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Investigating the lived experiences of teenage schoolgoing mothers: a phenomenological study of three schools in Okalongo Circuit, Omusati Region, Namibia

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ABSTRACT

This study assumes that education is a human rights obligation because it is the means by which people pass on their accumulated knowledge, skills, customs, and values from one generation to the next (Churr, 2015). Education also empowers people all over the world with the ability to live in dignity (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 2001). However, in Africa, as in the rest of the world, the schooling of teenage pregnant or teenage mothers has been widely debated and condemned. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of teenage school-going mothers in the Okalongo circuit in Omusati region of Namibia to understand the motivation behind their success to remain in school, despite the high rate of teenage mothers dropping out of school. This was a qualitative phenomenological study. I conducted in-depths individual interviews, focus group discussions and reflective journals with 16 teenage school-going mothers between the ages of 17-20, purposively selected from three different public rural schools in the Okalongo circuit in Omusati region, Namibia. The study used an interpretive paradigm that provides insight into the complex world of lived experiences from the perspective of those who lived or experienced it (Flick, 2006). A paradigm represents a worldview that informs the researcher about the nature of reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge (epistemology) and how the researcher learns what she wants to learn (methodology) (Kuhn, 1977, Creswell, 1998, Guba, 1990). Audio-recorded transcripts were transcribed, translated, coded and analysed used thematic analysis by identifying themes and patterns and organising them into coherent categories with sub-categories. The study of teenage mothers in particular is complex, and because women are not a homogeneous group, they cannot be understood solely through a hegemonic or universalising feminist lens (Chiponda, 2014). Thus, the theoretical framework of this study was informed by liberal, radical, Marxism, socialism, black, and African feminism, which aided in understanding and analysing data from a feminist perspective. The multiple identities of teenage mothers were also considered. As a result, the intersectionality theory was deployed in this exercise. The main findings of this study demonstrate that teenage school-going mothers choose to stay in school and continue their education not because they have full support from their school, home, or community, but because of their resilience and desire to provide a better future for their children. Despite exhibiting resilient characteristics, this study concludes that teenage mothers continue to face discrimination and victimisation at home, school, and in the community. Discrimination, name-calling, stereotypes, and stigma were identified as risk factors for teenage

mothers' dropout. Teenage mothers have expressed feelings of powerlessness and loneliness as society continues to 'other' and discriminate against them. Gender expectations, culture, and patriarchal beliefs have also been identified as major contributors to the exclusion of teenage mothers from the educational system. Despite the challenges, the young mothers developed into complex, loving, and supportive women (Burciaga, 2019). This thesis is expected to contribute, in a small but significant way, to African feminism, specifically Namibian feminist theory, teenage motherhood studies, and narrative and educational literature, within the ranges of the six feminist theorists. The study adds to existing knowledge and recognises the uniqueness of teenage school-going mothers' lived experiences of schooling and motherhood in the Okalongo circuit, Namibia. Furthermore, because their decision to stay in school has challenged some Ovambadja socio-cultural discourses about teenage mothers, this study contributes significantly to teenage mothers' and feminist research in the Ovambadja community (a previously marginalised community by other Ovawambo communities). It continues the legacy of liberalism, radicalism, Marxism, socialism, black and African feminism, which began in the 16th century to fight for women's rights, which are still being violated today.

Finally, the challenges faced by mother-learners in schools remain unsolved due to misalignment between progressive policy, cultural norms, and social behaviours. Equity and non-discrimination at the level of these young women's and others' lives in Namibia appear unresolved.