

Chapter 2: Unwanted pregnancies among secondary school learners in Zimbabwe: A qualitative inquiry into academic consequences

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Abstract

Despite there being much known about unwanted pregnancy, including the number of school girl dropouts from year to year, most studies on the issue have lacked the voices of the learners due to the fact that Zimbabwe still has thousands of learners dropping out each year as a result of unwanted pregnancies. This qualitative study aimed at learning from those who had experienced it first-hand, how the problem of unwanted pregnancy impacts on the academic performance of secondary school learners in Zimbabwe. In total, 16 participants were involved: 6 female learners from Form Three and 4; 4 teachers; 2 school counsellors; 3 parents and one official from ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (Primary and secondary education). In-depth interviews/ focus group discussions were used to collect the data and the data was analysed as themes. The study revealed that for many learners it was feelings of shame, fear of punitive action in the family and expulsion at school that was more detrimental to the learner's education than the pregnancy itself. Attendance—not regular attendance—was the first to fall off the charts, then concentration and participation went, followed by some people withdrawing from exams. Some learners, with consistent support from family and school, remained in school and made a recovery in learning. The chapter recommends confidential well resourced counselling, caring to ensure examination catch up time is deliberated and better implementation of the existing policies of ensuring that learners remain in school when they fall pregnant and parenting.

Keywords: Academic performance, School dropout, Secondary school, teenage pregnancy, Unwanted pregnancy.

1. Introduction and Background of Study

Every school term in Zimbabwe, a considerable number of secondary school girls leave their classrooms because they are pregnant. The scale of this movement out of school is difficult to ignore. According to Angeline Gata, the Deputy Minister of Primary and Secondary Education, almost half that, some 50 000 learners, were dropped because they were pregnant or could not walk to or attend school in 2024, with the lion's share, 33 746, at secondary school and 15 809 at Primary (NewZimbabwe, 2025). The 2025 figure showed that out of a total of 39,736, 26,704 children had dropped out of school and its primary reasons were cited as financial problems, early marriage, teenage pregnancy and child labour (Zimbabwe Situation, 2026: Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MpSat) Education Management Information Systems). National health data compounds the explanation for these numbers continue to stubbornly resist. The Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Survey (2023-2024) reported that approximately 23 per cent of females aged between 15 and 19 had at least one pregnancy a higher

prevalence of 30 per cent and 15 per cent was observed in rural and Town/cities, respectively, with Mashonaland central having the highest province prevalence in the country (ZimbabweNow, 2026). The International Day of the Girl Child 2025 celebrations featured speakers who highlighted that almost one in four girls nationally aged 15–19 was either school dropouts resulting from pregnancy or early marriage and that the secondary school completion rate for females was 65.9 per cent (Zimbabwe Situation, 2025). According to a separate survey conducted by child rights organization Zvandiri, 95 per cent of teenage pregnancy in the country was unplanned, as most of the pregnancies were caused by poverty and limited access to contraception (Newsday, 2024). Teenage pregnancy in Zimbabwe is a chronic and pervasive issue, whose root causes as well as impacts are cross-cutting in relation to health, education and household economy (Murewanhema et al, 2023), and the above statistics tell a similar story. There are not many straightforward explanations for personal pregnancies. A survey research on National Assessment on Adolescent Pregnancies revealed that only 50.7% of the girls who left out of school were due to the inability of families to pay the school fees; marriage was another factor with 15.2 percent and pregnancy itself 10.9 percent of the school drop-outs (Chidarikire, 2025). Not all of these pregnancies are from consensual relationships. MPs have posed questions to government over the number of cases in which the pregnancy is as a result of rape, Deputy Minister Gata confirmed that girls as young as 13 years have fallen pregnant while they were in school including two in the same school in Manicaland who dropped out within one term (Moyo, 2025). According to a recent reporting period by allAfrica (2025), the secondary education of 499 girls was disrupted by pregnancy in Mashonaland East alone.

Zimbabwe is not without policy on this matter. The Education Act, as amended, and the accompanying Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education circulars direct schools to keep pregnant learners enrolled and to readmit young mothers after delivery. Kurevakwesu, Mthethwa, Chirangwanda, and Mabeza (2023) studied how parents in Bulawayo's Cowdray Park viewed this re-entry provision and found that many households still regarded a pregnant daughter as a source of shame, which weakened support for her return to class even where the law was on her side. A phenomenological study conducted in the Hwange and Binga districts, drawing on interviews with sixteen young mothers, ten parents, and five school authorities, reached a similar conclusion: legal reform on its own had done little to stop the blaming and shaming that pushed young mothers out of secondary school socially, even when they remained formally enrolled (Muzingili, Muntanga, & Zvada, 2024). Less well documented, however, is the journey itself between pregnancy and academic decline: the lived trajectory of missed classes, failing grades, fading motivation suffered by a pregnant learner, both before she drops out and, perhaps, before she is able to persevere somehow. Most of the literature on pregnancy and drop-out in Zimbabwe takes both the two as being synonymous. This chapter considers these two events as clearly linked, but separate, and sets a challenge for secondary school students, and the adults around them, to explain in their own words how one came about because of the other. A study design was developed around three questions:

- What causes unwanted pregnancies among secondary school learners in Zimbabwe?
- How does unwanted pregnancy affect the academic performance of secondary school learners who remain in, or eventually leave, the school system?
- What can be done to reduce the academic harm caused by unwanted pregnancy among secondary school learners?

2. Literature Review

According to the World Health Organization, at least 70% of the pregnancies among these adolescent girls are unintended, and adolescent pregnancy in low and middle-income countries has a number of clear downstream consequences for girls, including missed education (World Health Organization, 2024). The latest guidance from the organisation directly correlates pregnancy with a loss of years of schooling and will have a commensurate impact on future job opportunities (Herald, 2024). Although the evidence contained in the WHO reports is largely from a health system perspective, and not from education systems, it is indeed useful to consider the Zimbabwean pattern within this global framing, as it is a confirmed pattern of a relationship between early pregnancy and education disruption, and is much broader and well documented. In fact, Athero, Muga, Kabiru and Ajayi (2023) summarised studies of pregnant and parenting adolescents in the African continent and found that most consistently reported issues in very different contexts of different nations include “stigma from fellow youths, teachers, and community”. They also pointed out that many of the studies surveyed examined why girls dropped out of school instead of considering how girls' learning was affected in the months leading up to their departure from school – exactly what this chapter sets out to do. But it is a review of many small studies, not a primary data collection, and so tends to lack the detailed, context-specific information that can only come from an individual qualitative primary study; this is where the present chapter is valuable.

In the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, closer to Zimbabwe, Jochim, Cluver, and Meinck (2021) found that poverty, coupled with unsupportive family responses and school-level discrimination, pushed adolescent girls out of school despite the fact that their right to stay in school is safeguarded in national policy. In a 2024 qualitative analysis across three countries in East Africa - Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe - Munakampe, Matenga, Chewe, Gold-Watts and Lahidji found that, generally speaking, stakeholders attributed decreased access to information and contraception as a result of school closures to an increase in adolescent pregnancies upon return to school. They focus on an important regional dynamic - disruption of services in the wake of a crisis, but frame their work around health service delivery and could provide a spur to thinking about learners' pregnant academic pathways, a focus addressed by this chapter. Within Zimbabwe itself, a small yet emerging qualitative literature is beginning to capture the experience of living with pregnancy school disruption. Hofisi and Hungwe (2025) conducted in-depth interviews with teen mothers, pregnant teenagers, their parents and key informants in Kadoma, and found that while the same old factors that predispose to teen pregnancy (poverty, little personal choice, culture and traditions) intensified during the COVID-19 period. Kurevakwesu, Mabeza, Masungwa, Matanga, Chirangwanda, Mavuka and Muridzo (2025), later focuses attention on the institutional aspects of the problem and interviewed the parents, social workers, and teachers of Bulawayo communities of what would a genuinely supportive re-entry environment look like. The findings were that the role of the social worker was underused to mediate between the school and family. As mentioned above, rewording the description of exclusion and stigma from the perspective of the young mothers themselves is best illustrated from a study by Muzingili, Muntanga and Zvada (2024) who conducted fieldwork in secondary schools in Hwange District, Binga. A correlated but different population (Grade 6 learners in the resettlement areas of Masvingo North District) by Saruchera and Chidarikire (2024) found that early pregnancy causes significant academic performance drops, absenteeism and dropouts even at primary school level, implying that the damage/drop recorded at secondary school level in this chapter can be traced back to the earlier levels of education rather than just secondary education. As a whole, this literature provides evidence that

unwanted pregnancy negatively affects the school experience for girls and young women in Zimbabwe as well as other countries and makes stigma, poverty and inconsistent policy implementation common explanations. What is missing, especially for secondary school learners, is a descriptive and qualitative account of the academic path itself: what happens, in what order, and why, directly related to the experience of the learners, as well as that of their teachers, counsellors, parents, and policy –makers. It was the intent of this chapter to provide that account.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study is based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, originally proposed in Bronfenbrenner's book *The Ecology of Human Development*, 1979. According to Bronfenbrenner, studying a young person's development—or academic development—in isolation is wrong and insignificant (Chidarikire, 2025). It must be viewed as a product of the interacting, nested contexts ranging from family and classroom environments to the contextual policies and cultural attitudes that inform the immediate environments (Baafi, 2020). In the context of this study, the theory can be useful in helping to explain how two girls exposed to the same biological experience (unwanted pregnancy) are likely to develop divergent academic outcomes. The reaction of a parent, teacher, or classmates is likely to make a huge difference as to whether a learner will keep going or start to drop out at the microsystem level as described by Bronfenbrenner. In the mesosystem, the theory highlights the extent to which home and school communicate, effectively or otherwise, when a pregnancy is known and where they fail to communicate, the absence of learners and the decline of their academic performance may not get addressed for several weeks (Chidarikire & Chikwati, 2024). The exosystem includes structures with which the learner is not directly involved, but which nevertheless affect her destiny, such as the re-entry policy of Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and the degree of fidelity on which individual school heads want to work (NCUBE, 2024). Lastly, the macrosystem is the culture and general attitude—typically unwritten but widely agreed on—that a pregnancy outside marriage is a disgrace to a family, which shapes the attitude of almost every system. This 'layered' approach has informed the structure of the interviews for this study and organisation of the findings in Section 5. Instead of presenting these causes, effects and potentially solutions as lists, the theory facilitates a reading between them so that any given solution, such as better school counselling, becomes comprehensible within the contexts of family and community conditions that necessitated the solution.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Paradigm: The study was located within a constructivist paradigm, on the understanding that people make sense of events like pregnancy and school disruption through the meanings they attach to them, meanings that differ between a fifteen-year-old learner, her teacher, and her parent (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.2. Research Approach: A qualitative approach was used throughout. This choice followed directly from the research questions, which asked not how many girls were affected but how the experience unfolded for them, a question better answered through depth than through counting (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.3. Research Design: The study took the form of a case study, drawing participants from secondary schools in two rural districts and one urban district so that the findings would not rest on the assumptions of a single setting.

4.4. Data Collection Methods: Learners, parents, and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education official were interviewed individually, in private, semi-structured sessions, while teachers and counsellors took part in two separate focus group discussions. Individual interviews were chosen for learners specifically because of the sensitivity of the subject matter and the risk of further stigmatisation in a group setting.

4.5. Sampling Technique: Participants were selected purposively, on the basis that they could speak directly to the research questions from personal or professional experience, which is the standard justification for purposive sampling in qualitative work of this kind (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.6. Sample Size: Sixteen people took part: six female learners in Form Three and Form Four (four currently pregnant or parenting, two who had returned to school after giving birth), four teachers, two school counsellors, three parents, and one Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Primary and Secondary Education official.

4.7. Justification for Participant Selection: Learners were included because they had lived the experience directly. Teachers and counsellors were included because they were usually the first adults to notice a change in a learner's attendance or performance. Parents were included because, as the theoretical framework suggests, their response to a daughter's pregnancy often set the tone for everything that followed. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education official was included to provide a policy vantage point that the other participants could not offer.

4.8. Data Analysis: Interview and focus group transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis process: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing those themes, defining and naming them, and finally writing them up. This process produced the three themes presented in Section 5.

4.9. Trustworthiness of Data: Participants were given the opportunity to review a summary of their own transcript and to correct or clarify anything that did not reflect what they had meant to say, a member-checking step recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to strengthen the credibility of qualitative findings.

4.10. Ethical Considerations: Ethical clearance was secured before any data were collected. Adult participants gave informed consent, and for the minor learners, consent was obtained from a parent or guardian alongside the learner's own assent. Everyone was told they could withdraw at any point without any consequence to them. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this chapter, and learner interviews were held in private settings chosen to avoid drawing attention to the participant.

5. Discussion and Findings

5.1 Theme 1: What Leads to Unwanted Pregnancy among Secondary School Learners

Participants described a mix of poverty, absent supervision, and, in some cases, outright exploitation behind the pregnancies they knew about.

Nyasha, a Form Three learner aged 16 (Participant 1), put it this way:

My boyfriend told me he loved me and that he would marry me once we finished school. I did not think much about protecting myself because I trusted what he said. Both my parents work in South Africa, and I live with my grandmother, who is too old to really talk to me about these things, so there was nobody around to warn me properly.

Tadiwa, a Form Four learner aged 17 (Participant 2), gave a different picture, shaped more directly by money:

My mother sells vegetables at the roadside, and some months we do not have enough for food, never mind school fees. There was a man near the growth point who started giving me small amounts of money and airtime. Later he wanted something back for it. I understood it was not right, but I felt I did not have another option because my mother could not manage the fees alone.

Mrs Chirenje, a teacher aged 39 (Participant 3), spoke from what she had observed across several years in the classroom:

A lot of what we see traces back to older men with money, especially around growth points, mines, and bus stops. Many parents have gone to South Africa or Botswana looking for work, and the children are left with grandparents who cannot really keep an eye on them. On top of that, our curriculum does not give learners enough proper sex education, so they are curious and unprepared at the same time.

When considered in combination, these narratives show that poverty, prostitution relationships with men, and lack of a comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) are all common factors contributing to the pregnancies experienced by the participants, as well as low levels of parental care associated with male labour migration. This corroborates the national picture as reported by Zvandiri finding that most teen pregnancy were not planned and were strongly associated with poverty (Newsday, 2024). This is also in line with the trend observed by Hofisi and Hungwe (2025) in Kadoma, which indicated that although the cases of pregnancy they studied are not attributed to any single dramatic cause, majority of the pregnancies stemmed from the poor standard of living and small role played by the nature of personal agency. The theme has included some instances where rape has been a factor in the official figures (allAfrica, 2025), reminding schools and families that not all of the stories in this theme have been of a freely chosen relationship, and this should be a reflection on how to respond after.

5.2 Theme 2: How unwanted pregnancy affects academic performance

This theme gathers what participants said about the actual, day-to-day academic toll of pregnancy, which turned out to follow a fairly consistent sequence: attendance slipped first, then concentration and participation, and finally, for some, grades and enrolment itself.

Chipso, a Form Four learner aged 17 (Participant 4), had been near the top of her class before she fell pregnant:

Before this happened I was usually in the top ten in my class. Once my classmates found out, some of them stopped sitting near me, and I noticed a few teachers looking at me differently. I began missing school because of morning sickness and clinic appointments, and by the time I came back I had missed important work in Mathematics and Combined Science. My marks went from As and Bs down to Ds in about two terms.

Mr Sibanda, a school counsellor aged 41 (Participant 5), described a pattern he had seen repeat itself many times:

It is almost always the same order. First her attendance becomes patchy, then you notice she has stopped putting her hand up in class, and after that the test results start to fall. By the time some parents finally tell the school what is going on, the girl has already missed weeks of content. Some of them just stop coming altogether because they cannot face the whispering in the corridors.

Mrs Gwatidzo, a parent aged 44 (Participant 6), watched this happen to her own daughter during a critical academic year:

My daughter was getting ready for her O Level examinations when she fell pregnant. She wanted to keep writing her mock exams, but she was so embarrassed about being seen at school that she began missing lessons. I tried to encourage her, but relatives kept saying she had shamed the family, and that made everything worse. Her mock results were far below what she used to achieve before this happened.

The pattern the participants detailed – attendance, concentration and participation, drop in grades, then leaving, resonates with scientific secondary school outfalls of pregnancy in 2024 – which accounted for the bulk of dropouts (NewZimbabwe, 2025). It further reaffirms the observation from the Hwange and Binga research where being formally in-school did little to shield a young mother from the blaming, and shaming that ensued from the school environment and processes (Muzingili et al., 2024). What problems Mrs Gwatidzo described with her learners' preparation for examinations is not unique to other learners who participated in the focus groups, and aligns with the general statement made by Jochim, Cluver and Meinck (2021) that the issue of learners dropping out of school due to pregnancy is not just the pregnancy being the problem, but rather the particular disruption that it causes.

5.3 Theme 3: What participants believe would help

Participants were not short of ideas about what needed to change, and their suggestions clustered around four areas: family response, school-based support, policy enforcement, and community attitudes.

Mr Mangwiro, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education official who took part in this study, aged 47 (Participant 7), was candid about the gap between policy and practice:

Our policy is clear that pregnant learners should be allowed to continue their education and that young mothers must be readmitted after they give birth. The problem is monitoring whether this actually happens at school level, because some heads quietly discourage a pregnant girl from coming rather than formally expelling her, which is harder for us to detect and act on. We need stronger monitoring at district level, with real consequences for schools that do not comply.

Ms Moyo, a school counsellor aged 33 (Participant 8), spoke about resourcing:

Every secondary school needs a proper, confidential counselling service, not just the ones in town. Many rural schools have no trained counsellor at all, so it falls to teachers who have not been trained for this, and sometimes they handle it badly without meaning to. We also need structured catch-up lessons for learners who have missed content because of pregnancy, especially in the run-up to examinations.

Mr Chikwanha, a parent aged 50 (Participant 9), reflected on what needed to change closer to home:

As parents we need to stop shaming our children when this happens, because shaming only pushes them further away from school. We should be talking to our children early, before anything happens, instead of waiting until it is too late. Traditional and religious leaders also have a part to play in changing how our communities see these girls.

The need for better implementation of the policy is in line with the finding of Kurevakwesu, Mthethwa, Chirangwanda and Mabeza (2023) that legal reform alone had been inadequate to even change parental attitudes to intervention in Bulawayo and supports Kurevakwesu, Mabeza, Masungwa, Matanga, Chirangwanda, Mavuka and Muridzo (2025) who noted that social workers could mediate between

families and schools significantly more than they currently do. This signaled a need that emerged from the regional literature that was reviewed in some parts of this paper as a need for counselling that was confidential and adequately resourced, which, outside of formal policy prescription, sometimes conflicted with learners' experiences (Ajayi, Athero, Muga, & Kabiru, 2023). Mr Chikwanha's focus on reducing shame at the family level has a direct correlate to the microsystem and macrosystem levels of the theoretical framework and is a reminder that without a family-level response that is not of a punitive nature, school-level response will not be a complete success.

6. Conclusion

To elucidate this, the present study was aimed at understanding the impact of unwanted pregnancy on academic performance of secondary school learners in Zimbabwe and the findings were further discussed so as to give rise to more specific picture beyond the mere before and after comparison. Academic damage didn't come all at once to the woman and her baby. It gradually developed in steps, through lack of interest and concentration, of infrequent attendance, and ultimately, for some of the learners referred to in this chapter, withdrawal before completion of exams. Beyond the pregnancy fact itself, stigma was time and time again identified as the greater catalyst for this decline by participants—family and school response in the days and weeks following disclosure seemed to be most influential in a learner recovering or dropping out. The reasons many girls become pregnant (poverty, reduced parental monitoring due to labour migration, exploitation by older men, and lack of sexuality education) indicate factors beyond the control of any one school. The Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner was particularly helpful here because it does not take the learner out of her context, and because it indicates that to achieve change will require concerted action at multiple levels: family, school, and policy.

7. Recommendations

7.1. For Learners: Secondary school learners should have access to accurate, age-appropriate information about sexual and reproductive health well before they need it, not after a crisis has occurred. Learners who become pregnant should be encouraged to tell a trusted teacher or counsellor early, so that academic support can begin before too much content has been missed, and they should be made clearly aware of their right, under existing policy, to remain in or return to school.

7.2. For Teachers: Teachers would benefit from training that helps them recognise the early signs of pregnancy-related academic decline and respond with support rather than public reprimand. They are also well placed to intervene directly when peers exclude or bully a pregnant classmate, and subject teachers in particular should be ready to provide targeted catch-up support ahead of examinations for learners who have missed lessons.

7.3. For Parents: Parents are encouraged to talk openly with their children about relationships and their bodies well before adolescence, rather than leaving this to peers or to chance. Where a daughter does become pregnant, avoiding punitive or shaming responses, and instead prioritising her continued education, appears from this study to make a real difference to whether she stays in school.

7.4. For the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Primary and Secondary Education: District-level monitoring of how re-entry policy is actually applied at individual schools needs to be strengthened, with clear consequences for schools found to be informally pushing pregnant learners out. Confidential counselling services should be funded and staffed in every secondary school, with

particular attention to under-resourced rural districts, and comprehensive sexuality education should be delivered consistently as part of the curriculum rather than left to individual schools' discretion.

7.5. For Counsellors and School Leadership: Counsellors should receive training in trauma-informed, confidential support specifically for pregnant and parenting learners, and should work directly with subject teachers to build individual catch-up plans ahead of key examinations. School leaders can help by publishing and standing behind a clear protocol that assures pregnant learners of their right to stay enrolled, and by working with local traditional and religious leaders to gradually shift the community attitudes that participants in this study identified as the deeper source of the problem.

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