BOOKS AND BABIES: PREGNANCY AND YOUNG PARENTS IN SCHOOLS

By
Robert Morrell, Deevia Bhana, and Tamara Shefer (editors)
Cape Town: HSRC PRESS
2012

Books and Babies: Pregnancy and Young Parents in Schools is part of a series of books by HSRC Press on parenthood. However, where the two previous publications focused on fatherhood (Morrell & Richter 2006; Swartz & Bhana 2009), one of the strengths of this publication is that the life worlds of both young fathers and mothers are discussed.

The book provides insight into the experiences of pregnant and parenting learners, within the school and home environments. The book centres on the extensive research that was conducted by twelve authors. It touches on a wide range of issues, including gender inequality, race, family, social norms, social interaction, education and discrimination. The book is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on pregnancy and parenthood in South African schools, in particular it examines the responses of principals and teachers to learners who are pregnant and parenting. The second section provides a quantitative analysis of learners’ attitudes towards pregnant and parenting learners. The section analyses the school experiences of young learners as parents. The reading experience is enriched by the last chapter with a visual essay by the photographer, Cedric Nunn. This essay begins with introductory notes on the visual approach and process of identifying willing participants. The fact that both quantitative and qualitative approaches are used ensures that the reader obtains a bird’s eye view, as well as a close-up encounter with the realities of being a young parent while trying to continue with formal education.

The authors systematically explore the plight of pregnant and parenting learners by providing concise explanations, with specific examples, to enable the reader get the gist of the book. The topics discussed in the text are done in a logical manner, which makes for easy reading and comprehension. The first section focused on the reactions and responses of principals and teachers to the pregnancy and eventual parenting of the learners. The responses of principals and teachers to pregnant and parenting learners, who in most cases are females, ranged from supportive to moralistic and scathingly
judgemental. The section examined the educational rights of pregnant learners and that of those who are parents, in line with the provisions of the South African Schools Act (No.84 of 1996).

The second section of the book comprised three chapters. In this part, the reader is given comprehensive discussions on the attitudes of learners to gender equality and the pregnancy and parenting that are experienced by their fellow learners. The section also explored the relationship between absent fathers and their role in learners’ pregnancies. The phenomenon of absent fathers in South Africa is closely related to the historical antecedent of the country. Morrell and Richter (2006: 4) explain that ‘Black, particularly African, fathers were, for the most part, separated from their children by the need to work in distant places on terms of migrant contract that permitted only annual visits home’. In such circumstances, the onus of caring for the family fell on the wives. This factor, among others, may be responsible for the prevalence of female-headed households in South Africa. Currently, female-headed households have come to be generally accepted in South Africa; even though not all families have fathers who provide migrant labour.

The third section highlights the perspective of the pregnant and parenting learners on how they are treated by principals, teachers and peers. The section elaborates on the role of fathers and their families in caring for learners who are pregnant or parents, and the learners’ children. In this part of the text, the authors addressed the significance of family support to a pregnant or parenting learner and her family.

The overall theme of the book, which is the experiences of learners who are pregnant and young parents while still attending school, is aptly captured in the body of the work. However, in the course of reading the book (and also based on my observation of the picture on the front cover of the book), it appears as if the authors draw more from the experiences of female pregnant and parenting learners than those of male learners. Shefer (2012: 124) alluded to this bias by stating that: ‘In terms of our data, there is a limitation in the demographics of the participants. As already noted, the chapters in this section of the book are relatively silent about the experiences and narratives of young male learners who are also parents. It proved extremely challenging to identify and recruit male learners who are openly parenting.’

Another avenue of analysis could have been the responses of siblings of pregnant and parenting learners to the changed status of learners. This would have provided insights into the dynamics of changing social relations between the pregnant and parenting learners and their siblings, perhaps, this can be considered in future.

This book contains useful material for students of Sociology and related disciplines. The book is a must-read for people who are involved in the formulation and implementation of health and education policies.
REFERENCES


Caroline Agboola
Doctoral Student
Department of Sociology
University of South Africa (UNISA)
South Africa.
agboolacaroline@gmail.com