as an added dimension to the already complex context of gender roles in heterosexual relationships (see also Jewkes et al., 2001; Richter, 1996; Varga & Makubalo, 1996; Vundule, Maforah, Jewkes & Jordaan, 2000; Wood et al., 1997).

Research further shows that there is a cohort of urban youth who do not want to become parents prematurely, as this would interfere with their lifestyle and aspirations (Eaton et al., 2003; MacPhail & Campbell, 2001; Richter, 1996). These youth are said to engage in sexual activity like others, but do not want their partners to become pregnant.

Contraception decisions are left to the female. In cases of pregnancy, the adolescent boy is automatically endowed with power to accept or reject a partner's pregnancy. In such cases, adolescent boys also weigh structural factors in their circumstances before making a decision. The consequences of this decision have a significant influence on the entire adolescent mother's pregnancy. An accepted pregnancy bolsters the girl's social standing. At the same time, it includes the male adolescent in the core responsibility and dynamics of childcare, whereas a rejected pregnancy stigmatises the adolescent mother. She is considered either unfaithful or unrespectable, and this not only affects her, but brings shame and embarrassment to the entire family (Varga, 2003). Adolescent boys are accorded the power to shape the parenting landscape within the context of adolescent parenthood, and thus power dynamics are fundamental in shaping adolescent motherhood.

Adolescents' sexual behaviour is also influenced by the attitudes of health professionals, as emerges in a number of studies, which demonstrate that nursing staff act as a barrier to adolescents' access to contraceptives. Adolescents experience difficulty in accessing contraception, citing a range of behaviours that include harassment, judgmental attitudes, scolding and shaming (Abdool-Karim, Preston-Whyte & Abdool-Karim, 1992; Buga et al., 1996; Eaton et al., 2003; HSRC, 2009; Wood & Jewkes, 2006; Wood et al., 1998) from medical staff. A Medical Research Council study on barriers to adolescent contraception use in South Africa equally revealed that some nurses' attitudes were a barrier towards adolescent contraceptive use, as nurses felt that the adolescents were still children and should not be having sex (Integrated Regional Information Networks [IRIN], 2007). However, in other contexts, family planning clinics have proved to play a significant role in reducing adolescent pregnancy, even if they had methodological limitations (Nitz, 1999). However, the clinics would be more effective if they were combined with psychosocial counselling and community based programmes (Kirby, cited in Nitz, 1999).

Research on adolescent sexuality has also raised questions around the family context of young sexuality. Silence and lack of parental communication around adolescent sexuality have been identified as key challenges in home and community contexts. Some studies

show that silences are born out of contexts that consider sexual activity dangerous. Lesch and Kruger's (2005) study shows that parents of the adolescent girls involved in their study had warned them that sex was dangerous, and therefore it was difficult for the adolescent girls to converse with their mothers on the subject. At the same time, this silence did not denote abstinence. Yet it was also complicated for the girls to use contraception, as they feared that their mothers would discover that they were sexually involved. Such intricacies leave adolescents vulnerable in situations where they should have access to all the available resources. The main concern is that secrecy around sexual activity should be eliminated, and adolescents should be exposed to sexual and reproductive knowledge well before the onset of sexual activity (Ehlers et al., 2000). A number of scholars have also indicated that adolescent girls, particularly in black communities, found it difficult to discuss sexual issues with their parents, as they risked punishment of different kinds (Boult & Cunningham, 1992; Eaton et al., 2003; Kelly, 2000; Kelly & Parker, 2000; Wood et al., 1997). These silences are rooted in parents' attitudes towards their children's sexuality. The underlying assumption is that they are children and they should not be indulging in sex.

The empirical studies on adolescent sexuality in South Africa portray an amorphous terrain. Understandings and responses to adolescent pregnancy and motherhood are entrenched in the social meanings of adolescent sexuality; adolescent sexuality is in turn characterised by various intricate dynamics, the most salient being the impression that gender roles are important contextual determinants of decision-making processes within the framework of adolescents' relationships (Varga, 2003). An investigation into adolescent sexuality and sexual behaviour would therefore entail an in depth understanding of the many dynamics that influence adolescents' social and cultural worlds. This broad framework of adolescent sexuality and dynamics are the foundation of understandings of motherhood experiences among adolescents reported in Chapters Five and Six.

Adolescent sexuality in South Africa has received further attention within the context of the endemic gender-based violence characterising adolescent sexual relationships. In Wood and colleagues' (1998) study among Xhosa adolescents in Khayelitsha, most adolescent girls indicated that they had been coerced into sex, and their relationships were characterised by masculine power and violence. The researchers noted that too much 'silence' around sexual activity left adolescent girls uninformed about their rights and

therefore vulnerable to coercive practices. One of the participants says, 'As a woman you have no rights. You must keep quiet and do as the man wants' (p. 7). In this instance, men are perceived to have the power to decide what takes place in a relationship. Partner violence has emerged frequently in the literature exploring adolescent relationship dynamics (Harrison, 2008; Harrison et al., 2008; Jewkes et al., 2001; Varga & Makubalo, 1996; Wood & Jewkes, 1997; Wood, Lambert & Jewkes, 2007; 2008). In the light of these findings, adolescent sexuality in South Africa appears to be interwoven with high risk (Dickson, 2003), powerlessness and lack of adequate information on matters pertaining to especially women's bodies, rights and sexuality.

### **Adolescent sexuality within the school arena**

The dominant response to adolescent pregnancy has been one that views it as inherently a problem and in particular a problem within the school arena – both for the progress of the learner but also as a negative impact on the school context and other learners. The main problem for schools, it is argued at popular levels, is not the pregnancy per se but the fact that the adolescent girl 'flaunts' her sexuality, the very sexuality the school purports to suppress. Writing on pregnancy among school-going adolescents from within an American context, Pillow (2006, p. 65-6) argues that teen pregnancy destabilises dominant frameworks of sexuality and mothering, which is further complicated by this occurring in the arena of schooling. The pregnant adolescent is rendered 'emblematic of teen sexuality,' her body clearly proclaims her sexuality within the school. The teenager's body is additionally laden with 'emotional public debates' on various emotive and moral crisis discourses, including notions of societal decline and the deterioration of the family. The adolescent's pregnancy is scrutinised and considered a violation of social moral codes. The fact that pregnancy happens within the school system challenges the stability and patent purpose of the school, to control, regulate, reproduce or silence those sexual identities that are believed to be abnormal, abhorrent and amoral (not only sexually active teenagers but also gay and lesbian learners). The presence of a pregnant adolescent presents a challenge to the sanitised image of asexual students the school strives to construct. Accordingly Pillow (2006, p. 66) argues schools project the pregnant adolescents as 'victims or wanton females', as their pregnancy is further ascribed to deviant and irresponsible sexual practices.

In a similar vein, but writing within the South African context, Macleod (2003, p. 426) argues that pregnancy is read as conveying the teenager's sexuality, she 'has had sex with a male at least once,' thus a proclamation of her sexual activity. Public discourse invoked by the pregnancy occurring within a school then reflects broader social norms about young sexuality, in particular putting into question the adolescent girls' right to be sexual in the first place.

Although the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 forbids discrimination of any sort against pregnant learners, South African society adamantly regards pregnant school going adolescents as pathologically deviant and immoral, so that a moralistic undertone permeates the entire discourse, punctuated by numerous dichotomies (Jewkes, 2006). The general assumption is that adolescents are still children and should not be indulging in sexual activity. Yet a completely different scenario occurs in schools, where the urgency regarding sex education is reflected in South African education policies. For example, the Department of Education (2000) and 'The HIV and AIDS Emergency: Guidelines for Educators,' documents emphasise the educating of youth on sexuality and HIV and AIDS (Francis, 2010). This urgency is reflected in the numerous intervention projects as highlighted in the first chapter. This dichotomised approach means that schools are burdened with HIV and AIDS interventions, whilst society reflects vastly different values regarding teenage sexuality. Adults usually construct adolescents as young and innocent (Mitchell, Walsh & Larkin, 2004) and this determines the censored knowledge they would find appropriate for them.

These adult conceptions of adolescents are also reflected in the attitudes of educators in schools. Schools feel that pregnant adolescents and adolescent mothers have been foisted on them, leaving principals and teachers with no option but to accommodate them (Bhana et al., 2008). More so, school authorities bemoan their lack of expertise in handling pregnant girls. The situation is further complicated by the fact that teachers find it difficult to reconcile their own convictions 'around generational hierarchies, reproduction and gender', (Bhana et al., 2008, p. 82). As a result, pregnant and mothering adolescents find themselves as victims of school authorities, as they struggle to balance school and motherhood and make meaning out of their sexuality within this arena.

Constructions of adolescent sexuality within the school environment have also been associated with intellectual ability, i.e. sexual activeness is juxtaposed alongside the adolescent's level of intelligence. This notion has been reported by both American and South African researchers. In this instance, the assumption is that some academically oriented adolescent girls have a reduced pregnancy risk (Cassell, 2002; Imamura et al., 2007; Kirby, 2002; O'Conner, 1999), which could also imply that the less academically oriented are therefore higher risk cases, which inadvertently pathologises adolescent sexuality. The same notion has been highlighted by those studies which advocate that the longer girls remain at school (especially due to grade repetitions) the higher the chances of pregnancy (Grant & Hallman, 2006; Hallman, 2004; Hallman & Grant, 2003; Hewett & Lloyd, 2005; Lloyd, 2006; Lloyd & Mensch 2008; Maharaj, Kaufman & Richter, 2000). The fact that adolescents in Africa generally, and South Africa particularly, stay in school longer than expected of them, means that the onset of sexual activity occurs during school years (Grant & Hallman, 2006). This means that a high percentage of school-going adolescents are sexually active, and this is highly problematised: sexual activity results in pregnancy if no protection is used. These are key concerns that policy and intervention strategies seek to confront. However, exploring adolescent sexuality within such dynamics further highlights the gendered aspect of their sexuality.

### **Research on adolescent pregnancy and motherhood**

Globally, literature on adolescent pregnancy and motherhood shows that it is generally perceived as deviant and problematic, hinging around moralistic responses to pregnancy out of wedlock and young sexuality in general. Because adolescent pregnancy has been problematised, numerous intervention strategies have been set up to redress the concerns of pregnancy and early motherhood. For example in the United States of America and Britain adolescent pregnancy and motherhood finds coverage and consideration within the social welfare domain. In this context, it is largely problematised for its bearing on the social welfare system. Half of all pregnant mothers are on welfare, receiving state assistance each year, with 77% of all pregnant adolescents going onto welfare within five years of falling pregnant (Rodriguez & Moore, 1995, cited in Makiwane & Udjo, 2006). There are then concerns regarding the 'moral fibre' of those communities that exhibit high rates of adolescent pregnancy. These high rates have prompted governments to set reduction targets of up to 50% by 2010 (Furstenberg, 1991; Hayes, 1987; Ventura et al., 2008). Some

of the strategies to reduce adolescent pregnancy focus on bringing young men on board such developmental programmes (Zavodny, 2001).

In the North American context, researchers have reacted to what could be seen as racist tendencies, which associate adolescent motherhood with the corrosion of the 'moral fibre' in black American communities, which present as high prevalence areas. Kaplan (1997) rejects such perceptions of adolescent motherhood. She presents a theory of relational poverty, to argue that relational poverty significantly contributes to high occurrences of adolescent motherhood in black American communities. She emphasises that relational poverty results in lack of positive relationships with the adolescent's support system. This leads to poor family relations, abandonment by family, school and the wider society. In this position, Kaplan argues the adolescent suffers from relational poverty and seeks to end this form of deprivation by bonding with boyfriends and subsequently their children. She further attributes teenage motherhood to social and economic divides and inequalities across race, gender and class. In this way, she challenges the view that adolescent motherhood reflects a lack of morality and breakdown of 'social fibre'. Rather, she sees adolescent pregnancy as a product of disparities of gender, race and social class. Other researchers have also linked adolescent motherhood to poverty and other structural features that characterise such environments (Geronimus, 1991; 1992).

In sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent pregnancy has also been treated as an area of concern, particularly given the risk of HIV/AIDS infections. The Department of Health in South Africa projected an upsurge in the number of births to adolescents, from 1995 to 2020, despite the fact that the fertility rates seem to be on the decline due to increased contraception use (Dickson, 2003). Some of the reasons given for the upsurge are the effects of urbanisation, which are believed to be associated with the breakdown of the rites of passage in many African communities (Zabin & Kiragu, 1998); as well as increased school enrolments and retention, which account for why more young people are at school longer than is expected of them (Grant & Hallman, 2006). Developmental research further affirms that adolescent pregnancy is a major concern, because of its association with school dropouts generally.

Responses in other African countries, which also problematise adolescent pregnancy and motherhood, vary according to how the nation perceives the problem. In Botswana,



adolescent mothers are allowed to return to another school and continue their studies after their child is one year old (Dynowski-Smith, 1989; Meekers & Ahmed, 1999). In Nigeria, adolescent pregnancy is frowned upon and penalised, causing most premarital and adolescent pregnancies to be terminated even if abortion is illegal (Udjo, 2003; Zabin & Kiragu, 1998). In Zambia and Zimbabwe, adolescent mothers are allowed to return to another school after the birth of their child, but not to their previous institution (Rutenberg et al., 2003). In Tanzania, it was not until the beginning of 2010 that adolescent girls were allowed to return to their previous schools after their baby's birth. Before then adolescents could only register with a vocational training centre instead of returning to mainstream education (Bébian, 2010).

The South African Demographic and Health Survey (1998, p. 268) shows that teenage pregnancy is viewed as a problem, and it appears to be more concentrated in some provinces and population segments than it is in others: 25% in Mpumalanga, 20% in the Northern Province 20%, and 18% in the Eastern Cape. Furthermore, the concentration tends to be higher among rural African teenagers (21%) and coloured teenagers (19%), as compared to white and Indian youth. This variance is attributed to the availability of contraception, access to education and economic development. The supposition that adolescent pregnancy tends to be higher in rural areas than it is in urban areas (Manzini, 2001) is attributed to the variations in structural factors within these contexts. However, rapid urbanisation in South Africa means that there are equally high populations of the most disadvantaged sectors of society in urban areas as well, which has accelerated rates of adolescent pregnancy (HSRC, 2009).

Further evidence of this variable concentration is detected in the literature on adolescent pregnancy, which predominantly focuses on the black adolescent girl. Race, culture and ethnicity have particularly been used to explain the differences in adolescent sexual and reproductive health (Macleod, 2002; Macleod & Durrheim, 2003). Macleod (2002) further underlines the equivocation that characterises the considerations of pregnancy among black and white adolescents. When pregnancy among white adolescents becomes the focus, there is an appeal to psychological justifications, but when it is among black adolescents, explanations tend to have a socio cultural slant. This tendency racializes adolescent pregnancy, as the black adolescent becomes the object of public scrutiny in the salient absence of the white adolescent.

This trend has also been noted in the American literature on adolescent pregnancy, where there is also a tendency to inscribe and directly refer to black adolescent pregnancy as problematic and epidemic, which further reinforces the notion of black adolescent motherhood in tandem with other youth vices like drugs and crime (Coleman, 1998; Corcoran, 1999; Phoenix, 1989; 1992; Rowley, 2002; Wilson, 1993). There is a general assumption that most of the literature on adolescent pregnancy in South Africa has continued to address concerns that have been highlighted in the US and British contexts (Macleod, 2002; 2006). For example, Klein and the Committee on Adolescence (2005, p. 283) assert that some of the psychosocial consequences of adolescent pregnancy include ‘school interruption, persistent poverty, limited vocational opportunities, separation from the child’s father, divorce and repeat pregnancies’ among others. South African researchers have similarly depicted comparable consequences of adolescent pregnancy as ‘disruption of schooling, vulnerability, and involvement in criminal activity, abortion, maternal mortality, infant mortality and low birth weight and poverty,’ (Cunningham & Boulton, 1996, p. 692), which highlights similarities irrespective of culture or context. Macleod (1999) has also reviewed a vast amount of literature in this field and affirmed that it is an echo of the rather damaging nature of the American and British literature on adolescent motherhood, which problematises and pathologises teenage pregnancy and parenting.

In contrast to the problematising discourse of adolescent pregnancy in South Africa, is the gendered notion that women’s identity is strongly defined by their fecundity and therefore rewarded in some African communities (Macleod, 2003). In the study mentioned previously with African teenagers, Preston-Whyte and Zondi (1992) found that fertility was culturally valued among women in rural KwaZulu-Natal communities. This finding is supported by a range of other local studies (Caldwell & Caldwell, 1993; Jewkes et al., 2001, Varga & Makubalo, 1996; Wood et al., 1997). Childbearing is seen as an essential part of being a woman, and some parents indicate that they would prefer their children to have a baby rather than use contraception. Without implying that early child bearing is condoned among some communities in South Africa, empirical studies show that teenage pregnancy is to some extent expected and tolerated among some groups (Jewkes et al., 2001; Preston Whyte & Zondi, 1989; 1992), and in other communities outside South Africa (Kirby, 2002; Melby, 2006; Sigh, 1998), which further highlights the importance of social and cultural contexts in framing meanings of adolescent pregnancy.

### **Psychosocial consequences of adolescent pregnancy**

While I have foregrounded the way in which adolescent pregnancy and parenting has been problematised and founded on moralistic discourses on young sexuality and femininity, it is also important to assess the wide range of studies that highlight the negative impact of adolescent pregnancy and parenting on the lives of adolescents. Some studies in the United States continue to show that adolescent pregnancy is associated with school dropouts. The general assumption is that if proper facilities are not provided for resumption into mainstream education, the educational and economic worlds of adolescent parents would be compromised (Hudson & Ineichen, 1991), leading some into a cycle of poverty and repeat pregnancies. Subsequently intervention and developmental programmes have been instituted in the United States over the years. There are now separate schools for pregnant and mothering adolescents, and these schools encourage reintegration into the education system (Selman & Hosie, 2005). Despite this innovative measure, questions have arisen regarding how voluntary the placements of pregnant/mothering adolescents into these institutions are, and what guarantees there are that these girls still obtain the same education they would have acquired from mainstream schools (Pillow, 2006). Further research within this system shows that adolescent mothers have consistently encountered numerous barriers in attempting to resume education. In some instances, they are expected to prove their fitness, participate in parenting classes and other activities, which eventually forces some to drop out of school (Brake, cited in Pillow, 2006). Pillow further asserts that, because of this, up to half of all school aged mothers end up failing to complete their education. Pillow (2006, p.74) critiques the notion of separate schools for adolescent mothers as she views the whole scenario as 'a discourse of contamination', in that the young mothers are involuntarily removed from their schools and asked to move to other schools. She ascribes this movement of adolescent girls to a fear among the education authorities of 'moral contamination of the other students' in mainstream schooling, thus projecting a discourse of pathology onto adolescent mothers.

Further research indicates discrepancies among those schools that encourage resumption soon after the baby. Adolescent mothers continue to encounter several constraints, which interfere with resumption into mainstream education. In a study carried out by Meekers and Ahmed (1999) in Botswana on pregnancy related school dropouts, the Ministry of Education and Culture did not only prohibit pregnant girls from resumption in their current schools, but further would not allow them to recommence mainstream education generally

before their children turned a year old. This posed great difficulties for some adolescent mothers. Considering school after a year's break became a huge challenge. Further complications arose when they were compelled to enrol in another school. This would also mean that in rural settings proximity to school and baby was significantly compromised. In such cases, adolescent mothers would be forced to choose between school and child, leading to possible school dropout. Whilst school dropout presents as a problem related to pregnancy, the indication here is that dropouts are more related to social response and attitudes than pregnancy itself. The practice is also heavily gendered, as nothing seems to be evident in literature about what happens to the adolescent fathers in this regard, even if they were in the same school.

As outlined earlier, in South Africa, the existing education policy on learner pregnancy stipulates that equality in educational policies be provided for all learners, and that the expulsion of pregnant schoolgirls be abolished (DOE, 2007; DOE, 1996). Pregnant and parenting learners are therefore not discriminated against, and the Department of Education Policy on Learner Pregnancy in Schools (DOE, 2007) further highlights that learners should leave school when their pregnancy shows for security reasons, but home study is encouraged through liaisons with colleagues. Earlier research on teenage pregnancy in South Africa shows that in most cases 50% of girls who fell pregnant did not return to complete their schooling (Martineau, 1997). The researchers attributed this to the lack of facilities provided by schools to ensure resumption of education, as those who chose to return left their babies with caregivers (Cunningham & Boulton, 1996). However, subsequent studies have shown that most girls returned to school following a pregnancy or delivery, even if the schools had not made provision for structures that would encourage smooth resumption of studies for adolescent mothers (Maharaj et al., 2000). Although there has been significant transformation at policy level, the school infrastructure does not appear to have been modified at all in order to better accommodate pregnant and/or parenting learners.

Macleod (1999) reviewed literature on adolescent pregnancy and motherhood in South Africa and observed that negative constructions of adolescent pregnancy and motherhood have been linked to notions of disruption of schooling, which it is argued has in turn contributed towards a lower socio-economic status for both mother and child. However, recent studies have challenged this association, arguing that while pregnancy mostly

follows or is associated with 'drop out' (Cassell, 2002; Lloyd, 2006), it is not, in most cases, the cause of the drop out. Numerous constraining social factors have been attributed to this (Lloyd & Mensch, 1999; 2008). For example, lack of motivation to continue schooling for some adolescent girls would lead to early drop out followed by pregnancy. Global research exhibiting the connection and causality between socio-economic difficulties and pregnancy ascribes negative life outcomes to early pregnancy alone, instead of equally considering the pre-existing disadvantage and general socio-economic and cultural context (Kirby, 2007), in order to reach a more appropriate and holistic approach. In the same way, ascribing school dropout to pregnancy alone obscures the other potential pre-existing factors.

### **Pathologisation and the gendered nature of adolescent motherhood**

It is evident that in international and South African literature, adolescent pregnancy and motherhood continue to be grossly pathologised and problematised. Analysing the birthing process of the adolescent mother, Hudson and Ineichen (1991, p. 79), for example, assert that:

The sheer fear of the physical pain can immobilize a young expectant mother, with the result that she may neither express her fears nor attend antenatal classes designed to allay those fears providing information and techniques. Fear and ignorance in the delivery room can make the pain worse than it need be.

Here a stereotyped portrayal of a helpless, ignorant teenage mother is presented, that is based on a range of assumptions about adolescents at social, psychological and biological levels. This assertion overlooks the general assumption that first time motherhood might be overwhelming or challenging to any woman, regardless of age, in the initial experience of pregnancy, birthing and motherhood. Associating age with labour pains may be pathological, even if the teenager's physiological make up is taken into consideration. The whole assertion rules out any rational agency for adolescents in pregnancy and parenting (Macleod, 2006), with the construction of young girls as passive, timid and frightened.

The pathologisation of adolescent motherhood has also been highlighted by Phoenix (1992; 1994), who demonstrates how this is powerfully racialised in particular contexts, as also noted in the earlier section on trends in research. She affirms that studies on black

teenage mothers in the US and Britain have been viewed as studies on devalued groups, with a predominantly negative and pathologising effect. Also, as noted earlier, the same concern has been raised in South Africa, primarily by Macleod (1999; 2001; 2002; 2006; Macleod & Durrheim, 2003). Macleod has presented a powerful critique of this tendency in most local studies of adolescent pregnancy. Her main concern is that researchers should understand the underlying factors in adolescent pregnancy and motherhood, before making pathologising assumptions about their pregnancy and motherhood.

Further pathologisation of adolescent pregnancy and motherhood emanates from those studies that link the pregnant teenager with her background. Russell (1982), cited in Schoefield (1994), argues that most adolescents who fall pregnant come from homes with limited discipline and family control, and they could have possibly experienced deprivation and depression, thus viewing adolescent pregnancy and motherhood as some form of deviance. Other scholars seem to agree with this idea (see Rowley, 2002). Preston-Whyte and Zondi (1992) also carried out research to explore the experiences of premarital pregnancy among African teenagers in KwaZulu-Natal. Describing their sample, they assert that none of the girls they interviewed had passed matric (high school leaving certificate), and most of them had come from homes in which the parents held unskilled jobs and had themselves not achieved high educational standards, inadvertently then reproducing the notion that teenage pregnancy is related to social deprivation. In a similar vein, De Villiers (1985, cited in Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1992) highlights that poor home background, limited communication and poor recreational facilities account for excessive numbers of adolescent pregnancies. The study was carried out among the coloured community in Cape Town. In a situation where the macrocosm is characterised by numerous mitigating factors, the teenagers are constantly in constrained circumstances, and a consideration of the underlying factors could possibly assist in understanding their circumstances broadly instead of concentrating on pathologising associations.

In its pathological stance, literature on adolescent pregnancy and motherhood in South Africa is heavily gendered. Macleod (2003; 2006) highlights some of the gendered assumptions from the reviews she carried out. These encompass the belief that, whilst all adolescents are expected to go through some form of general pressure in their respective communities, pregnant and mothering adolescents are viewed differently. The assumption is that they passively concede to external influences, which constitute negative and societal

pressure. More so, they are considered unable to rebuff male advances, which project them as passive. She further criticises the idea that pregnant and mothering adolescents are also lacking in cognitive ability. This pathological stance projects adolescent mothers as failures within the broad psychological framework. This framework, as highlighted earlier in the chapter, requires certain achievements for adolescents, before assuming normal adulthood. Complications arise when adolescent mothers are viewed against and compared with, not only the older mother, but also the 'ideal mother.' As highlighted in the previous chapter, literature on motherhood has a tendency to evaluate all mothers against what is set up as normative or idealised motherhood. Mothers who fall short of the ideal standards of mothering are pathologised. This same yardstick applied to adult mothers has been assumed to be applicable to teenage mothers (Breheny & Stephens, 2007; Deal & Holt, 1998; Flanagan, McGrath, Meyer & Garcia Coll, 1995; Hudson, Elek & Campbell-Grossman, 2000; Koniak-Griffin and Turner Plutta, 2001; Ruff, 1990; Secco, Ateah, Woodgate & Moffatt, 2002). The construction of the 'ideal mother' (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991), as highlighted in the previous chapter, is presented as a benchmark against which the inadequacies of adolescent motherhood are weighed up. This discourse presents adolescents as lacking both parenting and childcare skills (Breheny & Stephens, 2007). Any incompatibilities are considered a form of deviancy. These gendered and pathological notions not only underlie most of the literature on adolescent motherhood, but public and popular discourses on the issue as well. Davies (2000) underscores this western observation that asserts that adolescent mothers usually find mothering difficult and they tend to show feelings of heightened stress, with some adolescent mothers having mixed feelings towards their babies. Overall, she criticises research for attempting to compare young mothers 'unfavourably' with ideal motherhood (p. 2).

Difficulties in parenting among teenage mothers have also been viewed within a 'crisis' framework that may apply to any mothers whose experience of pregnancy and/or birthing is non-normative. Such an approach foregrounds notions of loss of a more normative, appropriate or smooth transition into becoming a parent. Schoefield (1994) argues that because adolescents have been 'accelerated' into motherhood before a culturally normative age, they are bound to experience some form of loss, which should not be mistaken for incapacitation on their part. All mothers go through some form of 'loss' if their pregnancies and deliveries occur in contexts that lack proper planning and foresight. Therefore, adolescents need critical support and not judgement, as their experiences are not

very different from what other women at a similar 'crisis point' may experience (see also Oakley, 1980; Robinson, 1992).

Adolescent mothers in South Africa have been shown to benefit from the general support of nuclear and extended families (Varga, 2003). Culturally, mothering and childcare occur within these broad frameworks, and these frameworks can be viewed as ideological constructs within some black communities in South Africa. However, some researchers have been critical of the cultural practice of moving children from relative to relative in order to accommodate the particular needs of the mother and/or father. Such children have been labelled as 'football children' and believed to lack parental love and bonding (Loening, 1992, p. 85), a rather pathological stance on adolescent motherhood, if one were to consider the socially constructed definition of 'family' within the adolescents' broader cultural frameworks.

The notion of the viability and strength of the single parent household in certain African communities (Hertz, 2004; Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1989; 1992) has contributed to adolescents believing that 'to be unmarried and have a child does not blight one's future' (Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1992, p. 232). Adolescent mothers have witnessed or are themselves products of successful single parent households, and do not seem to believe that their position might in any way incur adverse psychosocial consequences, bringing into question the assumption based on western notions of family that single parent families or children out of wedlock are necessarily problematic.

On the other hand, pregnancy and motherhood are considered to subsume the adolescent within the category of motherhood and 'heightened responsibility' (Shanok & Miller, 2007, p. 252). The assumption in this case is that pregnancy inherently infers an adult role, and adolescents have violated their age-graded roles to assume an inappropriate social identity. This perception has been widely criticised. Flanagan et al. (1995) argue that it should be noted that adolescent mothers are adolescents first before they become mothers; motherhood does not confer adulthood in a deterministic way. In this way, pregnancy for the adolescent girl does not mean that she ceases to be an adolescent; she remains a pregnant adolescent and she should be considered as such. In the South African context, the idea of adolescent motherhood conferring adult status on adolescents has also been espoused (see Macleod, 2006; Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1989; 1992 for critiques). The fact



that they are adolescents needs be foregrounded; this will aid in unravelling some of the complexities that shroud adolescent motherhood research.

Adolescent pregnancy and birth have also been powerfully medicalised. Macleod and Durrheim's (2003, p. 95) analysis of the psycho-medical discourse in South African research on teenage pregnancy shows that the adolescent's 'hidden bodily, psychological, social and cultural processes are brought into the plane of visibility and simultaneously rendered assessable and controllable through scientific and clinical methods'. In this manner, they argue that the adolescent is brought under scrutiny; her private life is made public through the exploration, analysis and evaluation of her faculties. In this process, her physical body is socially represented and regulated (see also Douglas, cited in Earle & Letherby, 2007; Shilling, 1993; Turner, 1992; 1995). In a similar vein, Pillow (2006) maintains that in the American landscape, adolescent pregnancy is viewed as a disease or as some form of disability by policy makers, which accounts for why pregnant girls are removed from mainstream schooling to special schools. She strongly denounces these as 'discourses of contamination', which assume that the embodied presence of the sexually active female student as pregnant student or mother will contaminate the student body, 'triggering an epidemic of immoral and promiscuous behaviour' (Pillow, 2006, p. 68). Implicit in such medicalisation of reproduction is the loss of women's agency in defining their own meanings and practices of pregnancy, birth and motherhood (Fox & Worts, 1999). This critique has also been raised as a concern for all mothers (not only teenage mothers) in the previous chapter. It continues to be a key challenge in the increasing technologisation of pregnancy, birth and parenting globally.

### **Adolescents' subjective experiences of motherhood**

In adolescent motherhood research, an underlying assumption seems to be that all adolescent pregnancies are unplanned and that, because adolescent pregnancy is unplanned, it is therefore unwanted. Empirical evidence has however shown that a number of teenagers are happy to have their babies, and some even feel that the pregnancies have brought improvement in their lives (Arenson, 1994; Cater & Coleman, 2006; Kaye, 2008; Merrick, 2001; Seamark & Lings, 2004; Shanok & Miller, 2007). Cater and Coleman (2006) emphasise that some adolescents in their study had indicated that they fell pregnant because they wanted to be mothers. A number of American studies (Arenson, 1994; Lesser, Anderson & Koniak-Griffin, 1998) also found that some teenage girls of African

and Hispanic descent affirmed that pregnancy and motherhood had improved their lives, which further suggests adolescent parents' celebration of motherhood.

In South Africa, ironically, literature foregrounding desires for motherhood are reflected in the popular realm and are virtually absent in academic studies. Pato (2006) in *Marie Claire*, a local South African magazine, talked to a number of teenage parents, and most of them indicated that even if their babies had not been planned they were the best things that had ever happened in their lives. Commenting on her 10 month old son, 20 year old Asanda says, 'There are moments when I have pangs of regret – usually when I think about how my friends' lives are progressing. But Liyema (son) is the most important person in my life, nothing beats the way he looks at me when he wakes up, or how he reaches out for me when he is unsettled – my heart feels as if it will burst with love' (p. 60). Concurring with this, is 19 year old Elizabeth who says that initially it was not easy to bond with her child, as she had to sit for exams two days after he was born, and her elder sister had to look after the baby. Talking of her son she says, 'I loved him from the moment I saw him and I can't imagine life without my son' (p. 62). 20 year old Tsego also says that she went through bouts of depression and stress but has since recovered, and she now feels like a real mother as she comments – 'now I can honestly say that I love my child' (p. 62). This article also indicates that adolescents may go through devastating and trying times as they try to grapple with early motherhood, including stress and depression. Some of them reported suffering from guilt, regret, and anger, which they believe may impact on the child (Verster, cited in Pato, 2006). Others reported developing strong bonds and attachment with their children. Scholars have however challenged this attitude among adolescent mothers, arguing that celebrating mothering may be superficial and associated with youth idealism and a denial of the many challenges of mothering in this context (Breheny & Stephens, 2007).

Whitely and Kirmayer (2008) explored patterns of childbearing between two different ethno-cultural groups living in the same city of Montreal, Canada. The two groups were Anglophone Euro-Canadians and Anglophone Afro-Caribbeans. In this, study the Anglophone Euro-Canadian young mothers indicated that they experienced social exclusion, which they attributed to stigma associated with early motherhood. The young mothers also said that they encountered social difficulties, as they were constructed as 'a failure', 'retarded' or 'oddball' (p. 342). They further reported experiencing rejection and

prejudice, particularly in public areas if they happened to be in the company of their children. Some indicated that they underwent pain and distress from the way they were treated, and felt devalued because they were young mothers. In contrast, Anglophone Afro-Caribbean participants revealed that being a mother enhanced their status and social activity. With the value placed on childbearing and rearing in their communities, childlessness is viewed as a source of scorn and stigmatisation. The study foregrounds both the diversity of community values with respect to teenage pregnancy, as well as the importance of community responses in the experiences of young mothers. In South Africa, young motherhood is also generally accepted and even in some cases rewarded in many black communities, as already indicated in this review.

In another study carried out by Kaye (2008) in Uganda, on how adolescents negotiated the transition from adolescence to motherhood, adolescents said that they were able to cope with motherhood in situations where financial support was assured. They however encountered challenges when they had to fend for their children on their own, reporting depression and disappointment at falling pregnant. Also in the Uganda context, Atuyambe, Mirembe, Johansson, Kirumira and Faxelid's (2007) study found that adolescent mothers reported facing domestic physical violence, particularly from parents and partners, as well as psychological abuse within their communities, for example, being punished for their pregnancies by being overworked and unfairly treated. As a result, a number of adolescents opted for unsafe abortions. The negative experience was further inflamed by the attitudes of health personnel towards them; they were humiliated and shamed for falling pregnant at their ages. The study reported how adolescents felt that they were victims of adult authority at all levels of their experience of being pregnant.

Studies in South Africa have also revealed that adolescent mothers have shown ambivalence about their roles and experiences, with some adolescents regretting falling pregnant (Loening, 1992), contradicting those who report taking pleasure in motherhood (Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1989), even if the pregnancy was unplanned. Varga's (2003) study reports that adolescent girls indicated that pregnancy was a major setback in their lives. They associated pregnancy with 'disruption of schooling, economic strain, limited job prospects, emotional stress, and even social stigma' (p. 165). Whilst the value of fertility is broadly acknowledged in this context, motherhood was pitted against immediate educational and economic concerns and losses. The adolescents in this study generally

reported finding motherhood challenging and experienced much stigma from peers and the community at large. They further claimed that motherhood jeopardised long-term relationships with their partners, who usually ‘dropped them’ to continue with school, only to settle with those women educated like them. Also in this study adolescent boys indicated that partner pregnancy meant disruption of school for them and probably social isolation by peers. They were also overcome with trepidation with respect to the potential costs fatherhood would incur, all of which highlights the complexity of parenting within an adolescent framework. Similarly Swartz and Bhana (2009) report that financial burden and fear of not being able to be breadwinners impacted on young men’s desires to be active fathers in their children’s lives.

As highlighted earlier, there are few studies locally and internationally that focus on teenage fathers, which continues to signal a gap in the literature, as well as emphasise the continued imbalance with respect to teenage pregnancy, with young women still carrying the major load of the impact of sexual practices with their partners. One wonders if the scarcity of research on young fathers represents their complete absence in care giving, or whether it also points to a blind spot on the part of researchers. As pointed out by Swartz and Bhana (2009), the few studies that have made mention of adolescent fathers have done so primarily through the voices of the adolescent mothers commenting on their partners, and research has generally portrayed adolescent fathers as irresponsibly and overly negligent (Morrell, 2007; Niehaus, 2000; Pattman, 2007). Strides have been made to reflect subjective voices of young fatherhood (Morrell, 2007; Pattman, 2007; Swartz & Bhana, 2009), but this remains a relatively marginal and small body of work.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the fact that adolescent motherhood is perceived as a global problem, with numerous countries setting up intervention structures and strategies to counter ‘the problem’. In South Africa, adolescent pregnancy and a related focus on teenage sexuality has been considered an issue of concern for some time now, but current emphasis and latest trends indicate that adolescent sexuality and pregnancy is explored mostly within the context of HIV and AIDS, and control measures have proliferated within this context. Scholars have generally responded to teenage pregnancy and parenting through a pathologising discourse, and have linked adolescent motherhood with various psychosocial, health and educational effects, which include school dropout, leading to

assumptions of lower social status for both mother and child. Some of these associations have been perceived within frameworks which pathologise early motherhood, and teenage mothering capability has also been scrutinised and questioned. Notions of judgement generally towards all mothers have been applied to teenage mothers, without consideration of them not being adult mothers and in a different life stage altogether.

Whilst sex education is part of the curriculum in South African schools, it appears that education and knowledge on general reproductive health have not been utilised as a means of preventing adolescent pregnancy. Adolescent pregnancy is also reviewed as emblematic of adolescent sexuality, and such meanings clearly spill over into how adolescent parenting is socially constructed as well. It is also of concern that studies of sexual practice among young people highlight how adolescent motherhood may occur within violent, coercive, and power imbalanced relationships, which leave adolescent mothers at high risk in these relationships.

Research on adolescent motherhood reveals that there are contradictions in how adolescent mothers feel about their pregnancy and motherhood. Evidence shows that whilst some regret ever being pregnant, others actually find renewed meaning out of it, and some have intentionally fallen pregnant. However, there is a general belief that adolescent mothers cope well if operating from contexts that offer them support. Finally, literature reveals that not much research is available on adolescent fathers, save for that which adolescent mothers reveal about their partners. The assumption has been that adolescent fathers are overly irresponsible, but studies that are more recent reveal that they may be keen to take responsibility for their children and partners, but are inhibited by their lack of material means. While strides are being made to look at the more subjective experiences of young fathers, this literature is at the early stages of development. In addition, with respect to the motivation for the current study, it is evident that while there is a mass of work on adolescent motherhood, research that foregrounds the subjective experiences of adolescent mothers is still marginal. Adolescents' subjective voices have been explored within the broad contexts of sexuality and relationship dynamics, as shown in this review. Such exploration tends to depict how the adolescent's sexuality is constructed, and not how they experience mothering per se, which leaves a gap in research on adolescent mothers.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **MAPPING THE METHODOLOGICAL PROCESSES**

#### **Introduction**

The main purpose of this study was to afford a group of adolescent parents an opportunity to tell their stories in their own voices, to allow them a chance to express their lived subjective experiences on being young mothers in school, and to ensure that this process was carried out within a non-judgemental and supportive framework. My main task was to listen to participants and then proceed to build an understanding based on their ideas (Creswell, 2003), that is, their subjective narrations. A feminist qualitative approach was adopted as the most appropriate methodological framework within which this could effectively be accomplished. It is within this broad methodological framework that the young mothers' narratives were collected through the life histories approach, and analysed within a narrative framework. The different processes employed in the collection and analyses of data are unpacked in detail in this chapter.

#### **DELINIATING THE METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study adopted values and principles of both the qualitative paradigm and the feminist approach. I explore these within their philosophical and methodological paradigms for an understanding of the debates that shaped them. Some strands of social science research indicate that research has been largely dominated by positivist ideas and epistemologies. Positivist epistemologies were grounded on the premise that accurate representations of the world could be produced, and that truth and meanings could be fixed entities that could be discovered and made existent without an interpreter (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Henning, 2004). Positivist ideals and philosophies dominated what Denzin and Lincoln (1998) term the traditional period (1900-1950). A general discomfort with positivist epistemologies and ways of researching human subjects fuelled the emergence of a number of alternative approaches (Burr, 1995) to the study of human beings around this period, among which were the qualitative approaches. It should be noted that there is no single qualitative approach.

Within sociology, the first qualitative accounts are associated with the works of Malinowski in Guinea and the Trobriand Islands between 1914 and 1918 (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p.13). Qualitative approaches took shape in the traditional period and spanned over five phases in the history of their development. After the traditional phase, the modernist period focused on formalising qualitative approaches, and the central concern was giving a voice to the voiceless. New interpretive theories, which included 'ethnomethodology, phenomenology, critical theory, and feminism,' were drawn into qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 16). During this period of shifts and turns in theoretical, methodological, and political movements, the narrative method also emerged. The narrative method is relevant here in that the voices of the participants are interpreted within the narrative framework. Some scholars locate its origins in the Chicago school of the 1920s and yet it is assumed to have started around the 60s, and narrative methods flourished in the 80s (Riessman, 2008). In addition, of considerable significance in qualitative approaches is Glasser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory, which also developed around the same period. Using open ended interviewing and emphasising data analysis through an inductive approach to theorising, the grounded theory perspective is very popular in qualitative studies. Its popularity hinges on the fact that it provides clearly defined steps for researchers to follow. Its naturalistic approach to ethnography and interpretation has continued to attract researchers, even if it has been broadly criticised for putting too much emphasis on theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Denzin, 1998).

In the next phase, the blurred genres (1970-1986), qualitative approaches had fully taken shape and the ethics of qualitative research became a substantial concern (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The focus in this genre was the presence of the researcher's voice in interpretive research (Geertz, 1988; Henning, 2004). The significance of the researcher's voice has been foregrounded in a number of methodologies and key particularly in feminist research. The next phase, the crisis of representation (1980s) was characterised by an endeavour to negotiate issues of reflexivity, 'the author was expected to make connections between the text and the world written about it', and in this phase the concept of 'the aloof researcher was overshadowed by action, activist oriented research' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 22). Whilst this is characteristic of qualitative approaches, it is equally at the centre of feminist research.

Having briefly outlined the historical and philosophical underpinnings of the qualitative paradigm, other features of this broad methodological framework are described, in order to help locate the focus of this study. My main concern was to allow the adolescent school-going mothers to tell their experiences of pregnancy and motherhood in their own voices from within their own contexts. Qualitative approaches are 'naturalistic, holistic, and inductive' and real world phenomena are studied in their natural states and environment (Durrheim, 1999, p. 47). Participants' experiences are located and understood within their broad life environments. Qualitative approaches allow the researcher to study selected contexts in depth, and strive to deduce meaning from those contexts in which action or research occurs (Brannen, 1992; Denzin, 1997; Dooley, 1995; Neuman, 1997). I carried out my study within the schools where the mothers were enrolled, and all the interviews were conducted within these contexts. I perceived these contexts to be spaces in which their simultaneous roles of mothers and learners were played out.

The qualitative and feminist approaches also foreground the researcher's position as interpreter within the research process. Interpretation is of paramount significance within qualitative research. As key interpreter, the researcher is tasked with understanding human experience, rather than, as in quantitative research, attempting to measure and predict. The researcher's central position within the process sanctions the researcher to build up understanding of phenomena through observing particular instances of these phenomena as they occur in particular contexts (Durrheim, 1997; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Neuman, 1997; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Due to this detailed exploration of the phenomena, qualitative approaches produce in depth, voluminous and very rich data (Silverman, 2000; 1993). I collected rich and lengthy narratives from each participant, and my task was to represent the participant's voices without fracturing these narratives. I am aware of the fact that representation of the original voices necessitates the researchers' interpretation at multiple levels. It is mostly in interpretation and analysis that the researcher cannot circumvent interfering with the research process. What is therefore fundamental is the researcher's responsiveness to the entire research process, in particular his/her location in the research and in relation to the research participants.

The researcher's position within the research process therefore raises issues of reflexivity and flexibility (Hammersely, 1989; Henwood & Pidgeon, 1993). Reflexivity is the process whereby the researcher continuously reflects on how the research shapes the researcher and



how the researcher is shaped by the process. It is a complex dialectical process in which the researcher brings his or her material, ideological background and current investments to bear on the research process at all stages, from conception through analysis to reporting and recommending. The qualitative approaches are conscious of the unattainability of objective accounts in research, and therefore underscore the fact that the researcher acknowledges his/her subjectivities in the interpretation of the research (Boonzaier & Shefer, 2006).

The issue of reflexivity is equally foregrounded in feminist research. The researcher's identity is questioned against the power imbalances between the researcher and the participants. This process aims at diffusing the historical patriarchal power relations, which are embedded within the research process, since politics and power are inextricably intertwined. Feminist research also questions the researchers' investments, their ideological position, and their focus on the overall research from conception to analysis (Hesser-Biber & Brooks, 2007). Reflexivity is therefore fundamentally underscored by both qualitative approaches and feminist research.

#### **USING A FEMINIST RESEARCH METHOD**

Feminist research focuses on women's experiences, and this focus is largely shaped by the historical exclusion of women from research, both as subjects and objects of research, which characterised positivist and empiricist knowledge production. As highlighted earlier, the main purpose of feminist research was a rejection of the Enlightenment methods of doing research. Men predominantly conducted scientific research and its main concern was men (Stanley & Wise, 1983). Feminist research has transformed this, centering on changing dominant patriarchal ways of doing research. The major thrust of feminist research is making women's voices and experiences a focal point of research (Du Bois, 1983; Letherby, 2003; Mies, 1983; Stanley & Wise, 1983). Giving voice to the voiceless has taken different forms in feminism (Stanley, 1994). Feminist researchers employ a variety of methods that take cognisance of women's previously silenced voices. There is no single feminist method (Harding, 1987), rather feminist methods draw on feminist ontology (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994), and there are key principles which guide and shape feminist research.

Cook and Fonow (1990) underscore the centrality of consciousness raising as a specific methodological tool in feminist research, asserting that feminist researchers occupy the research world 'with a double vision reality' (p.74), which is in a way part of their feminist consciousness. It is this consciousness that facilitates the transformation of the research process into an area of conscientisation for both the researcher and the participant, resulting in social change (see also, Denzin, 1997; Larzberg, 1994; Mies, 1983; Stanley & Wise, 1983; Reinharz, 1993). The researchers are expected to contribute to social change through a political commitment to women's empowerment and gender equality. This commitment equally challenges the neutrality of the researcher in scientific research, advocating for passionate scholarship (Du Bois, 1983; Klein, 1983).

Feminist research also foregrounds sensitivity to gender power relations between the researcher and the participants throughout the research process. The intention is that women should be studied in an interactive manner, a process that overrides the notion of subject and object in positivist research (Banister et. al., 1994; Cook & Fonow, 1990; Stanley & Wise, 1983). Such a practice encourages empathic connections during the research process and accommodates intersubjectivity (Du Bois, 1983; Klein, 1983; Mies, 1983). The implication in this regard is the adoption of appropriate research methodologies, which include action research and participatory research among others.

The main concern is that participants are not exploited or 'turned into objects of scrutiny and manipulation' (Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1983, p. 134), but integrated into the research process to become active participants and avoid the reproduction of power inequalities. Acker and colleagues further stress that the objectification of the participants would be minimised if they were involved in the analysis process.

Having outlined the philosophical and methodological frameworks within which this study is located, I explore the methods that were adopted within the feminist qualitative framework in collecting and analysing data.

### **NARRATIVES IN QUALITATIVE APPROACHES**

Narrative approaches have been used across disciplines in qualitative research. The origins of the narrative approach date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as seen in the works of Dubois. The

Chicago school further popularised the method in the 1920s, although some scholars believe that its origins lie in the 60s (Chase, 2005; Langellier, 2001). Like qualitative approaches, narrative methods were shaped by dissent against positivist ways of inquiry, developments in literature and popular culture, and the new identity movements and explorations of personal life in therapies (Riessman, 2008). Riessman emphasises that ‘even though the method budded in the 60s it flowered in the 80s with significant work guided by the feminist dictum, “the personal is political”’ (p.15). The narrative turn, has been largely shaped by the works of Mishler (1986; 1991), Polkinghorne (1988), Denzin (1998), Riessman (1993; 2008) and Cortazzi (1993), among other researchers. Worth noting is the fact that there is no single narrative method, and this is further underlined by the different definitions of narratives. These definitions have predominantly been crafted by the disciplines that employ narrative analysis.

Since the 1960s, narrative analysis has been used across disciplines like ‘history, anthropology, folklore, psychology, sociolinguistics, communication studies, and sociology and in professions that include law, medicine, nursing, education, and occupational therapy’ (Riessman & Quinney, 2005, p. 392). There is an assumption that links narrative inquiry to realist, postmodern and constructionist strands of knowledge production, which seems to support the assertion that there are many arguments as to its origins (Cortazzi, 1993; Riessman, 1993). Because of the acceptance and rise of postmodern and qualitative research methods, narratives have become regarded as valid means of producing knowledge (Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 1990).

In defining narratives that focus on personal accounts, Riessman and Quinney (2005, p. 394) use a continuum which categorises the narratives according to discipline and structure. At the beginning of the continuum, they view historical and anthropological narratives as encompassing an entire story, created from threads of interviews, observations and documents. In the middle of the continuum is the sociological and psychological based definition, where personal narratives embrace extended accounts of lives in context. These accounts are achieved through single or multiple interviews. Finally, there is the discrete story that can translate into a series of other stories, and they perceive this definition as restrictive within the sociolinguistic framework. The continuum further underlines Riessman’s (1993) assertion that narrative inquiry can best be defined

within the discipline or profession within which it is studied. Nevertheless, some scholars have attempted to give a general definition of narrative analysis. Riessman (1993) defines a narrative as a talk organised around significant events, yet Freeman (1984, p. 7) sees it as 'a way of ordering the landscape of events', and Labov (1997) considers narratives to be stories about past events. Propp (1968) and Labov (1972) have also viewed narratives as stories with a particular structural pattern. This perspective, has influenced their 'structuralist approach' to narratives (see also Silverman, 1993), where they focus on the grammatical aspects of the story. Bruner (1990) is a proponent of the functional approach to narrative analysis, where the centre of attention is on meanings of stories people tell, on their lives. Plummer (1983) refers to the sociology of stories approach, where the focus is the significance of the context of the story to the storyteller. Overall, narratives have been considered to render various functions in people's lives.

These views on narratives seem to underline different approaches to narrative inquiry. This study focuses on narratives of personal experience. Labov (1997, p. 2) defines this narrative as, 'a report of a sequence of events that have entered into the biography of the speaker by a sequence of clauses that correspond to the order of the original events' - assuming that these events have 'entered into the speaker's biography because they are emotionally and socially evacuated, and transformed from raw experience'. Ochs and Capps (1996) also underline the fact that a personal narrative is born out of experience, emphasising that it further gives shape to experience. Accordingly, narratives and self remain inextricably intertwined. Both Labov, and Ochs and Capps' perceptions of a personal narrative speak to how the event of pregnancy had entered into the biography of the young girls participating in this study, as it was being transformed from raw experience, their life experiences.

As researcher it was heart rending at times to listen to the adolescent mothers give their emotional accounts, as they struggled to make meaning of their new roles of mothers and learners in difficult conditions. As a researcher, I felt continuously challenged by trying to keep the participants focused on matters of relevance in this context, at the same time as allowing them to narrate their life stories. Talking about experiences is not always neat and sanitised and in such circumstances there tends to be a propensity for researchers to lose track or try to bring closure to the study (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I should also indicate that it was complex for me simply to leave the field, as the relationship between

the participants and I had gone beyond the researcher and the researched framework. At the same time, I had to acknowledge the fact that what is told and the meaning of what is told is shaped by the relationship between the researcher and the story (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I had not preplanned how I would relate to the participants, but I had approached the field with an open mind and allowed our interactions to create a relationship that would ensure that the subsequent interviews would be carried out in relaxed and fulfilling environments.

Even if the definitions seem to vary, narratives tend to find meaning from how events have been placed within them; significantly, some common threads seem to be found in many narratives. Examples of these include sequence and consequence (Fraser, 2004; Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Riessman, 1993) and thematic sequencing (Michaels, in Riessman, 1993). Riessman emphasises that the shape and meaning of the narrative is generally altered by where one chooses to begin or end it. Because meanings in a personal narrative are derived from what the self experiences, a narrative tends to foreground subjectivity and it uses rich descriptive language (Lawler, 2002; Plummer, 2001), a value that distinguishes it as a qualitative research method. This results in the research being converted into a form of storytelling (Lawler, 2002; Plummer, 2001). The actual analysis of the narratives is perceived as hermeneutic; an invariable engagement with the text ensures an understanding of the participant's viewpoint and their context, tracing the transfer of information and experience in a way that deepens the meaning of language and social life (Fraser, 2004; Jones, 2004; Labov, 1997). In the same manner, the telling does not only reveal the teller's experiences, but also their identity (Carr, 1986; Lieblich, 1998).

Mention needs to be made of the limitations that come with using narratives for analysing data. Riessman (1993) argues that narratives come with repeated transformations, as we continually interpret and create texts at every point, and endeavour to represent the primary experience, to which we have no access, with our own creations of language. Even if our final goal is to tell 'the truth', narratives about other narratives are our worldly creations (Riessman, 1993, p. 15), and meaning is always fluid and shaped by the context of the narrative. What we are dealing with is talk that represents reality, moderately and selectively.

Finally, I am convinced that narrative analysis is a valuable framework within which to listen to the life stories of the young mothers. Consequently, I approached the narratives with an open mind, with the view that meaning depended on the context and shape taken by each narrative. During the analysis, I strove to present the young mothers' stories holistically, taking caution to avoid fragmenting their narratives and meanings in the process.

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## **NARRATIVES AND LIFE HISTORIES IN FEMINIST RESEARCH**

Alongside the narrative approach, the study also drew on the principles of life history methodology. Life histories and narratives are seen by some scholars as 'genre blurring' and considered 'to tear down walls' (Hatch & Wiesniewski, 1995, p. 114). The conviction is that they both rely on the subjective stories constructed by people in different contexts. Each inquiry focuses on a lived experience, thus offering an option for relating the lives and stories of people to the understanding of broader human and social phenomena (Hatch & Wiesniewski, 1995, p. 114). Since life histories are stories of people's lives, narratives, and what needs comprehension is the connection; we make sense of our life through stories we tell about our lives. A life history is always a history of a single life told from a particular point of view, and the narrative may be the particular way of telling that life (Hatch & Wiesniewski, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1995).

Some scholars consider the life history to be subsumed within the broader narrative genre, as it is itself a form of narrative (Hatch & Wiesniewski, 1995). This consideration underscores the fact that, whilst this is possible, not all life histories are narratives. The distinction therefore is that whilst a life history is the individual's story told from his/her point of view, the narrative maybe the telling style of that particular story (Polkinghorne, 1995). On the other hand, if both life history and narrative were to be considered as methods, further distinction would be in the role of context. Whilst the narrative focuses on making meaning of individual experiences, life history draws on the individual's experience to make broader contextual meaning of the individual's entire life (Hatch & Wiesniewski, 1995). Regardless of the equivocation on what life history is and what narratives entail, I perceived the adolescent mothers' life histories as narratives of their lives. Subsequently I drew on the principles of life history research in making meaning of these life history narratives, and employed narrative analysis in analysing them. A relevant question then is the significance of life history in the broad feminist qualitative framework.

Broadly, the life history method is conventionally a qualitative method based on humanistic concerns with individual lives and the importance of subjective insight. It has been closely linked to the interpretive and symbolic interactionist sociology of the Chicago school in the 1930s (Clifford, 1986). The life history method has been argued by feminist to 'reflect(s) a multiplicity of experiences and world views, that it is the best suited method

for understanding the experiences of black women, because of their multiple social roles, which are acted simultaneously' (Etter-Lewis, 1991, p. 56). I believed that in this respect the method would be suitable for exploring and seeking to understand the simultaneous roles of adolescent mothers who are still learners at school.

Life histories tend to link the participants to their social systems for a deeper understanding of their subjective experiences. In this study, the approach further afforded the adolescent mothers the opportunity to discuss their experiences in their own voices, thus promoting the feminist viewpoint that affirms the goal of enabling women to speak on their own, i.e. giving voice to the voiceless. However, there is debate about how much the researcher's own voice should be present in the final analysis (Reinharz, 1993), which always presents as a challenge.

The life history approach serves to link the personal and the political circumstances in research, a major tenet of feminist research, in that a thorough qualitative exploration of the person is just as important as research into broader and more unrestricted aspects of societal life. The life history approach places peoples' lives in explicit shifting historical social patterns in ways that make sense to both participants and the researcher (Clifford, 1986; Stanley, 1994). Participants are able to furnish their histories of growing up in areas and times that are different from their current positions, but the life histories enable them to present coherent episodes of their narratives, even if the lives described fitted into dissimilar circumstances. The emphasis is on the link between the individual's life and the social system. This approach can also be very helpful in exploring how much the participants directly understand the social worlds in which they live, and equally enable the promotion of sensitising concepts (Plummer, 1983), a key tenet of feminist methodology.

The approach further promotes consciousness raising within the research process. Plummer (1983) underscores the fact that the life history approach involves establishing and maintaining a close relationship with the participant, but warns against compromising anonymity. It serves as an empowerment measure to women, as it affords them the ability to talk about their lives. When women speak, they reveal hidden realities about their lives that may challenge the truths of official accounts and established theories (Anderson, Armitage, Jack, & Wittner, 1990). Life histories therefore explore social life from the vantage point of women, and researchers have to create a written record of the participant's



life from the participant's own perspective in their own words, a principle that is equally foregrounded in feminist research. This may also encourage readers to understand a socio-political problem in individual terms (Maynard, 1994; Reinharz, 1992). Thus, the method was used in this study as part of the data collection tools for its appropriateness and association to the narrative. The combination of life histories and narrative analysis afforded me the appropriate framework for this purpose, but I also noted that there was a substantial overlap between the two.

## **THE STUDY AND THE PROCESS OF RESEARCH**

### **Aims and the research questions**

The broad aim of the study was to explore the experiences of parenting among a group of school-going adolescent mothers from selected high schools in Khayelitsha, Cape Town.

The study intended to explore the adolescent mothers' gendered subjective experiences and their social contexts, in order to unpack their personalised, interpersonal and broad contextual experiences of being young mothers attempting to continue with their education.

A number of research questions guided the collection of the life history narratives. Research questions are powerful in guiding the research process. They connect the research objectives to the practical world of specific and concrete data and data indicators in the actual research (Punch, 1998; 2003). In this way, they assist in organising and creating coherence in the research. This coherence is created within delimited boundaries, which means that the researcher is kept focused, and within limits during the entire research process. Research questions point to the crucial data for the research, and in this way, they guide data collection and data analysis. Using research questions that partly project the themes to be analysed also serves as a form of 'analytic bridging' (Miller, 1997, p. 36). This implies that they do not only work as a guide for data collection, but also guide the analysis process. In this study, I used research questions as a guide to conceptualising my study, and ensuring that I accessed data from the participants' different social positions and interactions that spoke to these concerns. The guiding research questions focused on three major areas: the adolescent mother's pregnancy, her new role as mother, and how motherhood was balanced with being a learner at school. These are the key concerns the research questions intended to explore:

- What was the context of pregnancy and how did the participants feel about it?
- How did participants construct their new roles of mother with respect to having a child? Here the concern was to explore what motherhood meant to the adolescent mothers.
- How did the participants feel about their transition to the new roles of mother, and what were their reported feelings and experiences within these new roles?
- What were the gendered experiences of motherhood; that is how did mothers, their partners, and families understand their role in parenting and those of their male partners? In addition, how did participants report practising parenting and to what extent was this gendered?
- What was the context of care regarding the child? For example, in whose care were the children when the adolescent mother was at school? How did participants feel about the arrangements, considering the broad structure of the extended family within most African contexts and environments?
- How did participants' position as school learners with a child impact on their relationship with their peers, parents, family and the community more broadly?
- What were the reported experiences of adolescent school going mothers in the school context? How did participants report balancing the load of schoolwork and motherhood? To what extent did they report experiencing support from the school for their academic and personal challenges?

## Participants

Participants were drawn from three schools in Khayelitsha Township<sup>2</sup> in Cape Town. The site was convenient and appropriate with respect to issues of access and trust for myself as the researcher, as I had been a contract educator in one of the schools and had worked closely with pregnant and parenting learners. This is predominantly a Xhosa speaking community, which is characterised by overcrowding, extreme poverty, high rates of unemployment, and high incidence of violent crimes and brutality. Khayelitsha is Cape Town's biggest township and the second largest in South Africa. The township consists of both formal and informal settlements, although the latter are in the majority. The population, which is 100% urban, is over 400 000, with a population density of 6.2 persons per square kilometre (Khayelitsha Urban Profile, 2003). There are 17 high schools in Khayelitsha and I used random sampling to select three schools. The schools are largely in the same vicinity but the neighbourhoods vary significantly. Mew Way High school is located in an area predominantly inhabited by informal households, mostly shacks. The security at the school gate is provided by armed police. Buhle High, about three kilometres away from Mew Way High, is surrounded by both informal and formal dwellings, and the school security is not as extreme, with a security guard operating the entrance. Finally, Magama High is mainly surrounded by formal households. The schools fall within a radius of two to four kilometres of each other. Convenience sampling was employed in selecting the participants for the study. In one of the schools, two participants who had initially given consent changed their minds. Snowball sampling was then utilised to keep the number of participants at 15.

All respondents were Xhosa-speaking, and either originated from the Eastern Cape or the Western Cape. All came from either working class or low-income backgrounds. What was evident in the data was an underlying 'other' narrative of poverty. In most households, there was no stable income. Most of the respondents came from female-headed households and the parents were either domestic servants or selling wares or food at the local market. In cases where the family could afford the basics, it was because the older siblings were in employment and assisting the parent(s).

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<sup>2</sup>This is a township historically created within the apartheid group areas act

The following table summarises the biographical and personal circumstances of the participants. For ethical reasons I had asked the Life Orientation teachers to exclude those who were below 15 years, but I discovered that a number of the participants had had their babies when they were 15 or even younger, but they were above that age at the time of interviewing.

SCHOOL	PARTICIPANT NAMES <sup>3</sup>	AGE	CHILD/AGE/SEX		HOME CIRCUMSTANCES
Buhle High School	Tumeka	19	5 months	Girl	Lives with both parents
	Thembisile	18	4 years	Girl	Lives with mother but usually alone with baby
	Lee	16	14 months	Boy	Lives with both parents
	Masi	16	12 months	Boy	Lives with mother, father deceased
Mew Way High School	Lethiwe	18	2 years	Girl	Lives with uncle, parents in the Eastern Cape
	Nikiwe	18	2 years	Girl	Lives with elder sister
	Nozibele	16	5 months	Girl	Lives with mother
	Liziwe	16	7 months	Boy	Lives with both parents
	Lolo	18	3 months	Boy	Lives with father, mother deceased
	Thobeka	19	15 months	Boy	Lives with mother
Magama High School	Noma	19	3 months	Boy	Lives with mother
	Sharon	18	13 months	Boy	Lives with father
	Phathiswa	16	5 months	Boy	Lives with both parents
	Tiny	18	16 months	Girl	Lives with mother
	Sive	20	3 years	Girl	Lives with mother

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms are used for the schools and the participants for ethical reasons

This table also includes participants' home context. Of the 15 young mothers interviewed, only four (27%) lived with both parents, and 11 (73%) came from family structures that either had only a mother or a father. Several studies, which view adolescents as problematic, have linked the occurrence of adolescent pregnancy with home and domestic environments (De Villiers, 1985, cited in Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1992). The focus of this study is to explore how the adolescent mothers experienced motherhood, and the context of the home will be understood within the broad framework of their own constructions of motherhood.

### **Positionality and situated knowledges**

In feminist research, the position of the researcher within the research process is of fundamental value. Feminist research, as highlighted above, acknowledges the way the researcher shapes the research process, and how the researcher's own experiences have a bearing on the entire course of knowledge production and representation. Harding's (1987) standpoint theory argues that society is structured in a way that produces knowledge and power, since people's actions and interactions have an effect on what they know. Even if people happen to be knowledgeable, what they can possibly do is determined by their positioning within their societies. They can be the dominant, marginalised or oppressed group, but this positioning of the researched is critical for knowledge production. Harding (2007) further argues that the oppressed and marginalised have the capacity to produce crucial knowledge, which can enable them to transform their lives for the better. As the oppressed group, they have to struggle against the 'apparent realities made to appear natural and obvious by dominant institutions and against the ongoing political disempowerment of oppressed groups' (p.51).

Thus, researchers are encouraged to start from the lives of those disadvantaged, before moving onto the institutions and structures that disadvantage them. Harding's theory entails a deep understanding of the positionality and knowledge creation in this research process, bearing in mind that all knowledge is socially situated, as it bears the imprint of the society within which it occurs (Harding, 2007). The different positionality of women within their societies leads to the production of different knowledges. Within this notion is the belief that truth and reality are socially constructed and dependant on the person who constructs them. It is with this in mind that I listened to the different narratives. I was

conscious of the fact that the truths told by the participants were their own constructions and reflected their subjective experiences. As I listened to the young mothers, it was evident that there were unrecognised resources that the young mothers could draw on to improve their lives, but because of their positioning within their institutions, it was not easy for them to do so. What they understood about their institutions and the relationship dynamics with their authority figures constrained them from accessing knowledge that would improve their lot as pregnant and mothering learners, as evident below.

Exploring issues of pregnancy and motherhood is potentially a sensitive area of research, as it is in part an investigation into women's sexuality and intimate interpersonal relationships. I therefore had to be especially ethically considerate in every step I took in the process. After obtaining permission from the Department of Education to carry out the research in the schools, I consulted with the school principals. The principal introduced me to the Life Orientation teachers in all three schools. The expectation is that since Life Orientation educators work as life skills mentors, students should make use of their expertise in their circumstances. After all the necessary consultations and consent procedure with both the adolescent mothers and their parents, I focused on gaining the trust of the participants. My main concern was conducting the interviews within the school. This meant that interviews had to be conducted discreetly, yet I had to allow my participants the right to choose spaces in which they felt most comfortable. This varied from school to school, and it was determined by the most appropriate times provided by the participants. What this practically meant was that I had to spend numerous days in the schools working around the young mothers' most convenient schedules. Some educators and learners in these institutions mistook me for a staff member, but the participants always referred to me as 'sisi'<sup>4</sup> a term they did not use when referring to their educators, which comfortably removed me from the staff cluster.

My initial effort was to focus on developing a close relationship with the participants. The research focused on a private part of their lives, their pregnancy, and motherhood, and I had to earn their trust before we created the life history narratives. The first interviews were challenging, as I tried to reach out and connect with the young mothers, amid an atmosphere of reticence. As a result, the first interviews were based on the question, 'Tell

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<sup>4</sup>Literally means 'sister' a Xhosa term usually used when referring to an adult female

me about yourself.’ There was no mention of pregnancy and motherhood throughout the initial sessions with all the participants. This helped to relax the participants and lessen the initial uncertainty.

What I noticed as soon as the interviews started was that a number of the participants were anxious about being judged. One of my participants, Tiny, hastily indicated that one thing she hated when talking to anyone about being a mother was that people tended to be judgemental. As this came up within the first interviews, whilst I was still trying to create rapport with the participants, I made sure I would not make that mistake. Interestingly, after three interviews with the same participant, we were quite close but her last remarks after the final interview were:

Actually, I feel so light now that I have spoken about what I went through. It has been so heavy on me and telling it to a stranger feels so much better, as I said, I hate being judged.

The apprehension was however allayed by the second interviews. From then on, the most crucial aspect was listening. Listening also involved paying attention to ‘unarticulated experience’ that is constructed and shaped by the incongruence of language (De Vault & Liza, 2002, p. 94). De Vault and Gross (2007) term this type of listening, ‘radical active listening’, which involves a fully engaged connection, where the researcher not only listens to the spoken word but also considers what lies beyond non-verbal communication. This means listening for gaps, silences, and different patterns of speech. The assumption is that women often use language that is bordering on everyday language to explain their experiences. In such circumstances, female interviewers tend to understand and even effect translations of these loaded expressions by virtue of being women themselves (De Vault, 1999). For example, one of the participants, Sharon, said ‘at home I cook, clean up, and do my homework’; and another, Lolo, said ‘I am in charge ... my father gives me money and I do the shopping, I am actually running the house.’ These statements do not accurately express their experiences, but if their meaning were to be further unpacked and the experiences translated one would actually understand the ‘real experiences’ the adolescent mothers went through. It is such listening that De Vault and Liza (2002) emphasise. A further step would be for feminist researchers to listen so attentively that they focus ‘attention on the unsaid’ in order to produce it as a topic and make it speakable (p. 97).

Consequently, I listened to the life history narratives attentively. I further realised that the more I listened without interruption, the more they opened up. What struck me was that in the creation of their life histories, the participants did not only concentrate on their personal lives, but these lives were narrated within social and cultural frameworks. Their stories did not only illuminate their experiences as mothers, but also mapped out their relationship dynamics. These were associations with partners, parents, friends and educators. In essence, their stories had imprints of their social and cultural contexts.

Although the focus was on their partial life histories relating to pregnancy and motherhood, much of their talk related to other aspects of their lives, or particular cultural norms, expectations and relatives who impacted on their lives. As a result, as I listened to these narratives, I could not help but hear several other narratives that ran concurrently or were intertwined with the main narrative.

All interviews were held within the school premises either during break, lunch or after school, before the participants went for extra mural activities. Most schools are generally characterised by high noise levels during these times, and even if we managed to get quiet venues, which ensured that there were no interruptions for the duration of interviews, background noise was often audible on the tape recordings. It was nice to have lunch or drinks with the participants during the 45 minutes to 1-hour interview sessions. I provided drinks and snacks, considering that participants would have sacrificed their lunch breaks, or even spared an hour after school to talk to me. For the duration of the interviewing process, I spent a large amount of time at the schools. An average of three to four interviews were held with each participant, and the pace of each interview was determined by the participants.

In addition, the interview venues were not fixed but dependent on the most comfortable spaces available at the time. In one school, there was a quiet room at the back of the school library, and in another school, a quiet office. My intention was to keep my interviewees anonymous, from each other and the rest of the students. Because I spent most of the day on the school premises, some participants would visit me in our interview venue for a chat even if I had no sessions with them on that particular day. In this way, some of them did find out about each other, and some of them were friends by virtue of being mothers.



## **CONDUCTING THE LIFE HISTORY INTERVIEW**

The life history interview was used in the creation of the life history narratives. The life history interview uses general guidelines in order to keep the participants focused (Plummer, 1983). In qualitative research, unstructured in depth interviews provide a way of generating data about the social world as people talk about their lives (Banister et al., 1994; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Interviews tend to provide more insight into the participant's social world if conducted within their space, in their communities (Plummer, 1983). At the same time, in depth interviews are preferred by feminist researchers for promoting complete interaction between the researcher and the participant (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; 1997). During this interaction, responses to interview questions are 'actively constructed on the spot', which means that the researcher has to facilitate the participant's ease and willingness to talk by being both attentive and responsive to the interview process (Plummer, 1983, p. 145). Life history research is a process, never quite finished and one can return and ask more. The life history interview was conducted repeatedly to explore different aspects of participants' lives in their context.

### **Repeated interviews**

Repeated interviews enhanced the bonds that had developed between the participants and myself (Reinharz, 1992). Furthermore, the interviews shaped the diversity and uniqueness of each life history narrative, and there was more reflection on the participants' experiences as the process progressed (Oakley, 1990). They were all young mothers attending schools in the same community, yet the diversity in their circumstances reflected this uniqueness. Repeating interviews also offered me the opportunity to revisit issues and seek clarification where I thought the life histories had not addressed the research question adequately. Before proceeding to the next interview, I would listen to and transcribe the previous interview, and this assisted in orientating the consequent interviews with each participant. This was extremely time-consuming, as I could not afford research assistants. However, the advantage was that I had extensive knowledge of each life history narrative that was created, and could constantly reflect on my position and the implications for the research process.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

I realised that the power relationship between the respondents and me could not be completely subverted. I am a mature educator and mother of adolescents, which placed me in a position of authority over the respondents. I was also brought up in a society that largely condemned adolescent pregnancy, which would have influenced the research process and subsequent data analysis. However, my concern for adolescents, as a mother and educator enabled me to create a bond with the respondents that ensured an interactive research process regardless of the power relationship. Before and after the interviews I would engage with the respondents on various issues pertaining to their schoolwork, and at times learnt more of their social life. Initially, as already indicated, it was not easy to get the life stories flowing from the respondents and I had to guide and probe, but as we progressed to the second and subsequent rounds of interviews, they opened up and were even keen to know when my next visit would be.

I also observed that because of the relationship that had developed between the respondents and me, an ethic of caring emerged. An ethic of caring focuses attention on the vast needs of the research population and expresses a commitment to learn and respond to those needs in the research setting (Leonard, 2002). I remember one respondent was not sure of what she needed to do in order to obtain a birth certificate for her child. She had not done so soon after the delivery of the child and had lost all required documentation. I assisted by referring her to the relevant authorities. Furthermore, another respondent with a sick child had fears of alerting the school authorities of her predicament. I encouraged her to talk to the school counsellor and it worked out very well for her. She was given a school pass and her teachers were notified of the condition of her child, and everyone was so understanding that she later confessed to living a new life regardless of the challenges she encountered. It was not mere collection of data, but a relationship also developed between some respondents and me.

I should also acknowledge that changes occurred in my own life. Listening to the different voices narrate their feelings of joy, pain, anguish, shame etc., compelled me to reflect more deeply on young motherhood. I am an educator myself and part of the anguish participants expressed derived from the attitudes and actions of educators towards the young mothers. The whole process of spending hours listening to the adolescent mothers deliberate on their

relationships with their parents, partners and the communities at large was an opportunity that called on me to reflect on my interactions with my own adolescent children, what my own perceptions and even the way I treated them meant to them. It was a moment of self-introspection as I wondered if I had listened to them enough. I remember one of my participants, Sive, saying;

My mother was so strict that she would not bother to listen to you ... we hardly talked and she never had time to listen or explain this and that ... I feel that she does not talk to me like other mothers do to their daughters ... If she spoke and maybe made one see things the way she thought, maybe I could have handled myself in a different manner.

I wondered what my own adolescent children would say about my parenting skills. I also speculated on whether I had listened to the participants enough in the creation of their life history narratives. I further reflected on my attitude to learners in general as an educator. Above all, it was difficult to bring closure to the interviews as the participants enjoyed talking to this 'stranger.' Having created the life histories it was a daunting task to decide on the most appropriate method of analysing them without fragmenting and compromising meaning. I eventually settled for thematic narrative analysis.

### **THEMATIC NARRATIVE ANALYSIS**

I employed a thematic narrative analysis in the analysis of the adolescent mothers' partial life histories. The narrative analysis explores what motherhood means to the adolescents. It further investigates how they balance their simultaneous roles of mothers and learners at school. In the early stages of the analysis, I toyed with various methods of narrative analysis, looking for a method that would best articulate the adolescent mothers' voices in this particular context. Attempts were made to employ Gergen's (1985) story line approach, Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch's (2003) listening guide, Richmond's (2002) story map approach and Labov's (1972) structural analysis. In my search for the most appropriate model or method of analysis I came across Riessman's (2008) discussion of four approaches to narrative analysis, among which was the thematic narrative approach. I believed this approach would be most applicable to my analysis.

Thematic narrative analysis provides a framework through which the adolescent mothers' stories are examined. Riessman (2008) gives a detailed explanation of the narrative thematic approach and the following is an adaptation of her method. In using this approach, the stories are kept 'intact.' Whilst all narrative analysis is basically concerned about the 'content' of the story, thematic narrative analysis focuses primarily on 'what' is said rather than 'how' it is said to 'whom' or for 'what purpose' (Riessman, 2008, p. 54).

Thematic narrative analysis is similar to grounded theory and interpretive phenomenological analysis. Instead of thematically coding data, which is fracturing the data, the story is kept intact as its sequence is maintained. This is what makes the narrative thematic approach slightly different from the traditional qualitative thematic analysis and from other forms of narrative analysis.

Riessman (2008) further emphasises that thematic narrative analysis adapts Mishler's distinction as it focuses only on the 'told' and not the aspects of the telling. In my research, I conducted the life history interviews predominantly in Xhosa. Transcription was followed by translation into English. Translation is considered a way of retelling the story; it is in a way the narrator's representation of the teller's story (Mishler, 1991; Riessman, 1993), and therefore bound to affect the story's linguistic finesse. Whilst all precaution was taken and attention paid to the transcription process, to ensure an accurate presentation of the life histories, the interference with the linguistic flair of the narratives could not be circumvented. It is within this context that I consider thematic narrative analysis appropriate for this study for its focus on the content of the narrative. This does not imply that language is of no significance in the analysis process; language is actually used rather as a resource and not a topic of inquiry (Riessman, 2008), as it is in the discursive based and traditional forms of narrative analysis.

Initially I worked through each narrative, isolating and ordering key events but maintaining the sequence of the story. Secondly, I identified the key underlying factors in each narrative, naming them. Some cases were then selected to show the general pattern in the stories. Underlying concepts in different stories were also compared and contrasted. Data were then analysed through themes developed out of this process. The whole analysis was guided by four key concepts that had been used as a guide in the collection of the partial life histories. Over and above the four major factors, the mothers spoke about their children

and the parenting dynamics in bringing up the children in both their homes and communities. The narratives did not and could not focus on their entire lives.

Usually within a thematic narrative approach the researchers pay less attention to the way the story unfolds or the interviewer's role in constituting the process, and the local context is not deeply explored. Since this study is carried out within a broader feminist framework, which categorically emphasises the relationship between the researcher and the researched, I firmly located myself within both the study and the interpretive process. This entailed a deep understanding of the micro and macro issues that shaped the adolescents' life histories. I did not merely collect the life history narratives; I was part of the creation of the narratives. This underlines the fact that, whilst a thematic narrative approach has been used as the key approach to the analysis of this data, a few modifications were employed to circumvent losing the focus of the broader context of the study.

Thematic narrative analysis has also been understood within a social constructionist framework in this study. Social constructionist research illuminates the different versions of the world and further reveals how these constructions make certain actions possible and others less so (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). I paid particular attention to the notion that all ways of understanding are historically and culturally relative (Burr, 1995). We make meaning from our lived experiences, and our thoughts are shaped by our history and culture. More so, particular attention was given to the adolescent mothers' social context as I listened to their stories, narrated within their social and cultural spaces. It was evident throughout that a strong framing narrative was that of poverty which was interwoven with participants' narratives on being mothers and learners.

### **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The study was conscious of the sensitivity surrounding the issues of pregnancy and motherhood, as it was in part an investigation into sexuality and intimate interpersonal relationships. After obtaining permission from the Department of Education to carry out the research in the schools, I consulted with the school principals and then the Life Orientation teachers in all three schools. Consultations were further held with the learners who were then given written parental consent letters in their home language (Appendix Four). Parental consent was obtained by means of signed communication between the

parents/guardians and the researcher. The adolescents who participated in the study had consented to doing so and had returned signed parental consent. For ethical and legal purposes, further consent from participants was achieved and a contract drawn up between the researcher and the participants (Appendix One and Three). All participants did this based on informed consent, and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and that they could leave the research process at any point if they so wished. I further ensured that the respondents were spared from any unnecessary pain or negative feelings by trying to make the interview sessions friendly and informal. Those respondents who indicated that they required further consultation were referred accordingly. Both the names of the schools and participants were changed for purposes of anonymity. It was difficult to interview pregnant learners, as most of them did not want to be involved with the teaching staff. School policy expected them to stay away from school as soon as their pregnancy started showing, and they were only expected to resume their studies after delivery. Consequently, 15 young mothers with children ranging from three months to four years were interviewed from Mew Way High School, Buhle Senior Secondary, and Magama High Schools in Khayelitsha.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the broad methodological framework within which the study was carried out. I have also detailed the research process, highlighting all the steps followed in conducting the research, including methods of data collection, recruitment of participants, methods of data analysis and ethical considerations. Thematic narrative analysis has been identified as the framework within which the narratives were examined. In this framework, I acknowledge that life histories are narratives but not all narratives are life histories. In this case, the thematic narrative analysis pays particular attention to both the content of the life histories and the context within which they were created. Language is not emphasised as a point of inquiry but it will be used as a resource. The analysis will follow the adolescent mothers' narrated experiences of their pregnancy and motherhood experiences at school, home and in their communities.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### MOTHERHOOD NARRATIVES: THE VOICES OF ADOLESCENT MOTHERS

#### Introduction

This chapter gives a detailed analysis of the reported experiences and constructions of pregnancy and becoming a mother of adolescent girls who have decided to continue in school after having their babies. Initially, the chapter maps out the context of pregnancy, highlighting the different experiences thereof. The social construction of adolescent motherhood as a problem and objectionable is explored as a framework within which the young mothers expose their feelings and experiences at realising they were pregnant. The reconstruction of identity is broadly outlined as the young mothers reveal what being pregnant and becoming a mother means to them. The chapter then maps out the various constructions of motherhood as espoused in the adolescents' experiential voices.

#### PREGNANCY EXPERIENCES

##### **The context of pregnancy**

Most of the adolescent mothers indicated that they were in steady relationships at the time of conception. The relationships had been going on for a minimum of three months and up to more than a year. In some cases the young mothers were dating men who were far older than they were. Nine of the 15 respondents were in this position. Given what we know about adolescent sexuality, I assumed that relationships might reflect complex power dynamics, in which the girls' sexual negotiation may have been compromised in some cases (Shefer, 1999; Varga, 1997; 2003). Evidence of unequal gendered power dynamics was indeed substantiated in some adolescent mothers' narratives on the dynamics of childcare and parenting, discussed in the next chapter. Six participants were dating school learners of similar age to themselves, and four of the male partners were attending school in other nearby institutes. Two of the respondents were in the same school with the father of their child. In both cases the girls were sent home to deliver their babies, and the fathers continued with their education as if nothing had happened. The young mothers in each case did not report the fathers to the responsible authorities and they were left to continue

unhindered with their schooling. According to the 2007 Western Cape Education Department (WCED) policy on managing learner pregnancy, if a male learner is responsible for the pregnancy, the school principal and the professionals from the Specialized Learner and Educator Support should collaboratively ensure that the male learner receives counselling, and is 'provided with information on matters of sexuality, responsibility for actions and the legal implications of obligation of rights' (2.2.2 (b)). The policy further stipulates that should the male learner be in another school the same procedure should apply but emphasis in both instances is on confidentiality. This section of the policy remains largely dormant; in that the adolescent mothers do not go to the trouble of informing the school authorities in cases where male learners at their schools are the biological fathers. One understands the lack of fervour to do so, as the school is only expected to counsel and educate the male learner on issues of reproductive health. In essence the policy permits male learner fathers to continue with school normally, whilst female learners are forced to 'drop out' at least for some time, even if they resume schooling after the baby. Although the Department of Education is commended for upholding the adolescent parents' constitutional right to education, it is evident that the implementation remains highly gendered and partial.

### **Pregnant and scared**

As outlined in the previous chapters, pregnancy and motherhood among school going adolescent girls have been construed as unacceptable in various communities (see Phoenix, 1989; Rowley, 2002; Wilson 1993). Consequently, pregnant adolescent girls have often endured suffering and apprehension. Most of the participants in this study reported experiencing fear and uncertainty on the issue of pregnancy. One of the biggest challenges was how to break the news to their parents followed by the worry of merging into their social worlds in their 'temporary transformed bodies'. A number of girls narrated cases of severe agitation as they constantly worried over the best way to communicate the pregnancy to their parents or guardians. Research highlights how most pregnant adolescents go through depression and fear, particularly related to concerns about the reaction of family and friends (Marlene & Mackey, 1998) and at times their partners. Such anxiety was endemic among participants. Nonetheless, participants revealed a large amount of strategic negotiation in 'breaking the news' to their family, usually their mothers, in order to diffuse the impact.



In her narrative, Nozibele said that because she could not face her mother, she had to write a letter informing her of the pregnancy. She smuggled it into her handbag so that her mother discovered it on her own, probably at her workplace. The assumption was that whatever the devastation her mother might experience, she would ‘cool off,’ before coming home, which reportedly, worked for her. This is what she says:

I did not have enough courage to face her (mother) so I decided to write her a letter telling her about my pregnancy. I did that then I put the letter in her handbag and I knew she would see it either on her way to work or at work...when she came home in the evening for sure she had seen the letter. She called me and asked me about it.

In another instance, Tumeka revealed a similar strategic response in which she recruited the support of her aunt to ‘break the news’. She described how she requested her aunt (her mother’s younger sister) to insinuate to her mother the fact that she could possibly be pregnant. The purpose of this, as she saw it, was to psychologically prepare her mother for the trauma her pregnancy was bound to cause. She feared that a sudden breaking of the pregnancy news could compromise her mother’s health:

When my pregnancy was confirmed, I told my aunt (mother’s sister). I just told her that I had been to the clinic and they said I was not feeling well. She asked what the problem was and I gave her the pregnancy confirmation note. She read it and exclaimed that I was pregnant. She insisted that I tell my mother but I could not and I begged her to take the message to her on my behalf. Actually, I had to tell her not to tell my mother that I had approached her but to insinuate...to ask mum if she thought I was still ‘okay’. I wanted her to prepare my mother psychologically, for my condition. My aunt did exactly that and my mother then asked if anything was wrong, then I had to tell her.

These examples show not only anxiety but also strategic ways of dealing with disclosure, which are illustrative of agency and thoughtfulness on the part of these participants.

For many participants the overriding experience was one of anxiety, fear, guilt and isolation with respect to disclosure, as evident in Tiny's narrative. Tiny fell pregnant whilst she was in primary school and this terrified her. Her biggest fear was that she was young and everyone was bound to condemn her for falling pregnant. She feared her mother most, as she would consider her pregnancy to be a betrayal of her trust. She even contemplated abortion but once again knew that her mother would never forgive her for that. Her friends were not supportive of her either and she felt isolated and yet burdened with trying to find a solution. Her burden is revealed in the following extract from her narrative:

I had this guilty conscience because of what I had done, I was so scared. I was thinking of many things. I remember the first thing that came to my mind and I really wanted to do was to abort. Yet I was very scared of that and particularly I was scared of my mother. If I aborted, I would have destroyed her because I know her stance on people 'who kill,' according to her abortion is tantamount to murder ... This tormented me and my friends were not helpful either. I felt alone, all alone. I was scared of being judged by people because then I was very young and I knew that my pregnancy would break my mother's heart as she had so much trust in me.

Tiny's feelings were similar to those of a number of the other girls, even if their circumstances varied. They described their different fears and subsequent actions. Sive described how she left her home, moved to another township simultaneously dropping out of school without her mother's knowledge, to take refuge at her grandmother's, because she feared her mother. Likewise, Sharon felt that she had betrayed her teachers, who trusted and had faith in her, more than she had betrayed her parents:

Here at school I am an open character, the 'teachers' child'. I volunteer to do this and that and the teachers always pick on me to represent the school in this and that, and it was like yoh!, what will Ms Moya say because we are very close, and it was like everyone was looking at me and I had supposedly betrayed the teachers as I was 'their angel' you see...I went through hell.

It appears that participants' distress diminished gradually with support, which emerged as a significant factor for participants. The narratives revealed that social and institutional support was central to handling challenges, and this notion ran throughout the narrations, juxtaposed to what Tiny revealed in the above quote of feelings of isolation, helplessness and susceptibility. Phathiswa corroborated this notion as follows:

When I realised I was pregnant, I thought of aborting because my parents were very strict and I could not face them. I sought for my sister's advice and she told me not to do it, but open up to mum because abortion might not be the best option; she was there for me at least, but still I could not face mum so she had to break the news to her.

After discovering that they were pregnant, a number of adolescent mothers initially considered abortion. The feeling usually arose out of fear and anxiety, related to the probable reaction of those close to the adolescent (Sweet, 1997). In essence they engaged in negotiating what could be considered as two 'wrongs': being pregnant and wanting to abort. South Africa is one of the few countries that have legalised abortion in Africa. Abortion is available on request in the first trimester of pregnancy (The Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Act [TOP] 1996). The act permits women to do so without the consent of their partners. More so, minors, that is, girls below the age of 18, have a right to terminate their pregnancy without the consent of their parents.

Research shows that whilst some communities are not yet well informed about their rights in this respect (Morrone, Meyer & Tibazarwa, 2006; NRC & IOM, 2005), considerable strides have been made in making abortion acceptable and accessible to young people (Jewkes & Rees, 2005). However, in spite of the positive impact of the legislation on issues of abortion, abortion in some South African communities remains highly stigmatised. In this community, the dynamics of religion and cultural beliefs were strong determinants of how individuals made choices in this regard. Thembisile, who got pregnant at 14 whilst still attending primary school, underlined this:

I did not even know I was pregnant ... When my boyfriend denied responsibility, my aunt suggested that I abort ... my mother refused that I go through with the abortion as she feared that I would die ... I

was very young and my understanding was very limited then, but then it was decided that I abort nevertheless. My uncle then moved me from his house (my home) to one of his children's house, my cousin in Pumula, a different location so that if I aborted our community would not know because of the stigma attached to it.

In this instance, the family was determined to carry out the abortion surreptitiously, for fear of being ostracised by their own community. Sive also substantiated this view when she said:

I had a friend who fell pregnant and then she aborted. My mother was very angry and she demanded that I stop associating with her, as she was a bad influence.

Previous studies have shown that pregnancy decisions among adolescent girls are highly determined by cultural ideas that are conflated with race, religion and cultural background, with some whites choosing abortion and adoption, and some blacks opting to carry their pregnancies to term and rear their children (Furstenberg, 1991; Hockaday et al., 2000; Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985; Hudson & Ineichen, 1991; Marsiglio & Menaghan, 1990; Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1991). It therefore follows that some black adolescent girls have been socialised to view abortion as disgraceful in their cultural enclaves. Even if they strongly believe that abortion could be the most viable option in their particular circumstances, it seems they would not proceed to such action. Phathiswa revealed that she was very determined to terminate her pregnancy, and her partner was supportive of the idea, even if he was reticent about his actual feelings regarding her pregnancy. Her parents however persuaded Phathiswa to carry the baby to term:

My boyfriend kept on saying that he did not want to be part of any decision I take concerning my pregnancy. That scared me. I was keen to abort but he kept on saying I should go ahead with it if that is what I wanted but he was not going to make decisions for me. I was to do what I thought was best for myself and not anyone. Therefore, I made up my mind to abort ... But when my mother said that I should not abort, I told him that I had changed my mind I was no longer going ahead with the

abortion as I had initially thought, because my parents were completely against the idea, that was the last I ever saw or heard from him up to today ... Maybe if I had aborted he would still have been with me ... I do not know, but when I told him that I was carrying the baby to term he disappeared, he deserted me.

This narration highlights how even if adolescent mothers and their partners were contemplating abortion as a means of resolution, they were not always empowered enough to act. Rather, they had to contend with numerous power dynamics. Key decisions concerning their pregnancies had to be carried out within a social and cultural framework highlighting the power of historically and culturally bound beliefs in shaping social practices and therefore subjective experience, as emphasised by the social constructionist position within which this study is framed (Burr, 1995).

Motherhood is practised within social and historical parameters that are characterised by different material resources and cultural constraints (Glenn, 1994), as are all other factors that shape it. Pregnant adolescents are not only expected to deal with their feelings, but also to contend with their families' religious and cultural norms, as well as values within the confines of their communities. Abortion still carries a stigma in this society, and this has a direct bearing on the decision the adolescent makes. They have little space to make any decisions about their own bodies. Broadly, their practices related to their bodies have to conform to cultural inscriptions and societal expectations of them as young women in their communities. Decisions are made for them and they are restrained from raising any challenges whatsoever. There was a particular silence in the adolescents' narratives around their legislative rights regarding The Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act. Traditionally societal control appears to be more binding on the lives of the adolescents than their own choices. Even if the girls were conscious of their legislative rights, these rights were considered a political issue that did not really affect their lives.

A number of participants also revealed multi layered emotions of anger at being deserted by their partners, and being angry and self-blaming for falling pregnant in the first place. They had been in relationships with these young men, and being deserted was experienced as a major loss and betrayal. They felt betrayed even if they understood that the pregnancies had not been planned. What they felt they needed most was support.

More than half of the participants, nine out of 15 had been deserted by the fathers of their babies in one way or another. Because most of the pregnancies had not been planned, some partners panicked at learning of the pregnancy and decided to terminate the relationship altogether, leaving the young mother all alone with the baby. Thembisile was one such case:

My boyfriend started playing hide and seek, and indicating that if ever I was pregnant then it definitely would not be his responsibility, so we should not even bother coming to his home on those grounds. Anyway my uncles proceeded to take me there and for sure, he denied responsibility or ever knowing me. I felt like a fool...He turned his back on us (the baby and me) completely and any time I made effort to get him to do something for the baby he would simply say he does not have a child and he was not going to pay for anything.

In some instances partners left for the city to look for jobs so that they could support both mother and child, but when they left, they never communicated or returned, leaving their own parents to assist the adolescent mother where they could or completely abandoning them. Lethiwe had such an experience:

What disturbed me most was thinking about my pregnancy and what I would do since my boyfriend had deserted ... I really hated myself for everything.

The feelings of anger were punctuated by embarrassment, self-blame, hatred and shame, which was brought about by their pregnancy and responses of others to this. This shame was further underlined by their failure to embrace the physical changes, a mark of pregnancy, in their bodies. Feelings of shame 'engender a desire for concealment and avoidance', and this is aggravated by fear of exposure, embarrassment and anxiety (Seu, 1998, p.138). Reacting to this type of shame, Sive, Nikiwe and Tumeka described why they had to leave school as soon as they discovered that they were pregnant, in these extracts from their narratives:

Pregnancy is funny ... it is like; when your tummy is big and you are pushing it around you are actually saying something to others [laughs loudly] you do not have to open your mouth. Your being pregnant says a lot ... Therefore, I quietly left school before anyone noticed I was pregnant. (Sive)

It is not nice to be a child pushing a huge tummy around ... to start with I was okay, but when I got heavy with child I hated myself for everything. I was patient enough to finish grade nine but then I did not proceed to grade ten because my tummy was too big. (Nikiwe)

What embarrassed me was my protruding tummy because I am very tiny. I was also ashamed of what my classmates would say. (Lee)

I was too embarrassed to face my class... I would be embarrassed, so I quickly dropped out of school on my own before many people even noticed I was pregnant. (Tumeka)

These extracts also serve to define the girls' sexuality in the school arena; 'the pregnant female student is emblematic of teen sexuality' (Pillow, 2006, p. 66). Participants did not seem to embrace their changing bodies. If anything, they were a mark of discomfort and disgrace. Teenage pregnancy is not only a source of shame but is equally objectified and viewed as sexual defilement (Bhana et al., 2010). Moreover, in some institutions the girls consider the slowly bulging pregnancy treacherous since it heightens their risk of being sent home early. Consequently, they are forced to keep the mark of their pregnancy and the shame of having been sexually active hidden. Having undergone the initial stages of shock, fear and guilt, some adolescent mothers have to brace themselves for facing the school authorities and their colleagues as well. To them this is another level of emotional turmoil as they struggle to adjust to the new role of pregnant learner at school. It is important to also flag the force young mothers have to reckon with in their peers. These extracts also reflect how peers played a significant role in shaping the experiences of the pregnant mothers within the school. The impact of peer response and pressure will be further discussed later in the chapter.

## **Pregnant at school: ducking behind walls and dodging educators**

A few weeks from closing for the April holidays, I was cornered by one of the lady teachers, Ms G, as I came down B block stairs. She demanded that I come to her office that same day, which I did not do. I decided to take the risk and dodge her for the remaining two weeks to the school holidays. I had to skip her lessons and attend those where I knew I would not be bothered. A few days later, we met again, accidentally, and she confronted me. Again, I apologised sincerely and promised to visit her office after school that day, which I did not do either. I successfully managed to dodge her until the end of the term ... I later delivered during the term break. (Sharon)

Sharon's story is typical of pregnancy experiences of a number of girls in schools in Khayelitsha. The narrators described how they spent most of the school hours 'ducking' behind other learners, walls and corners or even skipping lessons in an attempt to avoid being spotted by certain teachers who had been tasked by the school to make sure that the girls, whose pregnancies were clearly showing were sent home. This was perceived by the responsible authorities to be a way of protecting the girls from any accidents that might jeopardise their pregnancy at school, and yet this could also be a rationalisation on the part of the school to get rid of the pregnant girls.

Whilst participants were aware that it was not the school but department policy which stipulated that they leave school at a particular stage of their pregnancy, they felt that the whole process was disruptive and unfair, as the policy was interpreted in the most conservative way on the part of schools. They argued that if they were constitutionally protected then they should remain in school and leave only to deliver. Noma used a human rights discourse in an attempt to make meaning of the experiences of those learners who found themselves in this situation:

The truth is that no one wants to stay at home really; I would say that affected learners do not welcome the idea because it means disruption to their schoolwork. I believe that being sent home is unfair practice. Why did they allow us to attend school (pregnant) in the first place?



Learner pregnancy has previously been associated with disruption of schooling (Cunningham & Boulton, 1996), and keeping pregnant learners at school has been developed as a constitutional intervention strategy aimed at retention. Interviews among adolescent mothers from the other schools revealed that despite being in the same location and neighbourhood, schools implement the department policy in different ways. Other studies have also underlined this factor (Bhana et al., 2008). This is a clear indication of the disjuncture between the Department of Education policy and the schools. After listening to the adolescent mothers' stories, I thought it necessary to look at the policies of these schools. None of the schools had any such document; rather they believed that they were all implementing the department policy as it stipulated. The complication is that in such cases the policy either is misinterpreted or completely misunderstood (Bhana et al., 2008).

The gap between the department and school policies and school interpretation of the policy has left the schools exposed to manipulation by all parties involved, the adolescent mothers, their parents and the school's teachers and principals. Participants believed that the handling of pregnant learners by school authorities was fraught with favouritism and injustices, as teachers tended to protect those close to them whilst sending others home 'too early'. When she was told to leave school because her pregnancy was showing Noma said:

I decided to be stubborn ... I was six months pregnant then and that would have meant that I would be out of school for a full term. I was not going to do that ... so I bluntly told my teacher that I was not going home. I would only go during the final month ... there is no policy that stipulates that we should leave at six months. It is at the discretion of whichever teacher cornered you.

On the other hand, Thobeka related this experience, which demonstrates the difference in policy application:

Generally, teachers ignore pregnant learners. They have no business with them. They just want your parents to come and report that you are pregnant

and that is all. You leave school when you feel like. Most pregnant girls do not leave at all. Some deliver after school and continue the next day as if nothing has happened and no one cares really.

The above extracts demonstrate the variance in the way the learner pregnancy policy is implemented in schools in the same district and neighbourhood. These two contrasting experiences were from two neighbouring schools in the same location. One wonders which school is implementing the learner pregnancy policy as is expected by the DOE. The Western Cape Education Department (WCED, 2007) policy on managing learner pregnancy in general education and training and further education and training institutions, emphasises two alternatives which can be pursued by the schools in handling pregnant learners. Pregnant girls have an option of 'remaining at schools as long as is medically advisable and then obtaining learning material and support from the school, 'or withdrawing from the school, for the duration of the pregnancy and taking own responsibility for continued education' (2.1.4b). Emphasis is also placed on the liaison between the parents of the pregnant girl and the school. The school is expected to discuss with the parent the period the learner should be absent from school, based on the medical certificate with which the school should be furnished. In terms of the constitution, the WCED, the Education Management and Development Centre Directorates [EMCD], the school governing bodies, and the principals are 'accountable to all learners' right to quality education and this includes enrolled expectant learners or learners who are parents.' Furthermore the policy clearly stipulates that the school should enter into a written agreement with the parents or guardians of the concerned pupils clearly stating that pregnant learners attend school at their own risk, as the school is indemnified from any pregnancy related injuries or accidents. Moreover, the concerned learners should expect no exceptions regarding adherence to the school code of conduct (2.1.4.e). At a glance, one cannot deny that the schools are operating within the framework of the Department of Education's policy on managing learner pregnancy in general education, but the points of emphasis and levels thereof vary according to institutions.

Also salient in the policy is the Department's exoneration from any mishap that may befall the pregnant learners, which leaves the adolescent girls potentially exposed. This suggests a situation that pushes the pregnant learners out of school, yet ironically emphasising that 'it is essential for the learner concerned that her education should continue with as little

disruption as possible...'(2.4.2.). The issue is further complicated by the expectations on teachers as well. Whilst the learner is expected to take charge of keeping up with the schoolwork and continuous assessment throughout schooling, teachers are equally expected to ensure that continuous assessment is maintained whether the learner is in or out of school. One wonders how many educators will commit themselves to following up pregnant learners when they are part of the processes that practically drive them out of school in some instances.

## **RECONSTRUCTING THE SELF: UNDERSTANDING AND EMBRACING THE NEW ROLES OF MOTHER AND LEARNER**

### **Ambivalences associated with taking on the identity of mother**

All 15 participants were first time mothers, and it was touching, humbling and insightful to listen to them deliberate on their subjective understanding and meanings of motherhood. The meanings were powerfully informed by their social and cultural backgrounds, their micro and macro environments. The general sentiment was that the pregnancies had not been planned, although in most cases this did not imply that they were therefore unwanted (Breheny & Stephens, 2007; Jewkes, et al., 2001; Kirby, 2002; Melby, 2006; Shanok & Miller, 2007). Also interesting were the contradictory experiences regarding their pregnancies: the pregnancy had not been planned but many of them felt that the children were the 'best things' that ever happened to them. The fact that the pregnancies were unplanned had raised emotions of exasperation among some participants, as they regretted having fallen pregnant in the first place, as highlighted earlier. Other than generally acknowledging that motherhood was very disruptive both to their schoolwork and to life in general, most of the learners found being a mother extremely challenging:

Motherhood has really affected my work. It is hard, it is hard, and I really do not know how I am coping. After the baby I went back to school as if nothing had happened, got myself into extra-mural activities. It is complicated now and at times, I just sit and think about my life ... it is quite hectic. (Sharon)

I never enjoyed motherhood. (Nikiwe)

In these extracts participants have constructed motherhood as unpleasant and some of them have expressed feelings of self-rejection and indignation at the new roles of mother and learner:

I really hated myself for everything. (Nikiwe)

I was scared, I never enjoyed motherhood. I will never have another baby whilst at school. It is not easy at all. (Liziwe)

You want to play with your friends. You have to mind your baby. At times the baby is admitted in hospital. In addition, you miss school. At the same time you are expected to pass your grade. (Phathiswa)

The biggest challenge was that the adolescent mothers were already reeling from the gender specified roles that have been perpetuated in their communities and used to define women, like taking care of the household chores and preparing meals for the whole household (see De la Rey, 1997), and having to look after a baby and also prepare for and attend classes:

I do all the house chores because all my other siblings except for a little girl are boys. I cook, I clean the house, do all the laundry etc. (Tumeka)

My life rotates around my schoolwork and my child. I leave my child (at grandmothers') and proceed to school. After school, I collect my baby and go home. At home, I clean up, cook for my father, and do my schoolwork. It is quite hectic. (Sharon)

Right now, I take care of all the housework. I am the only girl in the house now. I clean, cook and do laundry for everyone. (Lethiwe)

These experiences constitute what De Vault and Liza (2002, p. 94) term 'unarticulated experiences' (see previous chapter). All this called for some form of resilience from the

adolescent mothers. Struggling to bring up their children in abject poverty was also a challenge expressed by most learners. In this instance, poverty has to be understood within a socio-economic and political framework.

The participants narrated their tales of helplessness in struggling to cope in poverty. In one case, Thembisile said that at times she tried to braid people's hair to raise money for her child's food. Tumeka indicated that at the end of this year she intended dropping out of grade ten and getting a job, so that she could look after herself and her baby, as she said that her parents were already struggling with the other siblings. She also cited the baby's father as uncooperative, and she had made up her mind to fend for the baby on her own:

I was thinking that I would complete grade nine and then leave school because things are really getting tough for my baby and me now. This man (father of baby) is not doing enough. I need money. I know that if I drop out of school, I will work by day and then register for night school, things might work. I have seriously considered this but I have not communicated with my parents.

The implication in this regard is that Tumeka was finding it challenging to balance motherhood and academic work. She was at the point of surrendering academic work and concentrating only on motherhood because of the poverty of her family. Lethiwe told of how she was 'given away' to her aunt because her parents' grant could not sustain the large family. Whilst she was very grateful to her aunt for affording her a life better than that of her siblings, and also for taking care of her child now that she was back in school, she was determined to break the cycle of passing on children to other relatives due to helplessness and financial inability to care for them (like she had to do with her child). Previous studies have associated adolescent pregnancy with poverty and inadequate social provisions, which have left most adolescents with very little free time (Branch, 2006; De Villiers & Kekesi, 2004; Geronimus, 1991; Jewkes et al., 2001; Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1989; Wood et al., 1998). All the respondents in this study came from extremely poor environments, characterised by overcrowded living conditions, high levels of crime, high incidence of HIV and AIDS, and lack of access to public amenities. Most of the residents in this area earn below the household subsistence level (Khayelitsha Urban Profile, 2003).

Although they were ambivalent about their feelings about their new roles as mothers, participants were insistent on acknowledging their deep affection for their babies, elaborating how this was never in doubt. Motherhood was understood in a rather broader context of responsibility, and it is within this context that the adolescent mother focused on the child and chose to reject the larger notion of motherhood, which incorporated responsibility and other socially defined roles. The young mothers understood the responsibilities that came with being mothers, but they chose to concentrate only on their children. Their understanding of being mothers transcended merely giving birth, but they were not keen to embrace motherhood in its entirety, in particular the duties that motherhood entailed in this broad social context. These feelings possibly derived from the macro image of mother. What they understood motherhood to mean in the larger social context was not what they wanted for themselves, now. They had been socialised to understand motherhood through the prism of their mothers' eyes, and were resistant to embrace the identity of mother they encountered in their daily lives. A universalistic approach to motherhood would consider motherhood multifaceted and complex (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991) and it would also constitute interrelation skills that evolve continually (Arendell, 2000). More so, women's beliefs about themselves, family and children are bound to influence and shape motherhood (Ribbens, 1994). Examples of some of the practices that may constitute these activities include physical and emotional care of the child, socialisation, i.e. transmitting the group's social values and norms pertaining to gender and kinship relations – the actual practice of mothering (Walker, 1995). The participants did not want to identify with any of the practices that had been used to define motherhood, be they essentialist or constructionist. All they wanted to focus on were their children, as illustrated below:

I love my baby so much but it pains me to know that I am a mother. I do not enjoy it and I do not want my baby to call me mum, but I love my baby very much ... actually, I am not ready to be a mother. (Liziwe)

I do not like being a mother because I am still young to be one ... when we go to church my mother takes the baby and I go to youth. (Nozibele)

My feelings about motherhood are mixed; having a baby when

you are a child, is not the wisest thing to do. Yet I love my child.

(Masi)

Participants articulated how they were wary of embracing motherhood completely, because of how they understood that identity. Mostly it seemed to relate to age and giving up on one's own life and youth. They acknowledged that they were still young and resisted being tied down to fulltime motherhood. Nikiwe indicated that as soon as she had the baby she wanted to move on, because she had hated herself for being pregnant and she was not keen to be stuck with a baby. When her boyfriend's mother decided that she should be relieved of the burden of the child so that she could resume her studies she was elated and more than ready to pass on the baby. She did not want the baby to 'hold her back'. In contrast to that initial response however, two years later, she regretted having ever allowed the biological father's family to take her child away:

I love my child, I like being a mother, but I do not have that child. Even if I do not have money, I would have loved to experience full motherhood even if I had not planned it, but people have snatched that away from me and completely removed me from motherhood, and now I am left with an identity of being a mother but practically I am not one.

Nikiwe had allowed her boyfriend's parents full custody of the child against her parents' will, and when she wanted her baby back, the boyfriend's parents insisted that she finish her studies first. Their opinion was that moving the child from them to other relatives could be confusing to the child. Her major fear was that the child was slowly slipping out of her hands, as she was only able to see her once a year; she felt that the mother child bond had been severed. She insisted she wanted her child to be part of her life, even if she did not know how best that could be done.

Thobeka, on the other hand, is a teenage parent who was very proud of being a mother, and had no regrets at all about having her child whilst in school. She whole-heartedly embraced motherhood, which she viewed as an 'answer to her prayers'. Whilst she was conscious of deviating from the normative construction of motherhood, being a mother presented a payoff with respect to proving her fertility. As elaborated earlier, in a number of cultural contexts in South Africa, fertility is accorded virtue, and young mothers have been

socialised to view and regard it as such. On the other hand, childlessness results in ostracism and stigma. This is what Thobeka said in an extract from her narrative:

I love my motherhood role. I love my baby. I would rather be an unmarried mother than not be a mother at all. I sympathize with my aunt who does not have a child. She fights a lot with her husband and in-laws about that issue. I had always prayed that the curse of not having children should not fall on me because of what I saw my aunt go through. I like being a mother and I love my child very much.

Evident in this extract was the assumption that infertility is a curse. The trauma and suffering that an infertile woman experiences at the hands of their in-laws is unarticulated in most communities, including the community of which Thobeka was a part. Consequently premarital fertility was not condoned but neither was it openly disparaged. Previous studies have shown that premarital fertility is positively received in some communities in South Africa (Jewkes et al., 2001; Maforah et al., 1997; Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1989). As a result some young mothers would be happy to prove their fecundity instead of using preventive methods, since they live in communities that hail fertility as a cultural value, even though this contradicts normative constructions of motherhood in their communities. Over and above this the young mothers find gratification and contentment in their children, if not the mothering practice. To them motherhood has been a source of joy and fulfillment, as espoused by theorists like Arendell, (2000), Christian (1985) and Hoffnung (1998).

### **Adolescent motherhood as deviancy**

The construction of adolescent motherhood as deviant and unacceptable ran across some of the narratives. A number of studies have illuminated the social construction of adolescent motherhood as pathological and problematic (Loening, 1992; Macleod, 2003; 1999). In this study, participants illustrated how they had internalised such discourses, and narrated their feelings of guilt and shame at being pregnant mothers at school going age. They indicated that they were stigmatised for having challenged normative constructions of young femininity and destabilised the socially constructed biological clock:

I know pregnancy is a mistake if you are still in school but all I ask is that teachers treat us like any other learners really. We are still learners



so why should they call us names and embarrass us in front of the whole class because we are mothers. Yes, we are mothers but that does not disqualify us from being children. Therefore, I personally want to be treated like any other child. I am a child and mother and motherhood should not be used to insult me. (Tiny)

In the community, people can be nasty. You are called 'Nozala', it is a term used for adolescent mothers and we know that it is derogatory.

(Liziwe)

Pregnancy is further attributed to indecency and unbecoming behaviour for young women in particular. Pregnant girls are consequently perceived as naughty, immoral and stereotyped as loose women, as 'street walkers.' A number of participants quickly distanced themselves from this broad perception by flagging how their pregnancy had nothing to do with deviancy or transgressive behaviour, and the fact that they fell pregnant did not mean that they automatically fell into that trope. It is likely that participants also held this view about other pregnant adolescents, hence the bid to vindicate themselves:

Before I had the baby, I used to spend time at home reading instead of going places with friends. As a result, my own father could not believe I was pregnant. I was home all the time. (Sharon)

I was not a naughty person (Tiny)

In most cases I keep away from the street, as a result many people were shocked by my pregnancy, as I have always been considered a decent girl. I do not loiter or hang out on street corners, which is typical of many girls. Actually, people tend to show respect to you if you are well behaved. (Noma)

Whilst this notion of associating adolescent pregnancy with deviancy was held by most adolescent mothers and their society in general, some adolescent mothers did take agency, proclaiming that their pregnancy was not a mistake but an outcome of their pushing the boundaries of normative gendered sexual identities practice:

I used to be very naughty. I hated school. I was hyperactive and very clever. I did not like school at all. To start with, because of my carefree attitude, I failed grade nine and I had to repeat. The following year when I was repeating I fell pregnant then I dropped out of school. I look back at what I used to do and laugh but it scares me at times. May be having a child at a young age was a wakeup call for me. I am very positive now. (Sive)

I would lie to my mother and pretend I was sleeping over at a friend's house when I was putting up with my boyfriend...I developed a close bond with my boyfriend's mother and she never minded me spending nights at her house. (Thobeka)

Motherhood for participants was strongly associated with maturity and responsibility. They were conscious of what they had got themselves into. Close analysis of their narratives also revealed an undercurrent of capitulation from their mothers, who viewed motherhood as a way of reigning in the girls.

Even if participants had consented to the responsibility that came with motherhood, this was clearly not appreciated by their community, since they also reported how their community had persistently affronted and slighted them for being a bad influence on their 'uncorrupted' daughters:

The general attitude is that if you have a child stay at home and avoid being at school, as you are a bad influence on other children. (Sive)

I have noticed that many people in my neighbourhood respect me as a child and mother but they do not want me associating with their daughters. (Lee)

Parallel to this discourse was the assumption that adolescent motherhood was endemic and on the increase. There were high numbers of pregnant adolescents, and the community was generally used to pregnancies among school-going youth. An illness metaphor, that somehow pregnancy was infectious was evident, since participants shared how parents

feared 'that their daughters would be next'. This is what Sharon said concerning this observation:

Young motherhood is not condoned as such but it has since become a frequent occurrence. The biggest problem that I see is that people tend to get worried about their children mostly. It is like so and so's child is expecting, I pray that it does not happen to my own child... when it happens it leaves them shattered.

### **Concluding remarks**

This chapter has outlined the impact of being pregnant among this group of teenage mothers. Participants narrated feelings of fear, anxiety and uncertainty at discovering that they were pregnant. These feelings reflected their ambivalence about this pregnancy. For all participants, they were convinced their family would condemn them for what had happened. In their different circumstances, most experienced the response of parents, partners, peers and the school in relatively negative ways, as a form of control, betrayal and/or abandonment.

This chapter has illustrated some of the key themes emerging from the data on what motherhood means to the young mothers interviewed. Most participants were overwhelmed with apprehension at discovering their pregnancies. The initial concern related to fear of rejection and an attempt at negotiating acceptance from parents in the light of their understanding of the stigma associated with adolescent motherhood. They therefore assumed relatively strategic ways of revealing their situation, to ensure that the impact for themselves and their family was minimised. They showed great sensitivity to the understanding that their pregnancy did not only affect them as individuals, but placed the entire family under public scrutiny, as the community judged their pregnancy. After the pregnancy had been accepted within their families, participants then elaborated on how they focused on reintegration with their peers and continuing with their studies as pregnant learners. Their narratives revealed that at some schools, pregnant adolescents spent most of their time 'on the run' from authorities because they did not want to be identified. They were forced to conceal their pregnancy for fear of being asked to stay at home until it was safe to be at school.

Generally, the adolescent mothers in this study argued that motherhood was demanding, challenging and overly disruptive of their schoolwork, but they emphasised loving their babies, while expressing ambivalence about taking up the identity of motherhood. The constant experience of being stigmatised and pathologised worried them. The meaning and their understanding of motherhood was generally shaped by these very discourses and largely determined by the contexts of care regarding their children. However, they indicated that the degree of institutional support around them accounted for their overall performance and achievement as mothers with children at school. Their parents and communities at times punished and blamed them for early motherhood, which in such cases, aggravated their experiences of being both mothers and learners at school.

The following chapter illustrates the contexts of care regarding the child, and maps out the young mothers' simultaneous experiences of being mothers within the school context.

## CHAPTER SIX

### ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD AND PRACTICES OF PARENTING

#### Introduction

In some African communities, caring for children is considered a communal practice, as mothering is shared among various members in the life of the child. Even if the biological mother occupies the central role in caring for the child, other family and community members are drawn into the practice. This chapter explores family networks and the practice of parenting among adolescent mothers and all persons in the life of the child. I further examine how the adolescents balance motherhood and being learners in school, exploring the relationship dynamics between the adolescent mothers, educators and school authorities. The chapter also investigates how peers shape the manner in which adolescent mothers experience being learners and mothers.

#### GENDERED EXPERIENCES AND THE PRACTICE OF CARE

This section explores how parenting is practised by all those involved in the life of the child, that is, the adolescent mother, her partner and both families. The demographics of this study revealed that 67% of the respondents lived with a single parent, a father, mother or relative at the time of pregnancy, whilst 33% lived with both parents. Without endorsing pathological notions of single parenthood, this revelation corroborates previous studies, which have shown that adolescents brought up in single parent households are more likely to fall pregnant compared to those who live with both parents (Nash, 1990; Van Coeverden de Groot, 1988). In such cases though, it is unwise to ignore what factors could be influencing such a trend. The intention is not to pathologise single parenthood and particularly adolescent motherhood, but to understand the contexts in which motherhood occurs, and to comprehend the adolescent mothers' subjective experiences of motherhood within their social and economic contexts.

As noted in the previous chapter, the adolescents' narratives on pregnancy and parenting could not be separated from their broader social and economic contexts, and their own stories were enmeshed with their experiences of family conflicts and poverty. These interwoven narratives provide a backdrop to challenges faced by adolescent mothers in

bringing up children in their environments. In the adolescents' mothering context, poverty was not only racialised but also feminised (Branch, 2006; Dickerson, 1995; Kaplan, 1997; Sidel, 1996). Most of the respondents grew up in female-headed households. Female-headed households have come about because of labour forced migrations (Gaitskell et al., 1983), and other social fluxes that result in abandoned, divorced or widowed women. Most of the women in this category are domestic servants, and 90% of the respondents' mothers fell into this group.

Although mothering elucidates and foregrounds the pivotal role of women in childcare, in South Africa the centrality of women in childcare is predicated on the historical antecedents of the apartheid era when black women made their mark as domestic servants caring for children of white families. Even though this was a relationship tainted with 'the dialectics of power and powerlessness' (Glenn, 1994, p. 6), the gendered nature of domestic service is evident, in that the work is largely performed by women. Gaitskell et al. (1983) argue that the gendered nature of domestic service lies in the feminised character of tasks associated with it. These include cooking, cleaning, washing and childcare. These tasks have been naturalised as characteristic of the female domain, since they are carried out within the household. Domestic service is still considered to be on the bottom rungs of employment (Gaitskell et al., 1983), and the work is viewed as oppressive and exploitative, nevertheless domestic workers are resilient enough to struggle for the survival of their own families (Hill-Collins, 2000; Segura, 1994).

It was within this broad scenario that parenting was practised by the parents of the child and their families in this study. These and other issues not only influenced their parenting, but also had a strong bearing on how the adolescent mother understood and practised her role as mother and learner.

Parenting in the African context is everyone's duty. Relatives, grandparents, siblings and community members practise parenting if need be. The child is usually regarded as everyone's child (Hill-Collins, 2000; Stack & Burton, 1994). Whilst it has been argued that women are central to childcare, men have their roles as fathers, uncles or relatives in the life of the child. Adolescent mothers' narratives revealed that women carried the bulk of the burden in child parenting as mothers, grandparents or aunts, whereas male relatives largely contributed financially to the needs of the child. Whilst parenting is characterised

by gender segregated roles, it has been argued that this scenario is rendered fluid in some single sex households, where women have successfully carried out parenting in the silent absence of the fathers or presence of male relatives (Hill-Collins, 2000). Research has also shown that the success of single motherhood serves as a positive role model for girls who then may not feel that a child before wedlock would jeopardise their chances of success in life (Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1992).

### **Dominance of female relatives**

Adolescent mothers in this study largely constructed parenting as woman's work, since mothering and childcare emerged as the responsibility of primarily the females in the family in almost all instances. In those households without mothers, adolescent girls described how they had to move in temporarily with a female relative until they gave birth. Thereafter they were initiated into mothering and care giving, and then they would move back to their families with their children, if the relative was convinced they were ready to care for their child. Sharon and Lolo were such cases. Sharon lost her mother at a very young age and grew up with her father who was her sole parent. She said that when she was young, her father would cook and wash her clothes, but as soon as she grew up, she took over all the chores. Despite having looked after his daughter single-handedly for more than ten years, as soon as she fell pregnant he asked her to move over to her aunt (his young sister) to get assistance with initial motherhood. For the first three months after the baby, Sharon lived with her aunt, who happened to live very far away from the school, thus further complicating her already compromised position. The irony was that Sharon's father had not relied on women's assistance in bringing up his own young daughter, but he would not undertake assisting his daughter with her own pregnancy and early motherhood:

My father decided that I live with his younger sister, (aunt) since I was pregnant. My aunt and I are very close so it was not a problem. I stayed with her, she would take me to the clinic, and to the doctor ... It was hard when the baby arrived but my aunt was supportive right from the beginning. She would bath, feed the baby and put him to sleep. I remained with my aunt for three months. I was forced to go back to my father because Masakhe is quite a distance from school and there were hardly any classmates with whom to discuss schoolwork.

Lolo's mother died in a car accident and she now lived with her father and two siblings. While pregnant, she remained in her father's house, but her father's girlfriend would constantly check on her. After delivery, she was collected from the hospital by a female cousin and taken to her aunt's house. Her cousin and aunt helped with baby care and 'mothering skills' for the first three weeks, and then she moved back to her father:

I went into full labour early hours of Friday morning, my father called his girlfriend. She came and took me to the hospital. I delivered that day and on Saturday, my cousin came and collected me. We went straight to my aunt's place. My aunt taught me how to care for the baby for two weeks. During the third week, I moved back with my father.

The other adolescent mothers had assistance from their mothers or elder siblings who were also mothers. This assistance varied from 'mothering lessons' to completely taking over childcare by those meant to assist them. Following are extracts from their narratives to demonstrate the reliance on women, whether aunts or grandmothers for assistance with the child:

My mum is my biggest supporter. Even if the baby cries at night, she quickly comes to my bedroom and takes over.  
(Phathiswa)

My relatives treat my child as their own. Anyone who gets home freely changes and feeds him if need be even if I am not there. All the people around me are supportive... I manage because everyone around me offers a hand. (Noma)

Both my mother and grandma did everything for me. It was as if my mother had a small baby again. All I would do was breastfeed the child. I never even took the baby to the clinic; my mother would do it for me. (Tiny)



My son is two weeks younger than hers (sister's son) so it was like my sister had twins because she took care of both babies. She would give them a bath and take care of my baby whilst I went to school. (Noma)

I went back to school and was the child I was before. The mother issue was far away from me. It was like my aunt had taken over the child. (Thembisile)

These narratives further illustrate that in the process of giving support the female relatives in some cases completely took over parenting, dominating the process of caring for the child. Even if this might seem beneficial for the adolescent mother, the mature relatives in these cases completely removed the young mothers from a role in parenting, as in the example of Phathiswa who describes how her mother would come to her room and 'take over', arguably impacting on and undermining her identity in the construction and meaning of early motherhood for her. Another example is Tiny's extract above in which she articulates the centrality of her mother in the parenting, 'it was as if my mother had a small baby again. This process confirms how the participants' agency in parenting was marginalised, as the mature women in their lives dominated and destabilised their role in the childcare domain. The young mothers could not reveal their true feelings to their parents because they claimed that they needed this support for their progress in school.

In their narratives, adolescent mothers continued to underscore the significance of female relatives in the practice of childcare; moreover, some participants shared how such care facilitated their ability to balance mothering with their lives as young people. When reporting on the nature of care and the relationships with their caregivers, a pattern of caring emerged. The first category was linked to the above scenario, what I view as complete control and domination of the mothering process by female adult relatives. Participants associated this type of care with parents and guardians who had embraced the fact that they were mothers, and proceeded to offer unwavering support. They viewed their mothers and guardians as sympathetic to their circumstances and further demonstrated this understanding as determining in their successful recommencement of mainstream schooling. They also linked the ability to balance schoolwork and motherhood with continued support. In some instances, the mothers dropped their own jobs or altered their

demanding routines to accommodate the arrival of their grandchildren and to facilitate their daughters' resumption of school. Among the participants who fell into this category it is evident that social and institutional support accounted for low stress levels among adolescent mothers and contributed to high levels of personal achievement: 54% of the respondents in this study fell into this category and they were optimistic and confident about their position as learners and mothers at school.

Juxtaposed to these understanding and supportive parents were examples of vindictive and hostile parents or guardians. The 13% of the participants who fell into this category told stories of retribution and chastisement by their own mothers, who they claimed had not forgiven them for falling pregnant, and decided that they would have to suffer the consequences of being mothers at school. These mothers somehow gave up on their children. This happened before the adolescents fell pregnant, and this attitude continued throughout early motherhood. Their mothers looked at early motherhood as a way of regulating the girls. One such example was Sive, who had to carry her baby everywhere even if there were people who could assist with baby-sitting at home. Her mother always reminded her to do so anytime she indicated she was going somewhere, that is, to the shops, mall, saloon, or to see friends, etc. She remarked that it was like, 'the baby was permanently stuck on me' and this weighed heavily on her. The only form of support she had was her boyfriend. Sive said the following about her mother:

I guess she knew how she was going to fix me. From the time I gave birth up to now; no one has ever assisted me with the baby, or nappies or clinic visits. My mother left me to struggle with it on my own. My baby has been my problem and my mother has just watched me. Even when I went into labour, I went by myself to the hospital. Even after delivering, she never bothered to come to the hospital

And later in the narrative she continues to say:

I would stay up at night by myself, in most cases my mother never bothered to wake up and assist ... generally she left everything to me and it was torture.

Thembisile recounted how her aunt initially took over baby care, soon after she gave birth whilst at primary school. She was able to resume studies after the baby and completed primary school without any hitches. Presently, she is in high school and she has since moved in with her biological mother. Thembisile portrayed her mother as uncooperative, and she claimed that her life was now complicated. She believed that her mother had her own life and she did not have time for Thembisile and her child as her aunt did. She claimed this has had an adverse effect on her schooling and achievement in general.

Adolescent mothers' narratives further illustrated a cohort of mothers, who like most unsuspecting parents, were shocked at the news of their daughter's pregnancy, but once the reality had sunk in, they became indifferent. The adolescent mothers claimed that their relatives had carried on their lives as usual. The assumption was that mothers expected their children to continue with school as though nothing had happened, but did not assist or mind what happened to their daughter or the child. They did not question or contribute to any arrangements their daughter adopted. They were seen to be unconcerned and indifferent to their daughter's circumstances: 33% of the participants found themselves in this situation, and some of them found support from their boyfriend's families. The children were then moved to the boyfriend's house when the learner mother went to school in the morning and collected in the evening when the learner went back home. Thobeka was one such case. Her boyfriend's mother closely supported Thobeka, whilst her own mother was rather unsympathetic, as outlined below:

My mother is also uncaring. At times I would leave my boyfriend's mother to keep the baby overnight because my mother has not been supportive when it comes to baby care ... my mother does not mind me doing that, if she does not see the baby around she knows where he would be and she does not care. My boyfriend's mother has done more than my mother has in assisting me with childcare.

Such arrangements seemed to work even when there was no longer a relationship between the learner mother and her boyfriend. Nozibele's partner had another girlfriend when her baby was still very young. They broke up but the boyfriend's family remained the child's caregivers:

I leave the child with her paternal grandmother ... I wake up in the morning, get ready for school, and drop the baby at her father's house ... I talk to his (partner) mum and everyone but I do not have any relationship with him.

Some learner parents had taken their children to crèche and forced the fathers to pay the fees. These places are available throughout the community for those who do not have childcare support, but the young mothers complained about lack of hygiene and proper care in these spaces. The children were then dropped at the crèche in the morning on the mother's way to school and collected as soon as she finished. This practice showed some thoughtfulness on the part of the learners who would otherwise have left school to care for their babies.

Grandparents and aunts were also reported to play a significant role in the parenting of the children (Hill-Collins, 2000). In her narrative, Tiny highlighted how her grandmother had to relocate from the Eastern Cape to Cape Town to assist with her baby whilst she went to school and her mother went to work. Lethiwe's child was in the custody of her aunt who also happened to be her guardian:

When my baby was young, my grandmother came from the Eastern Cape to live with us so that she could take care of the baby as I went to school. She remained with us for a year. (Tiny)

I grew up with my maternal grandmother. When she passed on, I was taken by my aunt (mother's sister). The problem was that my parents were unemployed and we were quite a group, so my parents had to give some of us away to their relatives, so that is why I ended up with my maternal grandmother, then my aunt (mother's sister). When I got pregnant, my parents insisted that I look after the child until she was bit older then I could leave her with my aunt when I went back to school. (Lethiwe)

According to Hill-Collins (2000), African American communities' 'fluid and changing boundaries' often distinguish biological mothers from other mothers. Other mothers are 'women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities' (Hill-Collins, 2000,

p. 119). Whilst biological mothers are generally expected to care for their children, these communities have realised that expecting one person to take full responsibility for mothering would be impossible. As highlighted in the above analysis, sharing mothering responsibilities is a common occurrence among black communities in South Africa (Magwaza, 2003). Hill-Collins (2000) further argues that women have been depicted as anchors in the childcare domain. Other women or neighbours have also contributed in the lives of the children by playing crucial parenting roles. Hill-Collins (2000) asserts that even though there is no particular relationship among people, other mothers, neighbours or women in the community often assisted in the caring for each other's children in African American societies.

This practice is also very common in some black South African communities. The role of 'other mother' was highlighted in one case in this study. Lolo's aunt forced her to leave school and care for her child since she had no mother to assist her. However, her father thought that leaving school would not be a solution, as her daughter's chances in life would be jeopardised. Her father managed to get a neighbour to agree to assist with the baby for a nominal fee whilst Lolo returned to school. Every morning Lolo took the child to this woman's house on her way to school and collected her after school. The woman was just a neighbour they knew well, and no relation whatsoever, but she was willing to assist Lolo and her family.

Siblings were also drawn into the parenting webs of the adolescent mothers. Phathiswa highlighted how her older sister, who had not done well in matric the previous year, looked after the baby whilst she went to school. She did not regard this as being exploitative of her sister, since she believed that they were family, and it was assumed that family members should provide such support, even if it had negative consequences for them personally:

My sister is taking care of my child whilst I am at school. I know it is like

I have punished her but she understands. (Phathiswa)

Thobeka and Nozibele also indicated how their boyfriend's sisters assisted their mothers with the care of their brother's child in each case. In all these cases, the parenting tasks were chiefly carried out by women, be it from the boy's family or the girl's. The whole scenario underlines childcare as not only central to women but also a dynamic cooperative practice.

In this intricate web of childcare and relationships, the adolescent mothers found themselves with very little space if any to negotiate or settle on the course of parenting they considered suitable for their children. They were seen as hapless victims who needed the authority and advice from everyone around them. Above all, parenting was the responsibility of the women in the lives of the adolescents, which underscores the gendered nature of child parenting.

### **CULTURAL FRAMEWORKS AND PATTERNS OF OWNERSHIP**

Some participants reported that in the isiXhosa culture and tradition, if a girl falls pregnant out of wedlock the, aunt, uncle or a chosen family relative accompanies the girl to the boyfriend's family. This is what Thobeka said about her the meeting between her family and that of her boyfriend:

My dad asked me to dress decently like a traditional Xhosa woman, long skirts and the like, which I did and we all went to my boyfriend's house. So when we got there his mother was there...his mother said that she could not say anything because she was a woman, so she asked if she could be given time to call her brothers, my boyfriend's uncles. (Thobeka)

Elders from both families meet and the boy is asked if he 'knows' the girl, a subtle way of finding out if indeed he is responsible for the pregnancy. Acquiescence on the boy's part is regarded as an admission of having impregnated the girl. After this, the families 'get to know each other' to establish that the two are not related. Thereafter the boy's family is then charged a certain amount of money ('*inhlawulo*'), some 'reparation for seduction' (Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1989, p. 229). The payments are viewed as a way of acknowledging paternal responsibility and this usually eases the pressure on the girl's family. At least the child has 'a father'. Following the birth of the child, both families are expected to play complementary roles in bringing up the child (Swartz & Bhana, 2009). In most cases, the baby remains with the girl's family, whilst the boyfriend's family contributes in other ways, mostly financially. It was interesting to note that in this study 26% of the respondents indicated that the boyfriend's families had actually taken over childcare, whilst the adolescent mother and her own mother continued with their lives. If a family does not pay

damages, this is tantamount to disrespect, leading to the exclusion of the father from the life of the child. This section explores how these ownership frameworks influenced child parenting and how this impacted on the adolescent mothers' schooling.

After adolescent mothers have been effectively 'trained' to take care of their babies, they are expected to assume the position of central caregiver, and this mainly takes place in the adolescent's home (Jewkes et al., 2001; Kaufman et al., 2001). Whilst the women in the mothers' life continued to take turns in the caring of the child, participants indicated that the children's fathers were expected to contribute financially in most cases. At times, the fathers visited their children if they managed some stolen chance; otherwise, they are the responsibility of the girl's family. However, the cultural practice of the payment of reparation affords the father of the child certain rights in relation to the child, as illustrated by the parents. Payment of '*inhlawulo*' means that the father of the child has a right to make decisions concerning the welfare of the child, and these decisions are reinforced by the nature and frequency of maintaining the daily requirements of childcare.

If the adolescent mother's family disapprove of their daughter's relationship, they exclude the partner and his family from the life of the child. The pregnant adolescent does not officially report to the partner's family and no reparation is demanded. Even if the partner is very keen to be part of his child's life, such cultural practices could be used to exclude him from the parenting domain. Lee's narrative revealed such a practice. When Lee gave birth to a baby boy, her father, who had always wanted his own son, took over parenting. He decided no reparation was to be paid for Lee's baby so that the partner could not have a claim on the child. Lee was also discouraged from accepting baby support packages from her partner. Even if Lee would have loved her boyfriend to be part of her son's life, she 'respected' her father's decisions. The boyfriend would however sneak in when the father was away to spend time with his child.

### **The role of partners in childcare**

Qualitative research indicates that men's involvement in issues of childcare is very limited because many societies do not expect it (Barker, 2006). The young mothers narrated their expectations of their partners in the welfare of their child. These narrations highlighted that the mothers understood their partners' material contribution; they were mostly expected to

provide for the child. Adolescent mothers' narratives also revealed different patterns pertaining to the role played by the fathers of children. In these contexts, fatherhood assumed different meanings in different spaces. Whilst fatherhood generally presents as a resource around which young boys can construct their masculinity, it also presents as a way of identification (Morrell, 2007). In this study, the conscientious partners accepted responsibility for their partner's pregnancy, and were willing to play significant roles in the life of their children as fathers. In one case, the partner had moved on with his life, he had a new girlfriend but he still faithfully contributed to his child's welfare by providing everything the child needed materially and emotionally. He played a key role in his child's life, and the adolescent mother and her family were contemplating handing over his six-month-old baby to his family whilst the adolescent mother carried on with her studies, as outlined by the adolescent mother:

He is supportive of his child. He buys her clothes, baby food and makes sure that she goes to the doctor if she is not feeling well. He even sends for the baby if he wants to spend time with her. In such cases, he takes care of the baby and even changes the baby's nappies ... but in most cases, the baby is always with his mother. My mother was suggesting that we leave the baby at his house the whole week and collect her on weekends until winter is over. Actually, I am thinking of collecting the baby only on school holidays instead of carrying her up and down. However, I do not want my baby to forget me and I know she will not because she knows me very well.

(Nozibele)

Nozibele's scenario illustrates the shared roles in child parenting as well as the significance of cooperation within the extended family. Her case depicts an uncommon trend in the practice of baby care in this mothering context. It is not a common occurrence for the father of the child to change their baby's nappy in a household where there are female relatives, hence the emphasis, 'but in most cases the baby is always with his mother'. Tumeka's boyfriend assisted here and there, but he was unreliable, which affected the young mother's balance of school and child demands. Most of the support comes from the parents of the partner particularly for those with partners who are unemployed (Swartz & Bhana, 2009).



In this context, being a learner and a mother is laden with its own power dynamics. Economic circumstances around key players in child parenting inform the contests and different ways of child ownership. Some adolescent mothers believed that the family with better resources controlled the life of the child. Being both a parent and a learner, as emerged in this study, was determined and shaped by the financial strength of the families, so that it could be the adolescent mother's family or the partner's who was dominant in this regard. Where the child's father had contributed nothing to the financial support and welfare of the child, they were viewed as silent or absent fathers, despite the fact that they were still in a relationship with the child's mother. Masi and Liziwe's narratives highlighted such a scenario. Liziwe's boyfriend was in the same school as her; and despite having accepted responsibility for Liziwe's pregnancy, he was considered a silent player in the child's life because he could not contribute financially:

My baby is my parents' responsibility. My boyfriend and his family have never done anything for him. Despite the fact that they accepted responsibility for my pregnancy, nothing has been paid to my family whatsoever and nothing has been done for the baby either. I feel that it is unfair for his family to keep quiet. I think they are being disrespectful, (*bayadelela*) towards my family. I also think that they do not care at all. (Liziwe)

Like Liziwe, Masi also indicated that she fell pregnant whilst her boyfriend was still a pupil at the same school as her. Following her complicated pregnancy, she dropped out of school and relocated to Cape Town where her mother was working. It had been a year since the baby was born, but the baby's father had never seen the baby or the mother, although Masi insisted that they were still in a relationship because it was never terminated. Now the baby was solely her mother's responsibility. The life of the child is mostly regulated and controlled by the family or partner who contributes most towards the welfare of the child. This family makes all decisions around who keeps the child, and manages the visitation rights and conditions.

## EXPERIENCES AT SCHOOL

### **Mothers at school: juggling the roles of learner and mother**

The previous chapter emphasised the point that both social and institutional support account for lower stress levels in adolescent mothers, leading to greater levels of personal and academic achievement. This conviction is the bedrock on which adolescent mothers strive to balance the simultaneous roles of mother and learner at school. Whilst most learners indicated that motherhood was disruptive and challenging, some of them vowed that motherhood would not jeopardise their chances at school or in life in general. Participants went out of their way to utilise whatever resources were available to them, both human resources in their social circles and any chances at their disposal, to try to balance motherhood and their academic work. The following extracts highlight their strong determination:

I was determined on my schoolwork and I vowed that pregnancy would not stop me and it didn't. (Sharon)

I never allowed pregnancy to stop me from attending school and now I have not allowed motherhood either. (Thobeka)

I will never allow motherhood to pull me down (Nikiwe)

Self-determination, together with social and institutional support, had afforded some participants an opportunity to juggle academic and motherhood roles. Those adolescent mothers who had significant support from their parents and partners found resumption of school and academic achievements possible after the baby. In most cases, the respondents found that going back to their studies and behaving as if nothing had happened did not work, as articulated by Phathiswa:

I tried to go back to all activities I used to do before the baby and maintain some routine but things have changed. I am still trying to find a suitable routine that I can comfortably stick to. Now I leave home in the morning and get back in the evening and I am already feeling guilty. I think I will have to drop some of the activities that I

used to do to accommodate the baby. Things have changed and I should accept it.

Some participants asserted that developing a workable routine gave some balance to their simultaneous roles. They were conscious of the fact that balance came with sacrifice. Some activities had to be surrendered if normality was to be achieved. However, they lamented the fact that the whole process of being mother and learner was tedious, and greatly disrupted and interfered with their schoolwork, as emphasised by Sharon:

After the baby I went back to school as if nothing had happened, got myself into extra-mural activities. It is complicated now and at times I just sit and think about my life ... I do not like it when I am torn between these activities ... I just trudge along. I do not know. I really do not know. I do everything by myself. I usually leave school say around 4.30 pm, laden with homework, maybe three or four subjects in all. Frankly speaking, at times I do not even give my son attention. As soon as I get home, I have to wash my baby stuff, prepare supper and do my homework. I really do not know how I cope with all the work but I do it.

Evident in the above extract is the value the adolescent mother placed on the maternal bond between mother and child. The fact that she wanted to go on as if nothing had happened gave rise to feelings of guilt. She felt obliged to care for and nurture her child. Sharon further demonstrated her creativity in trying to care for the baby and ensure that schoolwork was being done. She is living up to the nurturing and caring demands of motherhood (Ruddick, 1997). She engages in maternal practice that involves not only nurturing but also protecting and training children (Arendell, 2000; Barnard & Martell, 1995). In this process, she is also learning the mothering process, a move that challenges the psychological view of mothering, which asserts that mothering is instinctive and natural and that maternal skills emerge instinctually (see Phoenix & Woollett, 1991 for a critique of this). The extract below reveals her effort at balancing motherhood and school:

I try to keep him occupied with this and that and it works ... for example I once read from a magazine that if you want to occupy a

nagging child you feed them first then allow them to play with a plate and spoon. The noise is supposed to keep them busy. I tell you it has worked wonders with my son. I get through two home works whilst he is busy clanging and clanking a plate. He has a few toys though but he seems to prefer the spoon and the plate more. (Sharon)

This extract demonstrated resilience and determination to balance motherhood and being a learner at school. Her efforts seemed to transcend the factors that could cause her to give up school and concentrate on motherhood, including that she had no mother or sibling in the picture. The only family she had was her father and he was rarely home because of the demands of his work and social life, which left her alone with her baby and a load of schoolwork, as she tried to prepare for her matric exams at the end of the year.

Motherhood was mostly experienced as transforming to the adolescents, as elaborated in Chapter Five. Transformation was multifaceted, inevitable and unavoidable, but participants reported negative responses to such changes. Some participants reported how they were accused by their peers of self-neglect, coupled with exaggerated behaviour change after the baby. The assertion was that they changed their physical appearance, in that they tended to neglect themselves, 'give up on their looks', and even on the way they behaved which complicated their efforts as learners in class. This suggested that such change subjected the adolescent mothers to ridicule and scorn from other students or educators, which punctured their confidence, further complicating their endeavours in class:

One thing that I have noticed is that soon after the baby most people change completely. They tend to have a few friends, mostly mothers like themselves. Then they exclude themselves from the madness of the whole class so to speak. I really do not know what causes that but I did not follow that route... I make sure I behave like any other learner, naughty and mischievous as I have always been, open to everyone and free to talk about my child to anyone who asks after his health. (Sharon)

Some girls change completely after having their babies. They come to school completely unkempt and stinking of breast milk and other baby stuff... maybe, they have to take their babies to crèche before coming to school, I do not know, but these people usually fall prey particularly to boys. They make fun of them by calling them names like 'smelly nappies'. (Noma)

A closer look at the behaviour highlighted above requires an understanding of the underlying factors in the demeanour of the girls. A broader dimension is that the adolescent mothers are struggling for their survival and that of their children (Hill-Collins, 1994), within deprived frameworks of motherhood. For them motherhood was occurring within a historically deprived context of poverty. One may assume such changes among participants could be attributed to poverty and a lack of resources, as extensively discussed in the previous chapter. This observation was corroborated by Tumeka's narrative:

Now that I am a mother, extra effort is needed for me to maintain my appearance and my parents cannot afford that.

Furthermore, the contribution of the adolescent mother's own mothers seems to have an effect on the way adolescents are socialised into being mothers, another dimension of change in their behaviour. The gendered nature of adolescent parenting is underscored when participants are constantly reminded that they are now grown up and should be responsible because they are mothers. A number of adolescent mothers corroborated this assertion when they said this about their parents:

I do not know what my mother thinks but she insists that I should not befriend people without children. (Sive)

My aunt emphasised that I should consider myself grown up now that I am a mother and leave young children alone. (Lolo)

I have a new friend now, a mother like me. (Thobeka)

The concept of change, just like the various mechanisms adolescent mothers adopt in ensuring balance in schoolwork and motherhood, is greatly influenced by the social forces at play in the adolescents' lives. The underlying gendered assumption is that there is a different adulthood for men and women. Motherhood is viewed as conferring adulthood on young mothers, which is not the same for the young men (Macleod, 2001; 2006). Some participants in this study challenged this assertion, voicing concern at the gendered notions of slipping into adulthood. This voice of resistance was discerned on a number of occasions, when the participants rejected what was considered the norm. It was encouraging to note that they challenged the norm in expressing their discontent:

Boys also have children of their own but no one talks about them being fathers or their children, which is unfair. (Noma)

At the same time, some adolescent mothers drew a line between motherhood and academic work. They believed that they were only mothers at home, and at school they were learners like any other learner, as Noma categorically stated:

I am a mother at home and at school I am a learner and that is that.

She rejected the notion that being a mother was inevitably going to interfere with her academic expectations. Noma's assertions however appear juxtaposed to what most participants believed about drawing the line between motherhood and being learners at school. Noma's binarism is reflective of the way in which society keeps the domains separate. It is not conceivable that a learner at school is also a parent. Somehow, the public imaginary has to shift to allow for this possibility. It should also be emphasised that school authorities cannot assume that adolescent mothers do not have any other demands, and may be parents as well as learners. Participants' narratives further underscored this by emphasising the demands of being learners and parents at the same time. When they needed to be taken to the clinic, the participants were forced to make a choice, and the clinic staff seemed to insist on biological mothers bringing their children to the clinic instead of caregivers. Therefore, in a way drawing a line might be illusory and reflect rather the lived experience of the social binarism of school and parenting. This is what some other participants said:

Really, people get absent. If the baby is sick, they pretend to have been sick themselves, that is what happened to me the other week. I had the letter from the clinic but I told the teacher that it was me who had been sick because I had missed a test, when it was actually my child.

(Tumeka)

I had a baby when I was in grade nine as a result I did not do well. I am in grade ten now because I had to repeat. (Thobeka)

I missed school on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, (the child was admitted in hospital) Monday I was back in school, because he had been discharged on Sunday. All the teachers understood my case but this other teacher was on me again ... she did not even want to look at my child's admission papers. The other teachers gave me the tests I had missed but she ignored me. It hurt me a lot. (Thobeka)

These extracts reveal that drawing a line between motherhood and being learners at school is not always possible. The two roles both define and ascribe a synchronised identity and experience. The experience of being a learner is qualitatively different if one is also a parent and vice versa. The tendency is to strive to reconcile the two, and that is when institutional and social support is challenged. It is true that participants were mothers, but it is also real that they were still in school. In the same way that motherhood affects the working woman (Segura, 1994), so will it interfere with the learners' schoolwork.

Most participants further argued that the school did not give them any support, but instead frustrated their cause. Whilst they reported that there were a few understanding educators, they generally felt that they could not be honest with educators as far as their motherhood roles were concerned. Some participants also claimed that a number of educators generally believed that learner parents belonged at home with their children. A recent local study looking at teachers' narratives on learners who were also parents argues that 'teachers found it difficult to override their own beliefs around generational hierarchies, reproduction and gender' as they held onto the moralities of their own

generation' (Bhana et al., 2008, p. 82). It is during Life Orientation lessons that learners are generally equipped with survival skills, including information on risks of teenage pregnancies, HIV and AIDS among others. Some teenage mothers regretted that ironically it was in these lessons that some of them felt ridiculed and shamed in front of their colleagues, as described by one respondent:

In LO lessons we discuss pregnancy issues like when should people get pregnant and the dangers of teenage pregnancy etc. And it is during these lessons that pregnant learners and mothers are brought to shame. (Sive)

On the other hand, LO lessons were considered to offer a supportive forum. Some participants reported incidents where teachers demonstrated their sensitivity to pregnant learners during LO lessons:

I remember the other male teacher who taught me LO, he used to understand me so well. Any time teenage pregnancy was mentioned in class I would tense up but the teacher quickly picked it up and he spoke to me. I was very sensitive and guilty all the time. At times, I would leave class as soon as the discussion started because I could not stand it, but the teacher talked to me and I felt really better and accepted that I was indeed pregnant and I had to face it. (Tiny)

This does not rule out the possibility that teachers were still performing their duties as was expected. Participants generally expected teachers to be supportive or to at least treat them like other learners, instead of ridiculing them as most of them were already laden with guilt:

We need support; teachers should try to be understanding and accommodative. They scare us off. Actually, we fear them because some of them bluntly ask why you came to school if you had chosen to



be a mother or they simply say that is your problem, it does not concern them. (Tumeka)

Thando<sup>5</sup> (another pregnant learner) was called to the staffroom and told to stay at home as her pregnancy was too advanced and the school was not ready for any risks ... she said that she was dressed down in front of the other teachers, accused of 'wanting men' and getting herself pregnant. She was told to stay at home, as pregnancy was a mere indication that she did not take school seriously. She had vowed not to show her face at school again until after the baby. (Noma)

These extracts underline some of the humiliation that adolescent mothers have to contend with, ironically in spaces where they expect protection and educational expertise in understanding and negotiating their simultaneous roles of mothers and learners. The implication is not that teachers deviate from their core obligations, but not being tolerant only serves to make the young mothers fearful, while at the same time it encourages duplicity. A number of respondents indicated that they frequently had to use deception in order to stay out of trouble because teachers were intolerant of adolescent mothers in general.

In line with the argument that social and institutional support accounts for lower stress among adolescent mothers, at the same time promoting higher achievement levels, adolescent mothers who had a higher level of social support seemed to strike a better balance of academic work and motherhood, as compared to those who had minimal or basic support. One such case was Lolo; without a mother in the picture, she automatically assumed the central figure in her family context, and she was expected to undertake the entire house keeping while her father provided financially. At the same time, she had to care for her three-month-old baby and do her schoolwork:

With the baby now, I am trying to concentrate on my studies. It is not easy because I am the adult in the house who has to make all

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<sup>5</sup> Not real name

decisions concerning housekeeping. At the same time I am a mother and learner, I cannot really say I am performing well. I have spoken to some teachers and they insist I attend Saturday lessons, that is when most of the revision takes place. The biggest problem I have is that I have no one to help me with the baby on Saturdays so I cannot attend. One of the male teachers had said that I should bring the baby along but make sure that he does not scream and disrupt others. I thought of it but I was embarrassed you see. Up to now, I do not have the courage to attend with the baby.

In this situation Lolo found herself struggling within a gendered space, but was also ashamed of taking her baby to school with her, because adolescent motherhood was not only ridiculed but a source of shame to her as well (Bhana et al., 2008). She was missing crucial lessons because she had to care for the child. Her father's presence in her life did not seem to be of much assistance to her as far as childcare was concerned. The child's father could not assist with the baby either, rationalised on the basis that the baby was too young. Earlier Lolo indicated that an arrangement had been made that the child's father and his family provide childcare assistance when the baby grew bigger. Once again, it is the women and the girls who are expected to see to the rearing of the children all the time. Fathers and their families for the most part appear to assist only financially, leaving the adolescent mother to struggle with the demands of the household, her small baby and academic work.

Adolescent mothers who have returned to school after the baby usually find it difficult to perform mother and learner roles simultaneously (Bhana et al., 2008; Mkhize, 1995). In this study, this appeared accurate in those instances where adolescent mothers did not have adequate support, but were nonetheless burdened with roles other than those of learner and mother. On the other hand, those adolescents who had dependable social and financial support from both families and partners were performing even better than many who were not mothers were. It was also apparent that the first three months at least were rather daunting for all mothers, as they not only grappled with motherhood and being learners, but they had to accept complete readjustments in their lives. This entailed negotiating a workable schedule with their children and the caregivers. They also had to settle on what activities to forgo to accommodate

the child. At the same time, they had to assert themselves as mothers in a society that constructs the biological mother as central to child parenting while ostracising adolescents who are parents.

## **FORGING AHEAD: MERGING INTO SOCIAL CIRCLES AND ENCLAVES**

### **Experiences with peers**

After having the baby, the adolescent mothers were faced with the challenge of returning to their social lives and relationships with peers. This did not prove to be easy, as they had to contend with various opinions about their motherhood. In some cases, they realised that they had to develop new friendships, due to judgements and even desertion by colleagues. This traumatic experience started as early as pregnancy:

My best friend indicated that she was not prepared to befriend a mother because people talk. So she encouraged me to abort as she feared that people would gossip about her as well. When my mother assured me not to abort, she was very disappointed and she dropped me. (Phathiswa)

The dilemma that was encountered by both participants and their colleagues was compromised freedom of association. The right to choose who they wanted to associate with without feeling guilty about what society would think or say about their choices was compromised. Their society seemed to have an upper hand in determining the choices that adolescent mothers made. This also accounted for mistrust and secrecy among friends who should have been striving for interactive and open associations. The fear of what 'people will say' and not what friends thought and felt about each other seemed to be central in their associations. The parents of both the participants and their friends seemed to be the key players in making decisions that concerned their daughter's lives. They had a strong influence on the friendships of their daughters, seemingly oblivious of what the adolescents might feel or think about each other:

My friend was shocked and scared of what people would say if she was seen in my company, but her mother told her not to keep a

distance between us, maybe she was sympathising with me because of my age. (Tiny)

My mother would ask what is it that I discuss with people who do not have children ... she insists I should not befriend people without children (Sive)

The extracts above emphasise the power of adults in shaping the adolescent mothers and their friends' associations. Tiny's friend might not have been comfortable associating with a pregnant colleague, but her mother insisted she stick with her, which she did. On the other hand, Sive's mother demanded that she only associate with mothers like herself.

Conversely, some adolescent mothers reported experiencing tremendous support from their peers. Apparently, in such instances, parents did not assume a central role. Adolescents were afforded space to make their own decisions:

My friends were sexually active before I was and none of them had fallen pregnant, so they did not believe that I was dumb when I told them I was pregnant. When I showed them the confirmation slip, they were shocked. However overall, they were supportive. My baby is their baby and at times, they bring him small gifts. I really appreciate that. (Noma)

I have since found two new friends one is a mother like me but the other is actually a virgin. We know it and she does not even have a boyfriend. When the two of us talk about our children, she listens and comments; she likes us and we like her a lot. We do lots of schoolwork together. (Lolo)

My friend was supportive of me throughout. She would come home all the time, she does not have parents, and she lives with her aunts. I feared that they would tell her to drop me but I was lucky they were also supportive of me even if they completely disapproved of my pregnancy. When the baby was born she would frequent my house to see the baby and she would bring my baby small presents. (Liziwe)

Participants also revealed that the demeanour of other adolescent mothers determined a change in associations and acquaintances. One assumption was that adolescent mothers dropped their own friends out of guilt, as they felt that they had been betrayed. Yet others felt that the demands of mother and learner compromised their quality time with friends, which resulted in frustrations and unstable associations. Whilst adolescent mothers strove to create a balance with their friends, more pressure was encountered from peers in class. The greatest challenges they had to grapple with included 'negative rumination' (Whitley & Kirmayer, 2008, p. 342), and other factors like, gossip, mockery, degrading and snide remarks, among others. They were often insulted for falling pregnant at their age, as indicated in the examples below:

I have noticed that some learner parents get insulted about their motherhood over small incidents like wrangling over a chair or refusing to open a window ... for insignificant misunderstandings you are told that you are behaving that way because you had a baby too early ... even in the community my peers, especially boys would remark that 'look at this girl, she is so young yet she is a mother, Mom how is the baby?' The truth would be that they are mocking you and making fun of your situation. (Lee)

It was only in class that my peers made fun of me now and again ... also there was this other girl whose pregnancy was very big, she was being teased by our classmates now and again just like me. (Nozibele)

My classmates made snide remarks like '*tshoba tshoba*'-(you got it)...it is usually whispers and gossip but you can easily tell when you are the object of gossip. (Phathiswa)

I tried to conceal my pregnancy but my classmates talked a lot. Some would say how this girl dared get pregnant at such an age.

'*Uyaphapha*'-she is too clever for nothing. (Tiny)

All these extracts revealed what other classmates feel about the pregnant learners or mothers in their classrooms. They were considered objects of ridicule and shame. In one instance, classmates even associated pregnancy with a contagious disease (Pillow, 2006). Lolo illustrated this in her narrative:

A pregnant girl was under a lot of attack from the boys. They would remark that her pregnancy was making them yawn a lot and even fall asleep in class. They claimed that they were even having difficulty in concentration. They were also saying that they wondered why there were no separate classes for pregnant learners, or why they were not kept out of school altogether. The biggest problem with being pregnant in class is that you feel guilty. It is as if you have done something wrong and you deserve whatever comes your way. As a result, you always keep quiet and suffer in peace or drop out of school on your own if you cannot handle the heat.

Overall, the adolescent mothers found fitting into their social circles challenging. This was exacerbated by their guilt. They appeared to believe that they had erred and therefore deserved all the discriminatory and insulting comments from their colleagues. It was also apparent that they had no protection from bullying behaviour, which is usually forbidden in most institutions. It was because of this undermining, negative peer pressure that some adolescents dropped out of school in a bid to avoid going through humiliation, embarrassment and degrading remarks.

On the other hand, educators have largely contributed to the dropping out of adolescent mothers, as they have been accused of conveying negative and stigmatising messages. The relationship between educators and the adolescent mothers has a great effect on the way adolescent mothers strive to balance motherhood with being learners in school. If educators generally feel that pregnant learners do not belong in school (Bhana, et al., 2008), the implementation of policies that are compliant to their being in school will be overly compromised, considering the attitudes of the implementers. Any intervention strategies should aim at transforming attitudes towards gender equity among educators broadly before they are expected to handle adolescent mothers in schools.

### **Concluding remarks**

This chapter has explored parenting practices of a group of adolescent mothers, and the multiple ways in which care was divided between different stakeholders involved in the life of the child. Exploring the parenting experiences of adolescent mothers constitutes an investigation into their relationship dynamics. In most African communities, the family does not only comprise of the nuclear family, but the whole extended family usually works together as one cohesive entity. Adolescent mothers and their children live within such contexts. Also evident and worth underlining in this context is the gendered nature of parenting and childcare broadly. Because of such dynamics, adolescent mothers find support from the female members of their extended families. In most cases, it is the mothers and the maternal grandparents of the adolescent mother who assume the role of childcare. The child is taken into the adolescent mother's family and the parents bring up the child as if it is their own (Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1989). An interesting trend seemed to emerge in this analysis. In some cases, the child's paternal family was not only taking responsibility for the child but also taking the child away from the maternal family. In such instances, agreements ensured that the mother visited or collected the baby at set times. Whilst these arrangements might have compromised stability for the growing child, adolescent mothers seemed to rely on such support bases in order to continue with their schoolwork. Such arrangements also found reinforcement in the payment of reparation by the partners' family.

The advent of makeshift day care centres ensured that those adolescent mothers without extended family support bases found places which offered care for their children. The

children were dropped at these centres as the mother went to school, and collected soon after school. These mothers found balancing motherhood and schoolwork challenging, in that they assumed fulltime mothering immediately after school, compromising homework and study times. The mothers also acknowledged that the first three months were the most daunting, as they strove to adjust and get into a routine with their children.

Although there were a number of understanding educators at school, most adolescent mothers did not seem to get any support from either the school authorities or the educators. There was a general feeling that educators did not appreciate the presence of adolescent mothers at school. As a result, adolescent mothers learnt to be devious in order to skip lessons when the child was sick or due for immunisation. This situation was in some instances further aggravated by the attitudes of their peers. They were constantly reminded by peers that because they were mothers, they should not be in school in the first place. Their motherhood was also used to slight and insult them. At times, the fact that they were mothers was associated with deviancy, which left adolescent mothers feeling guilty and ashamed of being mothers in school.

The biological fathers did not seem to be supportive either. A number of these relationships were influenced by power dynamics, especially where their partners were employed and/or older than they were. At times children were taken away from them to be looked after by their partners' parents, whilst the partners continued their lives with new girlfriends. All these intricate networks informed how the young mothers balanced motherhood and being learners in school



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSIONS, REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

This chapter reviews and underlines key issues that emerged in this study, attempting to unpack the contributions the study may make to knowledge production, as well as to policy and practice, in particular in the local context of South African material conditions. I attempt in this chapter to synthesise and critically reflect on the findings, emphasising their significance for current knowledge about teenage pregnancy and parenting, in particular in the context of the social and policy changes that have taken place since 1994. The main concern of the thesis was to explore school going adolescent mothers' experiences and their social context, in a manner that illustrated their personal and interpersonal experiences of being mothers while attempting to continue with their education. The thrust of the thesis was to explore how the young mothers coped with their simultaneous roles of being mothers and learners, and whether the current shifts in policy were impacting in positive ways on their capacity to complete their education successfully, and feel better supported through this process.

The general assumption is that motherhood is challenging for any woman and being a mother and learner lays excessive demands on the mother. Moreover it has been well illustrated that negative responses from the community, the school, and other peers, as well as a lack of material and emotional systems of social support, can further exacerbate the impact on the lived experience of the learner. I was therefore particularly concerned to explore the multi-layered experience of being both a mother and learner, and the ways in which they experienced these different contexts through their pregnancies and parenting. For an in depth understanding of these experiences, theories of motherhood were unpacked within a social constructionist framework. Within the landscape of motherhood, grand theories that universalised motherhood have shifted to accommodate historical and cultural specificity in motherhood theorising. It is through this contextual framework that the thesis explored the experiences of a group of adolescent mothers in school.

In most African contexts, as in this one, motherhood is a communal practice which means that the young mothers' experiences are not only informed by their nuclear family but the extended family and the community broadly. My inquiry considered these family and community dynamics as well, with a particular focus on participants' relationships with partners, peers and the community. Because of the qualitative nature of the study, my findings may not be generalised to all learners who are parenting in South Africa, but the context and situatedness of the participants could be fundamental in making meaning of such experiences in similar circumstances. Moreover, it is particularly hoped that the study may say something about the strengths and weaknesses of current national policy and what needs to be done to ensure that such policy impacts positively on the experience and education of learners who get pregnant and parent while being at school.

### **KEY FINDINGS**

The findings of this study reflect that most of the participants were in stable relationships at the time of conception. Some of the participants were involved with men far older than they were, which opened their relationships to complex power struggles. For most participants discovering their pregnancy was associated with fear and anxiety, which already highlights contextualised responses to early pregnancies among school-going learners. They were afraid that they would dishonour their families because of their pregnancies. Initially they reported how it was daunting to disclose the pregnancy to parents or guardians. Although disclosing presented as a challenge, the participants demonstrated agency and thoughtfulness in different ways of disclosure, which foreground the resourcefulness of young people in these contexts – they are not always helpless victims as portrayed in some of the literature. Responses to 'breaking the news' to their family members were indicative of the strategic thinking of young women in this situation. On the other hand, it was also clear in this study that young people are disempowered at multiple levels with respect to their reproductive rights and bodies. Immediately after revealing their pregnancy, for most participants, the right to make a decision concerning their pregnancy was withdrawn from them, as parents decided whether they carried their pregnancies to term or not. Such a finding certainly questions the ability of young people to fully access or enjoy their constitutional rights. For example, even if adolescent mothers have a constitutional right to abortion and are aware of this, at least, as emerges in this sample, they did not consider abortion, because the stigma attached to pregnancy appeared to be lesser than that attached to abortion. Moreover, even those who did fleetingly

consider a termination show how the decision did not appear to be in their hands, but rather was one made by the family. Although pregnancy was usually stigmatised, it was often silently applauded, as fecundity was highly valued within the cultural contexts of participants. One of the key findings in this study was a deafening silence around the Termination of Pregnancy Act. Not only was there very little ‘talk’ about the act and young people’s right to this service, whether or not their parents supported them, the few references to abortion very clearly showed that it was not really accessible to participants. The lack of accessibility was powerfully related to the way in which community and family responded to the pregnancy of the young woman, and their relationship of control over her body and reproduction, as well as the overwhelming negative, indeed damning, social stigma attached to termination of pregnancy.

In this study, none of the participants had planned to fall pregnant. Yes, all of them were in some way held responsible for their pregnancy by significant role players, including their partners and families. In some instances, the partners reproached them for falling pregnant and terminated the relationships. As a result, most participants internalised the social blame and reported feeling embarrassed, ashamed and guilty regarding both the pregnancy and the ripple effects (including their partners’ desertions). Their experience of shame was intensified as their bodies began ‘showing’, particularly within the school arena where the added imperative of sometimes having to dodge the authorities in order to lengthen their time of school attendance before the birth was evident. The bulging pregnancies had to be constantly concealed so that they would not attract the attention of school authorities. It was evident that the way in which some of the schools interpreted the policy and recommendations on pregnant and parenting learners was to ‘get rid’ of them as soon as there was any evidence of the pregnancy, and usually this meant far earlier than would be medically necessary. This response on the part of school authorities and teachers appeared to have less to do with real concern over their health and wellbeing, but far more to do with moralistic agendas and dominant discourses on young women in particular. The need to erase the evidence of sexual activity on the part of young women and the construction of pregnant teenagers as morally deviant and ‘infectious’ to other young girls seemed to be paramount, as has been highlighted by other local and international researchers.

The participants in this study again revealed their agency and strategic responses to ensuring their education continued as long as possible, as they resorted to skipping classes,

hiding from certain educators, and using oversized uniforms to avoid detection. Further, agency and resistance was articulated by some who openly challenged school authorities, arguing that there was no policy indicating that they had to leave when their pregnancies were in the sixth month. Those who could not challenge the system nor bear the shame associated with their transformed bodies, simply left school, thereby disrupting their studies. They returned after the baby was born but suffered significant loss of schooling.

Notions of power and control dominated the participants' narratives on responses to their pregnancy. The structural organisations of the schools broadly reflected the salient power hierarchies that regulate and control daily operations of the institutions. Participants spent most of their time hiding away from educators, who in this case had the power to send them home early. Ironically, they were powerless and vulnerable in a situation that constitutionally is supposed to support their cause.

Similarly, after having the baby, participants experienced multiple challenges in their school and home context. At school, participants had to reckon with their peers. Some of them narrated incidents when they were ridiculed and embarrassed for having had children at their age. The inability of the school environment to acknowledge the dual role of such learners was evident through the way in which some experienced being condemned for lack of hygiene and cleanliness in cases where breast milk overflowed in class. Relationships with peers also became more complex, as they were now constructed as a 'bad influence'. Some participants reported parental interference on the part of their friends, who were instructed by their parents to no longer associate with them, highlighting a further terrain of parental control over adolescent parenting.

At the personal level of balancing the load of being both a learner and a parent, all the participants constructed motherhood as difficult, challenging and overly disruptive of their schoolwork. Firstly, the main concern was the insecurity related to school responses to their pregnancy and parenting. Because this was controlled by teachers and the school authorities, the participants lived in fear of being discovered and sent home early when pregnant, as well as negative and unsupportive responses when they returned as a parent. Although some studies (e.g. Bhana, Morrell, Epstein & Moletsane, 2006) have highlighted some supportive responses to pregnant and parenting learners, there were few examples of nurturing responses reported in this study. The participants in this case blamed the female

educators in particular for being unpitying and merciless, while exonerating the males from this practice. This may relate to their gendered expectations of their teachers, that is expecting women teachers to be more supportive, but it also may highlight women teachers' constructions of themselves as responsible for disciplining young women and sanctioning their sexuality. Some participants reported that all they expected were teachers to be understanding and supportive. Ironically, and of great concern to participants, it was during life skills lessons, supposedly a space for education and consciousness-raising on such issues, that they were most frequently brought to shame as young mothers. Some of them were forced to skip these lessons for fear of ridicule. In all this, the participants reported that they harboured feelings of guilt at falling pregnant. They believed that since they had erred, they deserved all the negative inputs from both the educators and their peers.

Secondly, the impact of adverse socio-economic situations on experiences was evident. Most participants found it challenging to parent in spaces that were characterised by lack of financial and material resources. They reported that their own families were struggling to cope, and this caused further exasperation on their part. Some of them were contemplating dropping out to look for a job. It was a big challenge to balance parenting and schoolwork in a situation of financial challenge.

In South Africa, with the introduction of compulsory schooling, new policies have focused on equitable access and provision, a welcome measure for the promotion of the education of learner parents. A number of paradoxical issues have continued to cloud access and provision issues. Early researchers like Cunningham and Boulton (1996) regarded adolescent motherhood as overly disruptive and contributing to high school dropouts. Recent findings from Imamura et al. (2007) argue that pregnancy is not usually the cause of drop out, but numerous psychosocial issues, particularly poverty, accelerated dropping out of school. This study noted that whilst pregnancy was disruptive to schooling, it did not present as the main reason for drop out. However, those participants who lacked financial support, or came from very poor environments, found it particularly challenging to balance school and motherhood. They deliberated on leaving school to work for their children. This was usually exacerbated by either desertion by the child's father or complete lack of support from family and partner.

On the one hand, this study found that pregnancy remained disruptive to schooling broadly, as participants were forced to take maternity breaks that hinged around personal interpretations of the policy and unclear school policies in this respect. The fact that pregnant learners are expected to leave school when their pregnancy shows is problematic, in that their pregnancies will show at different gestational periods, which will mean that some learners will be forced out of school way earlier than others. Inconsistent policies continue to ensure that pregnancy remains closely linked to drop out. Pregnancy should not be ruled out as a cause for drop out, but neither should it be considered the primary cause, and sensitivity to the wide range of other contextual issues should not be overlooked. A range of other factors such as family and community support, attitudes and practices at school, the need for grade repetitions, lack of resources and at times violence against girls (Human Rights Watch, 2001) also need to be considered.

Adolescent motherhood transpires within cultural frameworks, and it is within these frameworks that young mothers construct their meanings of motherhood. Given the hegemonic constructions of motherhood which broadly project motherhood and mothering in essentialist deterministic notions, it is not surprising that meanings of motherhood for adolescent mothers deeply resonated with such notions. Motherhood is broadly constructed as natural and essential (Nicolson, 1993), conflated with women's biological capacity to get pregnant and bear the child. Notions of womanhood and femininity are powerfully bound up with motherhood and this was evident for participants as well.

Participants' constructions of motherhood in this study were further modelled on how adolescents make meaning of their own identities as young women in their societies, and this construction remains parallel to how society views women broadly. They did not want to compare themselves with the older women in their lives, they wanted to remain as 'children', but they emphasised their love for their children and the importance of being a parent. They wanted to remain as children because society views them as such. Literature has shown that in some cases adolescent motherhood has been assumed to confer adult status on the young mothers (Flanagan et al., 1995; Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1989; 1992). Most of the participants in this study reported that the adults in their lives kept reminding them of the responsibilities that came with motherhood, among which was constant mention of maturity, but most of the young mothers rejected this perception, opting to be considered as children. Some of them still enjoyed sneaking out to play with colleagues as

soon as their babies took a nap, which challenges assumptions that adolescent motherhood necessarily confers adult status on young mothers.

Key in my findings was the social expectation of the centrality of women in childcare. Motherhood is so gendered that young mothers had to move from one place to the other to be 'taught' how to mother by female adult relatives. The practice does not only place women at the centre of childcare but also accentuates the biological mother as essentially responsible for her child's well-being. This practice further brings to the fore issues concerning maternal instinct in mothering practice. The fact that adolescent mothers are 'taught', emphasises the social construction of motherhood as a process through which mothers are socialised into those aspects of motherhood deemed acceptable and normative, as opposed to the innateness of the maternal instinct (Ruddick, 1997). Young mothers have to learn how to be mothers and be mentored into motherhood.

Paradoxically, the fact that female relatives socialised the participants into motherhood posed a challenge to the role of the participants in their children's lives as well. Although a number of participants welcomed the role of female adult relatives in their lives, some of them felt that the adult mothers also served to displace them as young mothers and disempowered them in the process. Some of the participants who found themselves in this scenario were suffused with feelings of loss and uncertainty, as they wanted to be fully engaged in motherhood even though they were full time learners.

Most participants indicated that contexts of childcare significantly emerged as pivotal in shaping how they experienced motherhood. The gendered nature of childcare meant that most of the participants had to be linked up with female relatives. This promoted socialising into culturally defined norms of mothering, and served to reproduce the gendered framework of care through these generational processes.

For those participants who had financial support for the baby, it was less challenging to step into their schedules and resume mainstream education soon after giving birth. Even for these participants, readjustments were crucial for routine and proper balancing of school and motherhood. In most cases, the participants found engaging in extra mural activities particularly challenging because they had to rush home and relieve whoever was providing support for the baby. More challenges were experienced by those participants

who dropped their children at day-care centres on their way to school and collected them soon after school. In this case, it was difficult to balance schoolwork and being mothers, since they assumed full time motherhood soon after school, sacrificing their attention to homework and preparation times. The most difficult experience shared was that of young mothers who had not only been deserted by their partners, but could also not get adequate financial or other assistance from their families or relatives. Most of these mothers had very limited resources and were contemplating leaving school to work. Childcare was also reported as characterised by certain power struggles, in that the family that had a financial advantage tended to control the parenting sphere, with a few children completely taken away from their mothers. The participants expressed concern at being implicitly coerced into parting with their children because they could not afford to maintain them.

The women in the lives of the participants dominated and controlled their mothering practices, which afforded them (older women) agency. Active agency in this instance underscored the superficiality of the celebration of older mothers as knowledgeable in issues of child parenting. Their reproductive power and knowledge as older women within the community is constrained by the dominant patriarchal structures within the mothering context (Walker, 1995). This agency was however limited, as all the mothering activities were carried out under the authority of the male figures in their lives. Although the study showed that there was silence around the role of fathers and minimal assistance from male partners in the childcare, fathers were largely presented as figures of authority. They made rulings, provided financially, and had the final word on what had to be done. This situation mirrors broad social constructions of motherhood, in feminist theorising on motherhood, where the power of mothers is argued to be constrained within patriarchal dominated spheres. Even though they demonstrate mothering as a source of power, such power and agency was practised within male regulated spaces, and it is broadly informed by patriarchal ideology. Normative social expectations of womanhood and motherhood are so internalised by women that they are considered acceptable and inevitable. In cases of single parent households, male relatives, particularly maternal uncles, are also drawn into issues of pregnancy and cultural deliberations, particularly in concerns of reparation. It is not the women's place to negotiate any demands or payments from the partners' family. Only male relatives engage in these and even if women are part of the meetings, they would not be expected to take control or make any substantive contributions, as this is broadly considered a male domain in this cultural setting.



The findings illustrated that adolescent motherhood is still powerfully associated with deviancy, and that adolescent mothers equally internalised this construction of themselves, which undermined their capacity for agency. The participants' constructions even confirmed that they were aware of this negative construction of themselves and had to challenge it by emphasising that they were 'good girls' and not 'street walkers'. These constructions were shaped by community attitudes towards pregnant and mothering girls. Because they were perceived as children who should not have been indulging in sexual activity, adolescent motherhood was regarded as inappropriate social behaviour. The community often judged them for being a bad influence on other children. However, the participants reported that even if this was the case, adolescent motherhood was so endemic that most parents in the community were concerned about the possibility of their own daughters being next.

Participants' constructions of motherhood further revealed feelings of ambiguity and anger. Whilst ambiguity about motherhood has been flagged in some of the studies (Oakley, 1990), I recognised that ambiguity in this case was determined by what unplanned motherhood meant to the young mothers. The general assumption is that because young motherhood is usually unplanned it is therefore unwanted. Most of the participants in this study felt that, even if motherhood was unplanned, challenging and complicated, they often constructed their children very positively as 'the best thing that ever happened to them.' They were uncertain about being mothers but they loved their children. This paradoxical consideration of motherhood demonstrated how adolescent mothers fluctuated between multiple notions of themselves torn between children and parents but not adults.

Furthermore, participants expressed mixed feelings about how they balanced school and motherhood. Some of them were determined to continue at school, arguing that they 'would never allow motherhood to pull them down.' Yet others acknowledged that being mothers had significantly interfered with their performance. At the same time, some reported their feelings of guilt because they thought that they were neglecting their babies because of the demands of their curriculum. One aspect most of them underlined was that it was manageable to balance both school and motherhood with support from relatives. Although they were managing, all participants agreed that motherhood came with

transformation. This was not only physical and mental, but it was inevitable that they altered their daily schedules to accommodate their babies, and this meant interference with certain school routines. Some participants reported that motherhood never interfered with their schoolwork because they had ‘drawn a line’ between being mothers and learners. They considered themselves learners like all other students at school, and only became mothers after and out of school, a notion that reflects society’s attitude, keeping the two domains separate.

## **KEY CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

A number of key areas that clearly remain of concern in the South African school and community context with respect to pregnancy and parenting among school-going learners, particularly women, emerged from the study. These challenges highlight the need for further measures with respect to policy and practice, that go beyond the current paper promises of the constitution, the Schools Act, and guidelines on learner pregnancy and parenting in schools, to deal with the multiple factors that undermine and inhibit the effective and appropriate implementation of such policies, in order to really alter the lived experience of teenage parents.

### **Social construction of teenage pregnancy and parenting**

Adolescent pregnancy and motherhood is broadly constructed as problematic and deviant in both research and popular culture. Media reports have a tendency to sensationalise adolescent pregnancy, which only serves to heighten the assumption that it is problematic. The WCED (2007, p. 1) policy on managing learner pregnancy, drawn from DOE (2007), recommends with emphasis that: ‘The learner must be considered to be a **Learner with Special Needs** with access to counselling by professionals of the Specialised Learner and Educator Support (SLES) component within the EMDC. The principal must manage and co-ordinate this process’. (2.1.1)

Such considerations could perhaps be responsible for othering discourses which characterise adolescent motherhood in schools. Thus, pregnant and mothering adolescents continue to be ridiculed by school authorities and their peers. In their communities, they are viewed as deviant. Because of this labelling, their associations with peers are controlled and regulated, as the community fears that they could possibly ‘corrupt’ those who have not fallen pregnant. It is recommended that attitude shifts in all stakeholders be

encouraged, so that adolescents get the necessary support in continuing with their education and getting acceptance within their societies.

Life Orientation classes should not be a space for further ridicule but indeed a space for challenging these kinds of practices and ideologies, and rather focusing on why this happens in the first place.

In this study, understanding meanings of motherhood among this group of participants required questioning issues around constructions of adolescence, womanhood and femininity in their broader social context. The study provides a strong picture of how adolescents understood and constructed their own experiences and identities as mothers and adolescents within this context. Another key social and internalised construction about being a mother emerged in the study, namely the conflation of motherhood with adulthood. Since adolescents are taking on an identity and social role that is associated with an adult role in current cultural contexts, it is assumed that they need to identify with such a role and give up on childhood and adolescence.

Most participants were not ready to do this, and found themselves with a conflicted and contradictory sense of self. The reluctance of the social environment to accept them as both young people, who still desired a childhood, but who also now had a child, was a challenging identity for these young people. The participants' agency was played out when they resisted the broad concept of motherhood that is usually associated with responsibility. They were positive about their babies, but at the same time, they wanted to enjoy adolescence. They wanted to have their children and continue to play with peers, without being reminded that they were adults because they had children. Most of them resisted the assumption that adolescent motherhood conferred adult status. They sketched out their own fluid identities: they did not want to be mothers, as this was socially constructed as an adult position, yet they did wish to enjoy caring for and relating to their children. They wanted to enjoy being who they were, playing with their peers whenever they could without fearing adult censure. They cared for their children but they wanted to enjoy their youth, and were aware of the importance of completing their schooling. Researchers and practitioners also need to develop a more nuanced approach that takes into account the complexity of their position as young people who still have to complete their schooling yet also wish for a relationship of care with their child.

While not arguing that school-going adolescents should be encouraged to have children, we also need to facilitate a way of allowing them adolescence, while still engaging with caring for their young child. A shift in social constructions of motherhood, parenthood and adolescence is required to allow a space for adolescents to be both engaged in caring but also allowed to enjoy access to what other young people have. Clearly, this depends on the social-economic environment of the young parent, but schools may also play a role in supporting such a balance, by challenging notions of parenthood, and opening up space for discussion about this contested area of what is normative and/or desirable for young people and parents.

Linked to the above argument, it also seems important to provide spaces for these young mothers to be assisted in negotiating their transition to parenthood, as well as dealing with the losses and gains of taking on such a role. Again, schools may play a role by facilitating access to school counsellors who are trained in supporting the young parents at school with the challenges that may emerge for them.

### **Gendered constructions of motherhood and the fluidity of adolescent parenting**

As highlighted in this study, constructions of motherhood and the practices of parenting of children remain highly gendered. Motherhood is broadly constructed as a woman's sphere, characterised by multifaceted and complex tasks that are designed for women. These tasks are interrelated with skills that constantly change as the mothering terrain is modified. The internalised ideology, that is, how the dominant ideology defines and delineates the conventions and meanings of motherhood shapes motherhood practices. What is socially expected of women in the larger social context contributes to women's meanings of motherhood.

Fundamental concerns related to the discourses on motherhood that emerged here include its enmeshment with childcare, a phenomenon that underlines its gendered nature. These meanings broadly informed the participants' own understandings of what it means to be a mother. More so, the women in the lives of the participants dominated the mothering sphere by virtue of being women, and were expected to take the major share of childcare. The gendered nature of tasks means that the participants were expected to cook, clean up, mind their babies while also attending to their school work. These gendered structures within their social contexts impacted on their experiences of mothering more broadly.

The practice also brings to the fore complex dynamics of relationship patterns in these communities. The communal approach to childcare underlines the gendered terrain of mothering, as for the most part only female relatives are involved. The feminisation of care means that the young mother carries the burden of the pregnancy and child in which both partners have a role. The male partner may continue his life unhindered, and in most cases in this study he was not involved in any way. Notably, the current policy and recommendations from the Department of Education do not concentrate much on the biological father, even if he is a learner in the school. All that is emphasised is that the male partner receives counselling and be reminded of issues of responsibility; otherwise the partner is exonerated from the pregnancy. This has a gendered impact on the adolescent mother who experiences both the stigma and disruption of schooling, while the male learner continues as if nothing has happened. This imbalance resonates throughout schools, and also serves to reproduce the broader social gendered construction of care-giving in families and society. In this respect, it is important for the Department of Education and other authorities in education to work in collaboration, so that policies promote gender equity and sensitivity in supporting and managing pregnant and parent learners.

Importantly, there is also a need for further input on education, at schools and in popular contexts, that challenges the normative notions of care. Childcare and motherhood have mostly been projected as women's and girls' duty. These socially constructed stereotypes have continued to perpetuate the gendered nature of mothering, facilitating an unequal load for women in the home and in civil society and its institutions. Learners need to understand that gendered notions of motherhood are socially constructed notions which lock women and girls into childcare. In addition, they continue to perpetuate such reasoning. Schools should also incorporate parenting skills into life skills education. Whilst this is not meant to encourage learner pregnancy and motherhood, other learners could make use of the skills long after they leave school or whenever they decide to be parents. Parenting skills should be incorporated into the school curriculum as part of life skills and applied whenever necessary.

There is also a need to educate not only the learners but also their communities on human rights issues and the significance of relevant legislation, so that they make informed

decisions about their lives and resist judgements of young people that undermine such human rights.

### **Structural challenges and framing of experiences**

This study highlights how it is impossible to dissociate the education of girls from their broader social and economic context. If their social spaces are characterised by a lack of resources, this is bound to affect the entire learning process. Structural challenges presented as a huge concern in the education of most of the participants in the study. Experiences of motherhood were enmeshed with those of their social context. Although it is difficult for the school to assist adolescent mothers economically, poverty plays a central role in how learners who are mothers balance motherhood and schoolwork. At times, participants dropped out of school due to lack of resources more than any other structural concern, a matter that framed the experiences of being mothers and learners. It is inevitable that any inquiry into motherhood experiences of adolescents considers the effects of the larger social structure, as it is within these broad frameworks that the learners mother. Moreover, educational authorities need to be aware that learners may be constrained by socio-economic challenges. Frameworks for supporting such learners then need to be sensitive to these barriers to women's educational progress, which clearly impact at multiple levels, not only on learner parents, but on all learners. National economic challenges may have shaped the current lack of further provision of services for parenting learners, other than the child grant, such as nurseries at school, which would ease both the financial burden as well as alleviate the load of parenting and learning, On the other hand our national policy is certainly in line with 'first world' approaches to gender equality in education, so that it may be the attitudinal resistance to such interventions, in the light of the continued moralistic response to such learners, that make such practices unthinkable.

### **Power relations and the complexity of being a young mother**

Participants' location within a network of authoritarian relationships with adults at home and school emerged as key to framing their experience of pregnancy and parenting. At school, they found themselves challenged by the power of authority invested in their educators and administrators. They were vulnerable as they negotiated their unwanted presence within the school spaces. These negotiations included concealing their pregnancies, hiding from teachers and skipping lessons. The figures of authority controlled these domains, as they decided when the pregnant learner should leave their schooling

even if this was against the judgment of the learner. At home, the presence and guidance of their parents was much welcomed, but it was also characterised by lines of authority and power inequality. They were ‘taught’ how to mother and at times their babies were taken away from them. They could not make any decisions about their bodies and their babies as they were dispossessed of the power to do so by the adults in their lives. The parents of their peers even appeared to control to some extent their friendships. The participants found themselves entrapped within the boundaries of these contesting authorities and this impacted on how they coped in school and as a parent.

In most cases, the participants were complicit with this domination, because they believed that they had erred, internalised the social messages about their ‘deviancy’, and generally felt they had no right to resist, even though some participants clearly articulated a degree of resistance to certain decisions made for them. More effort should be made to educate both parents and schools on the rights of pregnant and parenting learners, both as young people and as learners. Such interventions should focus on facilitating the understanding that adolescent mothers do not need to be pathologised or punished, but should be given space to make informed choices about their lives. Such interventions might be best implemented through frameworks of communication between communities, families and schools, such as through educational programmes that include parents, school teachers and authorities, as well as community leadership that are already present in many communities. Similarly, young people themselves need access to both the knowledge and confidence to assert their political and human rights, and understand that they have a right to negotiate their present and future.

### **Reproductive rights**

One of the key findings of the study was that abortion is an area of silence and discomfort for learners and their families, and one that presents as a highly contested terrain.

Participants portrayed abortion as more stigmatised than adolescent motherhood. Although some participants were willing to abort, they could not carry this out as their parents forbade them because of the stigma attached to it. While evidently stigmatised and not constructed as a reproductive choice option, there was a silence as to how termination of pregnancy is viewed and why it is so strongly rejected in the communities under study.

Moreover, participants did not seem to be aware of their legal rights in this respect. Even if they indicated that they contemplated abortion, there was no mention of or allusion to The

Termination of Pregnancy Act [TOP]. TOP is constitutionally available for women who want to terminate their pregnancies and young women have a right to do so without the consent of their parents or partners. In this group of participants, knowledge about the Act and their rights did not seem to be readily available or apparent. Such a gap in knowledge implies that while there are rights on paper, young people's access to such rights are mediated by cultural responses and parental control over their decisions. Thus, it is necessary that human rights issues including reproductive rights be emphasised in schools, and more readily made available, so that learners at least have information about what their rights are and what services are available to them. Challenges to parental and community attitudes also are required in order to equip them with a better understanding of their children and their rights.

This area of concern also highlights a well-known area of contestation within the South African context between human rights and cultural/traditional rights, which has appeared in areas such as customary marriages and practices like polygamy (Wechsberg, Parry & Jewkes, 2010). The need for more public debate over such issues is clearly needed, and again the school may play a role in facilitating such discussions, as well as making informational resources on rights and services available to young people and their families.

### **School responses and policy**

Even if pregnant learners are constitutionally obligated to be in school, being pregnant at school was challenging for a number of participants. Broadly, department and school policy are expected to inform the schools on the regulation and control of adolescent mothers. The department has achieved this through a 2007 document on management of pregnancy learners in schools. However, the interpretation and implementation of the guidelines varies so much that there are profound inconsistencies in handling pregnant learners in schools. Although schools have taken measures to protect the constitutional right of learners who are mothers, the reality is that pregnant learners are still being sent away from school. The expulsion happens within the confines of policy. For example in one of the schools in this study, students were expected to leave when they were six months pregnant, which meant that they would spend a complete semester at home before they delivered. Constitutionally keeping pregnant learners in school has been considered a way of retention and prohibiting exclusion. The irony is that the policy meant to protect the young mothers is drawn on to legitimise them being sent home and thus excluded from



education, even if the young mothers are expected to take responsibility for their schoolwork.

The Department of Education is strongly commended for efforts to retain pregnant learners in schools. However, the policy should be clearer, so that it achieves what it means to accomplish, retaining the young mothers in the system for as long as possible. It is recommended that the Department of Education work closely with schools to moderate and monitor implementation, so that there is consistency in the management of learner pregnancy. It seems imperative that schools create their own guidelines, and ensure that these do not inadvertently deny rather than facilitate access. Educators have also indicated that, although they are willing to assist and support learners who are mothers, they encounter challenges, particularly because of lack of clear policy guidelines.

Such policies may also protect the school authorities themselves. Because of the loopholes in the system, learners and parents have challenged the school authorities, accusing them of favouritism and partiality in the implementation of the guidelines. If schools do not have distinct policies on how they deal with pregnant and parenting learners, the situation will remain open to manipulation by stakeholders. There is thus also a need to involve all stakeholders, including parents in the policy and practices, for purposes of consistency and transparency in the management and support of pregnant and parenting learners.

Linked to ensuring that the policy is indeed effective and supportive of learners, there is moreover a need to deal with the moralistic attitudes of principals and educators who mediate the implementation of the policy, and thereby impact on the experience of pregnant and parenting learners. This study and others have shown how some principals and educators believe that the young mothers have violated moral codes and do not deserve to be in school. Engaging these central stakeholders and working towards shifting their attitudes would significantly assist in levelling the playing field in policy implementation.

Pregnant learners are also expected to ensure that they communicate with their educators and continue with schoolwork whilst on maternity break. Given the attitude of the educators and considering the sizes of their classes, pregnant learners remain challenged by this expectation. For example, participants narrated incidents when they were humiliated and judged by educators, who believed that pregnant learners had been foisted on them and

should not be in school in the first place (Bhana, et al., 2008). This attitude distressed the participants, who found it difficult to seek support under hostile circumstances.

Participants found it difficult to remain in class during lessons in which they knew they would be humiliated.

In this study, a number of participants indicated that they delivered and returned to school as soon as they could, to avoid interacting with teachers whilst at home. This situation challenges the relationship dynamics between educators and learners who are mothers. Shifting the educators' attitudes would encourage more open and flexible engagements, which would encourage pregnant learners to continue communicating with their educators whilst on maternity break, and thereby ease the transition back to school. Educators also need to be reoriented and educated on the constitutional rights of young mothers, in order to allow pregnant learners greater flexibility in schooling arrangements.

One clear area where schools could make a meaningful contribution is through providing services and educational inputs that may lighten the load and ease the burden of young parents. Since the numbers of learners becoming parents are not insubstantial, and since most learners will one day become parents, schools might be a space for parenting education, as well as raising challenges to the dominant perspective on parenting that assumes that one parent should nurture and the other should be breadwinner, which have been illustrated to be problematic for both men and women in contemporary society. As mentioned earlier, the Life Orientation programme in particular, which seems for some of these participants at least do more harm than good, may be put to use in this respect, in addition to raising issues more broadly on gender, gender equality, sexuality, and so on, all of which are key to the current problematising of teenage pregnancy and parenting.

#### **CRITICAL REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

As an overall assessment of the study, it is important to also reflect on the process of research, not only the outcomes, in line with the feminist methodological focus on self-reflexivity and the process of research. The methodology employed in the study appeared effective and appropriate for the purposes of answering the key research questions, and the ethnographic methodology was in conformity with feminist ways of knowing. Importantly, the study was not construed by myself or participants as only an academic one, but also a study that employed processes that stimulated consciousness among, and served as a

support for, the participants, a process which is advocated by feminist methodology. Importantly, it was encouraging that some of the participants even articulated feeling empowered to make decisions that transformed their lives following the research process. The fact that data were collected within the participants' spaces enabled my insight into their world (Plummer, 1983). Using repeated interviews meant that the researcher and the participants spent a lot of time together, and this resulted in accumulation of very rich data and a respectful process. Contributing in the accumulation of data was the value the research placed on the participants and their narratives. They were not merely objects of research but they were part of the process of knowledge production, which also facilitated their own growth and accumulation of knowledge. Crucial in the collection of the narratives was the importance of listening. The study set out to present young mothers' subjective experiences and these were narrated within their own spaces, creating liberating frameworks which allowed the young mothers freedom to express themselves.

I learnt that participants wanted to be heard. The more I listened without interrupting, the more they opened up and felt safe to share their experiences. They found it comfortable to open up to me because I was a stranger, which created a sense of safety. More importantly, participants experienced my non-judgemental listening very positively, since this was something they were not familiar with, especially in relation to adults. Thus the experience of being listened to without judgement by an adult not only provided a safe space, but also, I believe, allowed for the building of their confidence and self-acceptance in the light of their multiple other experiences of social rejection and marginalisation. My main purpose in this study was to 'enact real world social change for women' (Miner-Rubino, Jayaratne & Konik, 2007, p. 208), and equally influence this transformation at policy level. There are some indicators that this was achieved, such as feedback from participants as mentioned, but also shifts in their composure and sense of self were evident to me through the process of the research.

The study methodology was also important in terms of the gaps in the literature, since in a deeply objectified area of study such as teenage pregnancy, there have been few studies that articulate the narratives of young women themselves. Listening to subjective voices deeply shaped the data collected (De Vault & Gross, 2007). Feminist researchers are encouraged to listen to gaps and silences, and to consider the hidden meanings behind the unarticulated speech (De Vault & Liza, 2002). It is through such listening that the

researcher could discern such gaps and silences, for example the silence that was noted around abortion.

The study was however admittedly limited in a number of ways, which should be noted, and point to the need for further research. It is important to acknowledge that for the purposes of this study, I concentrated on learners who are mothers, and what I have documented on learners who are fathers were only the views of the young mothers about their partners. The voices of learners who are fathers have not found much coverage in research more generally either, and this has been noted as a concern in the literature (Swartz & Bhana, 2009). However, studies are slowly proliferating on the voices of learner fathers (see the recent text by Swartz & Bhana, 2009; Morrell, 2007; Pattman, 2007). No doubt, this area of study, and implications for policy and intervention, will be richer if the voices of learner fathers are better captured and presented as well.

Motherhood is a complex phenomenon and generalising motherhood experiences challenges cultural specificity in such theorising. There are of course parallels and overlaps with studies in other contexts, but the young mothers' experiences in this study are powerfully located in their communities and cultural meanings, an understanding that necessarily limits the study and findings. Realising that cultural context is fundamental in constructing notions of motherhood, it is recommended that such studies be extended to other cultural contexts locally, for a more holistic picture of the multiplicity of such experiences nationally to emerge, in order to better inform policy and programmatic change.

The silence around the issue of abortion among this sample raised a number of concerns, as already highlighted, for learners, their parents and community. There are gaps in the literature on knowledge, attitudes and stigma attached to abortion in this community. It has been acknowledged that there is a lack of research in the area of termination of pregnancy (Varga, 2002), and this study reinforces the need for further investigation in order to better understand the current social responses to this form of reproductive choice.

Finally, this study has illuminated the powerful association of motherhood with childcare, and the continued dominance of patriarchal conceptions of femininity in current social contexts, that construct the care of children as the primary responsibility of women. While

the participants challenged this normative construction of motherhood to some extent, their lives were burdened by this unequal distribution of labour and the lack of responsibility expected of their male partners. These normative perceptions of women remain major concerns for their centrality in parenting more broadly in South African social transformation. Thus, one cannot isolate mothering practice and experience from socially organised structures that regulate such institutions within the larger frame of society. An inquiry into adolescent motherhood and mothering should understand the broad structures and hierarchies which control and shape these institutions. Also importantly, this study has confirmed the arguments made internationally that teenage pregnancy and mothering, and key to both, adolescent and female sexuality, remain stigmatised, pathologised and problematised. With respect to both of these key findings, it becomes clear that any challenges to the problems that adolescent mothers face need to be located within the broader goals of gender transformation, justice and equality.

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## APPENDIX ONE

### Informed consent for participants

Women's and Gender Studies  
University of the Western Cape  
Private Bag X 17  
Bellville  
7535  
Cape Town

16/11/2006

Dear-----

My name is SISA NGABAZA and I am a D. Phil. Student in the department of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of the Western Cape. The study aims to explore how adolescent mothers /mothers-to-be such as yourself are coping with the double roles of mothers and school child. The study will involve interviews with you at a place and time convenient to you. Data collection is expected to last for four to six months. Each interview is expected to take between 45mins and 1hr. With your permission the interviews will be recorded and the tapes will be transcribed. I will keep the tapes and transcripts in a locked cabinet at my home during the study, and I and my supervisor Professor T. Shefer (contact details: e-mail [tshefer@uwc.ac.za](mailto:tshefer@uwc.ac.za); tel 021 9592234) will have access to the information during the study. At the end of the study the tapes and all the transcriptions will be destroyed.

Please be advised that your participation is completely voluntary - it remains your choice to be involved in the study. You will also remain anonymous – your name and that of your school will not appear anywhere in the study. All information supplied will be treated in absolute confidence and you are free to withdraw from the study anytime you feel uncomfortable, without penalty or prejudice. All information supplied will be treated in absolute confidence and used only for the purposes of this study.

A letter has been written to your parents/guardians to ask their permission for you to participate in this study. If you and your parents agree that you may participate, please fill in the form below and return it to me.

Sincerely

SISA NGABAZA

TEL: 021 9138253

CODESRIA - LIBRARY

## Participant consent form

I----- (FULL NAME)

hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time should I so desire.

----- (Signature of participant)

CODESRIA - LIBRARY



## APPENDIX TWO

### Informed consent letter for parents

Women's and Gender Studies  
University of the Western Cape  
Private Bag X 17  
Bellville  
7535  
Cape Town

16/11/2006

Dear Parent/Guardian of -----

My name is SISA NGABAZA and I'm a D.Phil. student in the department of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of the Western Cape. My study is exploring how learners who are either pregnant or have a small baby like your daughter cope with the double roles of mother-to-be/mother and learner. The study will involve interviews with your daughter. Two interviews of 45mins to 1hour will be held with your daughter in a month. The whole study is expected to take four to six months. With you and your daughter's permission the interviews will be audio taped and the tapes transcribed. The tapes and the transcripts will be kept in a locked cabinet in my house for the duration of the study. They will be destroyed at the end of the research project.

Please note that your daughter's identity will remain anonymous throughout the study (her real name and that of the school will not be revealed at any point). Also, your daughter's participation in the study is voluntary and she may decide not to participate without any penalty.

Kindly discuss your daughter's participation with her, and if you are both agreeable please complete the form below.

Sincerely

SISA NGABAZA

Tel: 021 913 8253

---

**Parent Consent Form**

I----- (full names of parent/guardian) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the study. I consent to my daughter participating in the project.

## APPENDIX THREE

### Learner consent letter (Xhosa)

Women's and Gender Studies  
University of the Western Cape  
Private Bag X 17  
Bellville  
7535  
Cape Town

16-02-2007

Mfundi obekekileyo

Igama lami ndingu Sisa Ngabaza. Ndingomye wabafundi be D.Phil. kwisebe lezifundo zeWomen's and Gender Studies kwiDyunivesithi yasentshona Koloni. Ezi zifundo zenziwe ngenjongo yokufumaniseka ukuba abantwana besikolo abanabantwana baphila njani behamba isikolo baphinde badlale indima yobuzali ebantwaneni babo. Kuzokwenziwa udliwano ndlebe nawe kabini enyangeni, kwiindawo ekulungeleyo nangexesha elikulungeleyo. Uqokelelo lwenkcukacha lulindeleke luthathe ithuba elingange nyanga ezine uyokuma kwinyanga ezintandathu. Udliwano ndlebe ngalunye lulindeleke ukuba luthathe imizuzu emashumi amane anesihlanu kusiya kwiyure. Oludliwano ndlebe luzokushicilelwa kwicwecwe, lenziwe isicatshulwa ngokwe mvume yakho. La macwecwe nesicatshulwa ziza kuba phantsi kogcino. Izakube ndim nomphathi wam uProf. T. Shefer, onkcukacha zilandelayo, ([tshefer@uwc.ac.za](mailto:tshefer@uwc.ac.za), inombolo yomnxeba 021 959 2234), sithi sobabini abantu abanemvume yokufikelela kwiinkcukacha. Ezonkcukacha zizokutshatyaliswa ekupheleni kwezifundo.

Qaphela! Ngokuthatha kwakho inxaxheba, kuxhomeleke kuwe ukuba uyafuna ukuba yinxaxheba kwezifundo. Inkcukacha zakho nezesikolo sakho azisayikubonakaliswa apha ezifundweni. Zonke inkcukacha azisayikuvezwa konke apha ezifundweni, nanjengoko nawe uvumelekile ukuyeka ukuba uziva ungonwabisekanga.

Fumana ileta ebhalelwe mzali wakho ecela imvume yokuba uthathe inxaxheba kwezizifundo. Ukuba wena nomzali wakho niyavuma ukuba uthathe inxaxheba, ndicela ugqwalise ifomu leyo ingasemva uyibuyisele kum wakugqiba.

Ozithobileyo

Sisa Ngabaza

Inombolo yomxeba 021 9138253

I-mail 2653186@uwc.ac.za.

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**Learner consent form (Xhosa)**

**UMFUNDI**

Mna----- (igama lakho)

Ndiyavuma ukuba ndiyaqonda okuqulethwe yile ncwadi nohlobo lwesifundo futhi ndiyavuma ukuthatha inxaxheba. Ndiyaqonda ukuba kuvumelekile ukushiya isifunda xa ndifuna njalo.

----- (utyikityo lwakho)

----- (indawo)

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## APPENDIX FOUR

### Parent consent letter (Xhosa)

Women's and Gender Studies  
University of the Western Cape  
Private Bag X 17  
Bellville  
7535  
Cape Town  
16-02 -2007

Mzali obekekileyo

Igama lami ndingu Sisa Ngabaza. Ndingu mfundi weD.Phil. kwisebe lezifundo ze Women and Gender Studies kwi Dyunivesithi yase Ntshona Koloni. Ezi zifundo zenziwe ngenjongo yokufumanisa ukuba abantwana besikolo abanabantwana baphila njani behamba isikolo baphinde badlale indima yobuzali ebantwaneni babo, njenge ntombi yakho. Kuzokwenziwa udliwano ndlebe nentombi yakho, kabini enyangeni. Luzothatha imizuzu emashumi amane anesihlanu kusiya kuyure. Izifundo zonke zilindeleke ukuba zithathe ithuba elingange nyanga ezine uyokuma kwiinyanga ezintandathu. Ukuba nobabini niyavuma, oluviwano ndlebe luzakushicilelwa kumacwecwe. Macwecwe lawo azokwenziwa izicatshulwa. Loo macwecwe nezozicatshulwa zizakuba selugcinweni. Izakube ndim nomphathi wam uProf. T. Shefer onkcukasha ezilandelayo ([tshefer@uwc.ac.za](mailto:tshefer@uwc.ac.za), inombolo yomxeba 021 9592234), sithi sobabini abantu abanemvume yokufikelela kwiinkcukasha. Ezo nkcukacha zizokutshatyalaliswa ekupheleni kwezifundo.

Qaphela! inkcukacha zentombi yakho azizokuvezwa apha ezifundweni, nokuthatha kwakhe inxaxheba akunyanzelekanga, uyakwazi ukuyeka. Nceda uthethe nentombi yakho malunga nale nxaxheba azakuyithatha. Uba nobabini niyavuma, nceda ugcwalise ifomu leyo, uyibuyise kum wakugqiba.

Ozithobileyo

Sisa Ngabaza

Inombolo yomnxeba 021 9138253

I-mail 2653186@uwc.ac.za

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## Parent consent form (Xhosa)

### UMZALI

Mna-----(Igama lomzali)

Ndiyavuma ukuba ndiyakuqonda okuqulethwe yilencwadi nohlobo lwesifundo. Ndiyavuma ukuba intombi yami ithathe inxaxheba. Ndiyaqonda ukuba uvumelekile ukushiya isifundo xa efuna njalo.

----- (utyikityo lomzali)

----- (indawo)

----- (umhla).

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