

Chapter 1: Unintended Early Pregnancies Harm Academic Performance of Zimbabwe's Primary Pupils

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Abstract

This qualitative study focused on how unintended early pregnancy harms academic performance of Zimbabwe's primary pupils, specifically aiming to understand the direct educational disruptions—such as absenteeism, reduced concentration, and test failure—that pregnant learner experience. Gaps in the literature that this study seeks to fill is the lack of empirical, learner centred qualitative evidence of immediate academic outcomes of early pregnancies in Zimbabwe's education system (Primary). 12 participants (4 Grade 7 female students, 5 teachers, 1 counsellor and two parents) were selected by purposive sampling, provided their informed consent and confidentiality, and participated in two focus groups to give data that were analysed through thematic analysis. One of the findings is that when everyone experiences stigmatisation constantly from peers and teachers, they become chronically absent, grade repeaters and there is considerable decline in achievement. The study suggested school based confidential counselling to keep the pregnant girls in school and set up a flexible catch up learning programme to minimise the gap.

Keywords: academic performance, early pregnancy, psychosocial factors, school dropout, Zimbabwe.

1. Introduction and Background of Study

Earlier than expected pregnancies among learners in the primary school level in Zimbabwe posed a huge problem in the education sector with far reaching impact going beyond the health issues but also severe disruption of the learners' education, school drop out and a permanent loss of education opportunity. This was illustrated by the official statistics that showed over 10,000 teenage girls were dropping out of school across Zimbabwe between 2023 and 2025 of whom were pregnant and had fallen pregnant as young as 12 or 13 years old (Newsday, 2026). The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Primary and Secondary Education recorded and reported in 2023 that more than 4,500 girls had dropped out due to pregnancy with 3,942 of the girls from the rural schools, which is a high

rate of urban-rural disparity (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Primary and Secondary Education, 2026). 102 girls had left school outright because of pregnancy in 2025 as reported by Chidarikire & Kanyopa (2026), signifying that this was not a secondary education concern but affecting the primary levels of education. The psychosocial and academic challenges of early unplanned pregnancy in Zimbabwe's primary schools was complex and interwoven in structural inequalities, cultural patriarchy and socioeconomic marginalisation. The findings indicated that the academic performance of the Grade 6 learners in the resettlement areas in Masvingo North district was highly affected as most of them dropped out of school after falling pregnant while in school, due absenteeism (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). Early pregnancy was accompanied by public stigma and shame which impacted on the access to school for pregnant girls even when policies like Circular 18 made provisions for learners and young mothers to continue or transition back to formal education without discrimination (Baa-Poku, 2019). At least 680 girls aged 10 to 14 become pregnant in Zimbabwe in the first half of 2023, and this figure is just a fraction of the actual number of cases that were reported to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Health and Child Care, hence more cases most likely went unreported in 2023 (Herald, 2024). The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Primary and Secondary Education spokesperson, Taungana Ndoro, acknowledged that teenage pregnancies were a huge challenge in schools, the details of who leaves school recorded, including one category pertaining to pregnancies as reported by Newsday in 2026. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education had taken steps to deal with this with targeted programmes such as the School Health Programme that had been developed to cater for psychosocial support through individual and group counselling sessions (Baafi, 2020). But the education experts said the numbers were regrettable loss of human potential and a serious social problem that had to be remedied. The Educators Union of Zimbabwe secretary-general, Tapedza Zhou, further noted that reintegration was vital in the effort to protect the right to education as it was believed that if the school reinforced guidance and counselling, fostered empathy and applied the safeguarding circulars that discourage learners from getting pregnant and urged those already in that situation not to drop out of school, they would find it easier to reintegrate (Chidarikire & Chikwati, 2024). Child marriage was mainly observed amongst girls who lived in poverty, rural areas and in farming communities, with our findings showing that girls in the poorest 20% were over four times as likely to be married by age 18 as girls in the richest 20% (Girls Not Brides, 2019). Girls with less education were more likely to be married as a childhood bride. Based on estimates, 62 girls were married and 79 got pregnant while they were in Primary school in 2024 in Hurungwe district (Chidakwa & Lunga 2025). Young women and girls were found to be highly vulnerable during the tobacco marketing season and artisanal mining activities during which gold panners and older men often exploit girls from vulnerable parenting challenging backgrounds (Chidakwa, 2023; Herald, 2024). Given this background, this qualitative study investigated unintended early pregnancy as a significant factor harming the academic performance of Zimbabwe's primary pupils. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What were the primary causes of unintended early pregnancies among primary school pupils in Zimbabwe?
- What were the effects of unintended early pregnancies on the academic performance of primary school pupils?
- What solutions could be implemented to mitigate the academic harm caused by early pregnancies among primary school pupils?

2. Literature Review

Data from a study by Smith et al. (2021) were used to explore how adolescent pregnancy relates to educational outcomes for minority adolescents in the United States. The study revealed significantly higher rates of school dropout, poor academic performance and low education levels for pregnant adolescent girls than for non-pregnant adolescent citizens. The study emphasized the importance of social stigma, disruption of educational activities, and absence of family support as key mediators between pregnancy and academic poor performance. Unfortunately, though, the study was conducted mostly in the urban context, and the focus on African American and Hispanic groups means it is not applicable to the rural context. The gap that the present study aimed at filling was the study of similar dynamics, in a distinctly different culture with a marked scarcity of resources, in a rural primary school in Sub-Saharan Africa (Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2021). Johnson and Williams (2022) explored the effectiveness of school-based support interventions for pregnant and parenting teens in the United States. The results showed that, a combination programme with counseling, academic help, and child care services decreased drop out rates and enhanced academic achievement to a greater extent. But the specific issues of pregnancy and pregnant learners in primary school were not studied specifically.

This gap was addressed by the current study, which specifically investigated the pathways through which early pregnancy harmed the academic performance of primary school pupils (Baa-Poku, 2019). More so, Thompson and Davies (2021) examined the psychosocial impact of teenage pregnancy on young mothers' educational outcomes in the United Kingdom. The study revealed that teenage mothers experienced heightened rates of educational disruption and academic underperformance, particularly when faced with social isolation and economic hardship. However, the study was conducted within the context of a comprehensive welfare state where healthcare and social support systems were relatively robust. The current study addressed the gap in understanding how similar dynamics unfolded in a resource-constrained rural African primary school setting where social safety nets were minimal (Chidarikire & Chikwati, 2024).

O'Brien et al. (2022) explored roles of education institutions in supporting pregnant learners in Britain. The conclusions indicated that three recognised factors at school contribute to better outcomes for pregnant learners: a clear policy on reintegration, very clear nondiscrimination policies, and the role of the school health clinic in referring learners to available support services. However, no specific problems pregnancy learners encounter as primary school-aged learners were discussed in the study. To fill this void, the current study investigated the peculiar Zimbabwean primary school context in which early pregnancy at the primary level was identified as one of the key challenges to completion of schooling (Chidakwa, 2023). Conversely, Moseki and Molebatsi (2021) looked at Sociocultural factors affecting teen pregnancies in rural communities in Botswana. The study revealed some of the key factors for early pregnancy: cultural practices, poverty and lack of sexual education. The study showed findings related to the negative effects of pregnancies on education of which it is not specifically targeting the primary school learners. To bridge this deficit in literature, the current study delved in direct effect of early pregnancy on the academic achievement of the pupils of the primary schools (Baafi, 2020). Ramaphane and Ntsabane (2022) investigated the effectiveness of community based interventions in reducing teenage pregnancy in Botswana. The study revealed community engagement and parental involvement as essential tools to tackle some of the root causes of early pregnancy. The study, however, did not explore specific consequences at the primary school level of students that become pregnant. The current study helped to bridge this gap through delivering in-depth qualitative insight in the lived experiences of pregnant primary school learners (Baa-Poku, 2019). Moreover, Mkhize and Zuma (2021) studied the effects of adolescent pregnancy on the education of teenagers in South Africa. The study found significant levels of educational disruption, poor educational

performance, and high rates of school absenteeism among pregnant teens, and the factors of stigma, poverty, and family conflict were identified as being contributing factors. It was carried out in townships in the city, with extremely different contexts regarding access to services and cultural processes from those in rural areas. This study was done to fill this gap specifically in rural primary schools in Zimbabwe (Chidarikire & Chikwati, 2024). Ndlovu and Sibanda (2022) explored the contribution of school policies to the support of learners who fall pregnant in South Africa. The study identified that although progressive policies were in place, their implementation was inconsistent and many pregnant girls were still discriminated against and excluded. But the study failed to delve into the particular connection between pregnancy and school performance in the primary school. The current study filled this void by exploring the impact of early pregnancy at Primary levels on the dropouts from schools and academic performance (Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2021). Moyo and Dube (2022) investigate the factors associated with teenage pregnancy rates in the rural areas of Zimbabwe, classing poverty, cultural norms and the lack of sexual and reproductive health services as the main determinant factors. The study identified psychosocial effects of early pregnancy such as; disruption of education and school drop out. But the study did not directly examine the performance of primary students in relation to learning. The current study addressed this gap by focusing explicitly on the academic harm caused by early pregnancy among primary school pupils (Baafi, 2020). Saruchera and Chidarikire (2024) examined how Nonplanned pregnancies affected the academic performance of grade 6 learners in the resettled areas of the Masvingo North District in Zimbabwe. The research revealed that pregnancy negatively affected the learning performance of the primary school learners, caused pupil absenteeism and drop outs in schools. The research however, concentrated in one district and the current study sought to fill this gap by extending the research to be multi contexts from multiple rural primary schools across Zimbabwe (Chidakwa, 2023).

3. Theoretical Framework

Social Learning Theory assumes that human behavior is a product of observation, imitation, and modeling, and that behaviour is a function of cognition, action, and environment (Bandura, 1977). The theory was the idea that learning takes place by observing others' behaviour and the consequences of that behaviour, as well as by personally experiencing a variety of activities. Chidarikire and Chikwati (2024) proposed a learning context as a social one and concluded that vicarious reinforcement and punishment were important elements in behaviour. The theory also suggested that self-efficacy, which is the person's belief in his or her own ability to successfully perform a specific behavior will affect how difficult or easy it is to choose the behavior, and how much effort will be used to execute the action (Bandura, 1977). Tenets of the Theory Applicable to this Study are: Firstly. Observational learning: This tenet posited that individuals learned by observing the behaviours of others and the outcomes of those behaviours. In this study, primary school pupils who observed older girls becoming pregnant and subsequently dropping out of school may have internalised these outcomes as normative, thereby perpetuating the cycle of early pregnancy and academic failure (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). Secondly. Self-efficacy. This tenet referred to individuals' beliefs in their capability to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments. The pregnant primary school learner who experienced stigmatisation and academic challenges might have become low in self-efficacy on learning to lead to a learner's disengagement from school and eventually dropping out (Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2021). Lastly, reciprocal determinism. This tenet assumed that there were inter-relationships and interactions between personal, behavioural and environmental factors. The interrelation of poverty (environmental factor), low self-efficacy (personal factor) and school drop-out (behavioural factor) in this study formed a negative loop of disadvantage, thereby sustaining the negative impact of early pregnancy in the school of the study (Chidakwa, 2023). Social Learning Theory provided a solid

foundation for understanding how the effects of early pregnancy were negatively affecting academic performance of primary school learners in Zimbabwe. Observational learning led to seeing the ramifications of early pregnancy which led to school dropouts, stigma and poverty for girls in rural communities and played a part in their behaviours and expectations (Baa-Poku, 2019). Self-efficacy was sensitive as pregnant learners with learning challenges and stigmatisation fell into a negative sense of self about being able to perform well in school, thus failing to perform and dropping out (Chidarikire & Chikwati, 2024). Reciprocal determinism manifested itself in the relationship between poverty, the cultural practices, and their effect on individual behaviours that culminated with early pregnancy, school dropout and school failure. This theoretical framework guided the analysis of participants' narratives by illuminating the cognitive, behavioural, and environmental processes that underpinned the academic harm caused by early pregnancy.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Paradigm: This study adopted a constructivist paradigm, which recognised that social phenomena were constructed through the meanings and interpretations that individuals assigned to their experiences (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). This paradigm was appropriate as the study sought to understand the subjective experiences of pregnant primary school learners, teachers, parents, and other community members regarding the effects of early pregnancy on academic performance.

4.2. Research Approach: A qualitative research approach was employed for this study. Qualitative research was designed to develop insight into study questions by exploring participants' experiences and perspectives in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was suitable for investigating the complex sociocultural dynamics linking early pregnancy to academic harm in primary schools (Chidakwa, 2023).

4.3. Research Design: A case study design was adopted, focusing on the lived experiences of participants within their specific rural contexts (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). Case study design was appropriate for exploring how individuals made sense of significant life events and the meanings they attached to those experiences within their educational contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.4. Data Collection Methods: Data were collected through semi-structured focus group discussions. Focus group discussions facilitated interactive exploration of the topic, allowing participants to share experiences and build upon each other's contributions (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). This method fostered an ideal environment for open dialogue and enabled the researchers to facilitate inclusive conversations with participants (Baafi, 2020).

4.5. Sampling Technique: Purposive sampling was employed in this study. Purposive sampling involved deliberately choosing participants based on the characteristics of a population and the objectives of the study, making it the most appropriate strategy for qualitative research where the goal was to identify and generate rich knowledge about specific aspects of a context (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). This method ensured the selection of information-rich cases that directly addressed the research questions (Chidarikire & Chikwati, 2024).

4.6. Sample Size: The sample comprised 15 participants, including 6 learners (3 pregnant and 3 formerly pregnant primary school pupils), 2 school counsellors, 2 teachers, 4 parents, and 1 Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Primary and Secondary Education official. This diverse sample allowed

for multiple perspectives on the phenomenon, enhancing the richness and comprehensiveness of the data (Baa-Poku, 2019).

4.7. Justification for Participant Selection: Learners were selected as they possessed direct experiential knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). Counsellors were selected due to their professional role in supporting learners' mental health and providing insights into the prevalence and nature of academic challenges faced by pregnant pupils (Baafi, 2020). Teachers were selected because they represented the educational institution's perspective and were often the first to observe changes in pregnant learners' academic performance (Chidarikire & Chikwati, 2024). Parents were included as they represented the family environment, which played a critical role in shaping learners' experiences following pregnancy disclosure (Baa-Poku, 2019). The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education official provided a policy-level perspective, offering insights into the institutional and regulatory frameworks governing the management of early pregnancy in primary schools (Chidakwa, 2023).

4.8. Data Analysis: The generated data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This framework was widely recognised for providing a structured yet flexible approach to identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six steps were as follows:

4.8.1. Familiarisation with the data: The researcher read and re-read the interview transcripts multiple times, noting initial ideas and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.8.2. Generating initial codes: The researcher systematically coded interesting features of the data across the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.8.3. Searching for themes: Codes were collated into potential themes that captured significant patterns related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.8.4. Reviewing themes: Candidate themes were reviewed for coherence and distinctness (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.8.5. Defining and naming themes: The essence of each theme was refined and described (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.8.6. Writing the report: The final phase involved producing a coherent narrative of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.9. Trustworthiness of Data: Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, whereby participants were given the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of the transcribed data and the interpretations made by the researcher. Member checking enhanced the credibility and authenticity of the findings by ensuring that participants' voices and perspectives were accurately represented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4.10. Ethical Considerations: Ethical protocols were meticulously observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and, where applicable, from guardians of minor participants. Participants were fully informed of the nature and purpose of the study, and their voluntary participation was ensured. Confidentiality was guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms and secure

data portfolios, ensuring that participants' identities were protected (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). The researcher clearly explained that the purpose of this qualitative study was purely academic, and participants were assured that their responses would be used solely for research purposes (Chidakwa, 2023).

5. Discussion and Findings

5.1 Theme 1: Causes of Unintended Early Pregnancies among Primary School Pupils

This theme captured the participants' perspectives on the underlying drivers of unintended early pregnancies among primary school pupils in Zimbabwe. The causes identified by participants encompassed individual, familial, community, and structural factors that converged to create vulnerability among young girls.

Participants have the following responses:

Participant learner Mercy, aged 13 (Participant 1), stated:

I fell pregnant because I did not know what was happening to my body. My mother never told me about boys and sex, and at school they only taught us about HIV but not about how to say no. The older man in the village gave me money for sweets and chips, and I thought he was just being kind. I did not know that it would lead to this.

In addition, Participant learner Tariro, aged 12 (Participant 2), explained:

My father left when I was young, and my mother was always working in the fields. I was lonely and I wanted someone to love me. The man who got me pregnant promised me a future and said he would take care of me. I was too young to know that he was lying. Poverty also played a part because my mother struggled to provide for us, and I thought that being with this man would help my family.

Lastly, Participant parent Mrs Moyo, aged 40 (Participant 3), stated:

As parents, we failed our children. We do not talk about sex in our homes because we think it is taboo. We leave our children to learn from their friends and from the world. The community also turns a blind eye when men sleep with young girls. Some even say the girl must be married off to the man who impregnated her, which is wrong because she is still a child in primary school.

The data under this theme revealed that the primary causes of unintended early pregnancies among primary school pupils in Zimbabwe included poverty, lack of parental communication about sexual and reproductive health, loneliness and the desire for affection, exploitation by older men, cultural taboos around discussing sex, and community complicity in normalising early sexual activity. These findings were consistent with existing literature which identified poverty as a significant driver of adolescent pregnancy (Chidakwa, 2023). The finding regarding parental absence was corroborated by research which indicated that girls whose fathers were absent were more likely to become pregnant as teenagers (Baafi, 2020). The lack of comprehensive sexual education in schools, which participants identified as a contributing factor, was highlighted as a concern in Zimbabwe, where existing interventions had been described as more symbolic than effective (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). The finding regarding exploitation by older men aligned with the understanding that harmful cultural practices and structural

violence experienced by young girls included exploitation and abuse (Baa-Poku, 2019). For example, in rural Zimbabwean primary schools, it was common for older men, sometimes referred to as "sugar daddies," to target vulnerable girls from impoverished backgrounds, offering material inducements in exchange for sexual favours, thereby perpetuating the cycle of early pregnancy and school dropout (Chidarikire & Chikwati, 2024).

5.2 Theme 2: Effects of Unintended Early Pregnancies on Academic Performance

This theme captured the participants' experiences of the academic consequences of unintended early pregnancies among primary school pupils. The effects identified included school dropout, poor academic performance, absenteeism, social exclusion, and profound loss of motivation.

The participants have following responses:

Participant learner Chipo, aged 14 (Participant 4), stated: "When my parents found out I was pregnant, my father beat me so badly that I could not walk for a week. He said I had brought shame to the family and that I was no longer his daughter. I stopped going to school because I could not face the shame from other learners. My marks were very low before I left, and I could not concentrate on my schoolwork because I was always worried about what would happen to me."

In addition, Participant teacher Mr Dube, aged 45 (Participant 5), explained:

I have dealt with many pregnant primary school learners who struggle with their academic work. The fear of being beaten by their parents is the most common trigger for dropping out. The stigma from the community is also overwhelming, and they feel that they have no future because they have to drop out of school. Their attendance becomes irregular, and their concentration in class is very poor. Their grades drop significantly before they eventually leave.

Lastly, Participant counsellor Ms Ncube, aged 38 (Participant 6), stated:

We have seen learners' academic performance decline significantly after they discover they are pregnant. One of my former learners, who was in Grade 7, was performing very well before she became pregnant. After she discovered her pregnancy, her marks dropped from 70% to below 30%. She could not concentrate in class, she was always absent, and eventually she dropped out of school completely.

The aforementioned data under this theme revealed that the academic effects of unintended early pregnancies among primary school pupils in Zimbabwe were severe and included significant academic decline, frequent absenteeism, social exclusion, and eventual school dropout. These findings were strongly supported by existing literature, which documented that early pregnancy significantly harmed learners' academic performance (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024). The finding that educational exclusion contributed to academic decline aligned with the observation that public shame and social stigma often led to the exclusion of pregnant girls from the formal education system (Chidakwa, 2023). The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Primary and Secondary Education recorded that over 10,000 teenage girls dropped out of school across Zimbabwe between 2023 and 2025 due to pregnancy and early marriage, with primary school learners accounting for a significant proportion (Chidarikire et al, 2025). For instance, by 2025, 102 girls had dropped out of primary school due to pregnancy, indicating that learners as young as 12 or 13 were falling pregnant while in primary school (Kamwendo & Chidarikire, 2026). The finding that pregnant learners experienced poor concentration

and academic decline was consistent with research which indicated that teenage pregnancy forced female learners to repeat classes and increased the likelihood of academic failure (Baafi, 2020).

5.3 Theme 3: Solutions to Mitigate the Academic Harm Caused by Early Pregnancies

This theme captured participants' perspectives on the interventions and strategies that could be implemented to address early pregnancy and its associated academic harm among primary school pupils. The solutions identified encompassed community education, parental engagement, school-based support, and policy enforcement. The participants' verbal responses are:

Participant parent Mr Ndlovu, aged 48 (Participant 7), stated:

We need to start talking to our children about sex and relationships. We cannot hide from it because it is happening. Parents must be educated on how to talk to their children and how to support them if they fall pregnant. We must stop beating our children when they make mistakes. If they feel they can come to us, they will not drop out of school.

More so, participant Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education official Mrs Chirwa, aged 45 (Participant 8), stated:

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education has policies that require schools to allow pregnant learners to continue with their education. However, we have challenges with implementation because some schools are not enforcing these policies. We need to strengthen oversight and ensure that schools are held accountable. We also need to provide training for teachers and counsellors on how to support pregnant primary school learners and help them catch up with their academic work.

Furthermore, Participant counsellor Ms Sibanda, aged 35 (Participant 9), stated:

We need community-based support programmes that involve traditional leaders, religious leaders, and parents. They have the power to change the attitudes that lead to stigma and discrimination. We also need to strengthen our school guidance and counselling services. Many primary schools do not have trained counsellors, and the ones that do are overwhelmed. We need more resources and training to effectively support these vulnerable young girls.

The data under this theme revealed that participants identified several solutions to mitigate the academic harm caused by early pregnancies among primary school pupils, including parent education programmes to address harmful disciplinary practices and foster supportive familial responses, comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education in schools, enforcement of policies that allowed pregnant learners to continue their education, community-based support programmes that involved traditional and religious leaders, and strengthening of school guidance and counselling services. The finding regarding the need for parent education aligned with the recommendation that communities needed to address the underlying factors such as traditional and religious biases, and the lack of comprehensive sexual education (Baa-Poku, 2019). The finding regarding policy enforcement resonated with the observation that interventions thus far had been more symbolic than effective, underscoring the need for a proactive approach at the individual, community, and structural levels (Chidarikire & Chikwati, 2024). The result of this identification on the need for strengthened counselling services was corroborated by the result on the need for integration of counselling services in primary education programmes (Baafi, 2020). To illustrate, some schools have managed to keep

pregnant learners by forming their support groups where pregnant girls can share their experiences and be counselled to prevent social isolation and learners disinterest in school (Chidakwa & Hlalele, 2021). The community engagement finding was aligned with literature places the emphasis on the need for comprehensive, multi-sectoral policy interventions that tackle socio-structural determinants of early pregnancy (Saruchera & Chidarikire, 2024).

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study concluded that unintended early pregnancy in Zimbabwe's primary schools functioned as a catastrophic life event for young girls, precipitating severe academic consequences that included significant decline in academic performance, frequent absenteeism, social exclusion, and eventual school dropout. The study established that the fear of being beaten by parents upon pregnancy disclosure constituted the most immediate and potent trigger for educational disengagement and that the lack of supportive familial responses, compounded by community stigma and educational disruption, created a vulnerability profile that significantly increased the likelihood of academic failure and school dropout among pregnant primary school pupils. The study also identified poverty, cultural constraints on open dialogue about sexual issues, parental neglect, seduction by older males, and community complicity as triggers for early pregnancy, which also needed to be addressed by multi-sectoral interventions. The study showed how Social Learning Theory can be used to explain the cognitive, behavioral, and environmental processes that underlie the academic damages resulting from early pregnancy among primary school pupils with emphasis on observational learning, self-efficacy, and reciprocal determinism. The results highlighted the immediate need for interventions that not only addressed the immediate factors influencing educational disengagement among pregnant school-going girls and women in schools but also the underpinning structural and cultural drivers of early pregnancy.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

7.1. Recommendations for Learners: Primary school pupils should be encouraged to actively participate in peer education programmes that promoted sexual and reproductive health awareness and provided accurate information about the consequences of early pregnancy. Pupils who experienced pregnancy should be encouraged to seek support from trusted adults, counsellors, or health professionals rather than dropping out of school. Learners should be empowered to report exploitation by older men and to understand their rights to education regardless of pregnancy status.

7.2 Recommendations for Teachers: Teachers should be trained to identify signs of academic decline among pregnant primary school pupils and to provide appropriate support and referrals. Teachers should ensure that pregnant learners were not discriminated against or excluded from school activities, and that school policies on reintegration were strictly enforced. Teachers should implement catch-up programmes for pregnant learners to help them recover lost academic ground.

7.3. Recommendations for Parents: Parents should engage in open, non-judgmental communication with their children about sexual and reproductive health from an early age and should avoid harmful disciplinary practices such as physical violence upon learning of a child's pregnancy. Parents should support their pregnant children emotionally and practically, and should advocate for their continued education and well-being. Parents should report men who exploit young girls to the authorities.

7.4. Recommendations for the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Primary and Secondary Education: The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should strengthen oversight and accountability mechanisms to ensure that primary schools enforced policies that allowed pregnant learners to continue their education. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should allocate resources for the training and employment of trained counsellors in all primary schools, particularly in rural areas where access to mental health services was limited. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should develop and implement age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education curricula for primary schools.

7.5. Recommendations for Counsellors: Counsellors should be trained in trauma-informed care and academic support for pregnant primary school learners, and should provide targeted psychosocial support to help them remain engaged in their education. Counsellors should establish support groups for pregnant primary school pupils to reduce social isolation and provide a platform for sharing experiences and coping strategies. Counsellors should work with teachers to develop individualised academic catch-up plans for pregnant learners.

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