

Student Mothers and the Changing Social Phenomena; Focus on Higher Education in Kenya

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Abstract

A core responsibility of any educational institution in delivery of quality education entails making education functional and accessible in the face of social dynamics. Changing social phenomena at university enrolment has realised an increasing number of mature-entry student mothers and rising numbers of undergraduate student mothers, a feature that was previously uncommon in higher education. Whereas normal structural changes are often met with regular readjustment and policy change or development in institutions, the student mother phenomenon has been left out despite its obvious implications to equity and accessibility in education. By embracing paradigm shift in sociological research this concept paper, developed at the initial stages of the study adopts qualitative methods and employs participant observer and content analysis to bring into focus student mother experiences and glimpses at existing policies regarding student mothers at university in order to highlight issues of quality, accessibility and inclusiveness in education, in the background of feminist theory and critical theory. The findings reflected challenges of mobility, acceptability, accommodation, delays in completion and alienation of undergraduate student mothers. Though The Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MOEST) gender policy of 2006, revised in 2007 contains the re- entry policy on unconditional readmission of teen mothers into primary and secondary schools, it does not mention the student mothers at university, an assumption that individual universities may probably have internal systems to deal with it. A glimpse at university policies however reveals little or no trace of relevant policies for the undergraduate student mothers albeit tentative accommodation arrangements. This implies that unrevised policies and conservative approaches to student mother issues may result in great challenges of retention, progression, mobility and completion of the more underprivileged undergraduate student mothers. The study therefore suggests the need to carry out thorough studies in the student mother phenomena, to work on impediments that deter education achievement, accessibility and mobility in the face of dynamism in higher education.

Key Words: Students mothers, Higher education, Social phenomena

Introduction

This concept paper is part of an ongoing study in student mothers' education. The study aims at bringing into focus the trends of student mothers in higher education. It seeks to identify trends of social and structural adjustments that have impacted on education for accessibility and mobility, retention and timely completion of student mothers and their place in higher education. It highlights relevant theories to education inclusion that reflect the student mothers as marginalized and in dire need of relief if education quality and achievement are to be realized. Basically, the paper exposes the changing trends that are globally identified as causing gaps in education theory and practice that the ongoing study may investigate. Through reflexive journals, content analysis of social media and some reviewed literature from universities across the globe, student mother phenomena in the postmodern era is explored for input.

Background

The changing phenomena surrounding student mothers can best be illustrated by a best case scenario presented on media about professors at university resulting to desperate measures in support of student mothers in their classes. Kimberly Yam (2016), editor of The Huff Post (23rd march 2016) featured Professor Darryn Willoughby of Baylor university in an act of empathy holding a student's baby (Millie), while he taught in class, albeit to allow its mother Katty Humphrey to concentrate in the lecture. In an interview, the professor claimed it was the only sensible thing to do at the interest of student's wellbeing. Revealed in a twitter clip in another incident at Ivory Coast Bouake University, June 27th 2016, a 'hero' professor straps a female student's child on his back to allow the student complete writing an exam. Other students found it awkward and funny, took photos and posted them on social media. The clip went viral. Some of the questions and speculations that emanated from the debate were:

'.... professor is a 'hero' a perfect professional! ... Could a female professor have done the same?... it doesn't make him less of a professor though the act is humble... what do we have here! changing gender roles?... The real heroine is the girl, she sits exam despite the house-help who failed to turn up... was it an act of kindness, or was Professor the baby's father? ... Where was the baby's father? ... Sounds crazy, Professor turned baby sitter! ... what of the University policy? ... why get babies at university? ... was it innovation? ... Needs attention, that professor!... Is he mad?'

The questions, speculations and observations may look crazy at the face value but they actually reflect pertinent issues regarding not just lack of knowledge regarding student mother experience but are also an indicator of social change especially in the African context where baby care is a preserve of women. When the women face parenting challenges as indicated in the above cases, it is their education that is compromised. Katty's case may however sound a note of hope in student mother issues if others like the professor come up in support of them. The negative comments are indicative of the traditional approaches to parenting in traditional

education institutions where getting pregnant mid-course earned the teen mother an expulsion from school. It is this change from the traditional approaches to the above scenario that is the concern of this paper, the need to accept change and therefore address it in identifying barriers and challenges new or old in higher education (Wekesa & Nelima, 2011; Chemjor & Mwangi, 2015 and Lyonnette, 2015), the trends in policy and practice and establish the place of student mothers in higher education.

Theoretical Orientation

Through the feminist theory's reflection of inequalities in education (Patton, 2000; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000) the study exposes the existing intervention as wanting. With focus on the radical feminists theory that advocates for exposure to education to empower women to overcome the forces of discrimination and general inequalities (Gelles, 1999; Giddens, 2004 and Patton 2002) and the liberal feminist theory that reflects the role of society in establishing social systems to safeguard the rights of women like the constitutional rights, and the critical theory with its view of the role of society in establishing social structures and institutions in intervention into social problems rather than just criticizing or highlighting them, the study is significant in making education meaningful for student mothers who are basically marginalized in the crucial inclusive education.

Methodology

The study, as preliminary findings of a major study, employs qualitative methodology (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, 2014; Bogdan & Biklen 1992), with data collected through content analysis of social media articles that addressed current and trendy issues of student mothers and highlighted the thematic concerns that arose in them as indicators of the changing phenomena in student mothers' lived experience in higher education. At another level, as supported by (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000), issues relevant to student mothers' experience from reflexive journals of the researcher in education institutions were also brought focuses while reviewed literature from higher education research reports, journals and texts were reviewed as test of trustworthiness in the findings.

Policies in the Face of Change

In Kenya, student mothers (SM) phenomenon is seen from the backdrop of marginalization in education accessibility at all levels; primary education, secondary education and higher education (Gachukia, 2003). Much of change in student mother research in the past addressed school dropout issues with rates of as high as 60% due to teen pregnancy. Despite this change, seen with exposure to education through increased levels of literacy, sensitization of communities about the value of education, the enactment of children's rights to education and development of gender policies (Gichuki, 2009; Gachukia, 2003 & MOEST 2006), there has been tremendous change in the development of inclusive education in Kenya, new challenges tend to emerge. Such changes can be seen in the education policies some of which address

gender and education, an area that has been marked to deal with discriminatory education and enhance accessibility (Kamara, 2011). Apart from other barriers towards enrolment of girls in education like early marriage and manual employment, pregnancy and motherhood continues to score highest among the social related barriers to education. The gender policy of 2006 that spells out inclusive education and eliminates obstacles towards education attainment for girls and the re-entry policy that ensures accommodation of teen mothers in secondary school have dealt with traditional barriers effectively. As a result, school dropout has significantly dropped.

Despite the partially achieved or perhaps just perceived success in inclusion in education and the attempted readmission when students get babies in school, challenges of retention form another stumbling block to the very girls' education. In a research study carried out between the year 2009 and 2010 on teen mothers' challenges in Kenya, (Kamara, 2011), it was revealed that schooling and parenting sometimes leads to dropping out of school, poor performance and absenteeism. A remarkable finding during the study however reflected that changing social phenomena had eliminated social stigma and trauma associated with pregnancy because in the study, teen mothers unanimously agreed that they were not traumatised or socially misplaced in readmission and that they were comfortable in their own schools. This is conspicuously contrary to the government policy earlier designed that had recommended transfer to new schools on re-admission to avoid perceived stigma in their own schools due to labelling associated with teen pregnancy.

Though there are hardly notes to compare, phenomena at higher education regarding student mothers is fast changing. While middle level colleges have had clear rules and regulations regarding pregnancy mid-course the college, it should be noted that they are not only discriminative but a bit outdated in the face of reforms already undertaken at secondary school. It is the same policy that is adopted by some universities in Kenya, contained in students' handbook that spells out action like deferring courses or examinations, vacating hostels and seeking own accommodation outside university premises on the event of student motherhood (Chemjor & Mwangi, 2015). Some other universities however have attempted inclusive education for student mothers in higher education institutions and have undertaken measures of inclusivity and accommodation by preserving some hostels to accommodate student mothers and their families. This scenario is lamented in various studies and it sounds the need to engage studies focussed on individual institutions and individual student mothers in order to establish the place of student mothers in the face of change. It is the phenomena surrounding student mothers at higher education, the gaps in knowledge, the obsolete policies, the skewed assumptions and the challenges at university that require in-depth study in addressing change in student mothers' education.

Growing numbers; the Kenyan experience

Out there in the world, the truth about increasing numbers of student mothers is proof that the Kenyan experience will be no different. Studies in Canada for instance indicate that between 11% and 16% of the post-secondary students were student mothers between 1976 and the year 2005 according to the Canadian Journal of Higher Education (2011 p.51-80). This study features students in the 18 to 22 age bracket which is directly related to the Kenyan undergraduate student

mothers. Effects of parenting and the experiences of student parents as seen from the socio-cultural point of view can be summarized as; added costs (college fees and upkeep), financial sacrifice (baby care utilities), increased roles and added responsibilities. Strain in emotional and physical engagement were also earlier noted by Lynch, (2008) who identified such experience as more workload especially after maternity leave and a long period out of class. Still, in Kenya, the Center for Studies in Adolescent, CSA (2008. P.26) also indicates an increase in student teen mothers from 4% at age 15 to 49% at age 19. The central issue however is that the number of young mothers is on the increase which is predictably indicative of the likelihood of the same phenomenon being reflected at university.

From the individual cases of students seen carrying babies on campus or those with babies related problems who seek counselling and other assistance, and the growing number of those who vacate hostels due to pregnancy, the number of student mothers seems to rise every year and evidently, majority of them on casual interviews claim that having babies mid-course interfered with their studies. In the actual study, an attempt at demographics will be made to establish the current approximate population and engage in-depth interviews, one on one or through focus group discussions to investigate their experiences and their place in the university

Change and Career Trends

Another report from the University of Warwick that also appeared as news item on Wednesday 19th August 2015 (Lyonette, 2015) further offers insight into the student mother crisis, exploring their career choice as being influenced by the need to accommodate their motherhood status. The compiled report from research studies sponsored by the Nuffield Foundation indicates that for want of room to accommodate the baby care and related responsibilities, many student mothers tend to avoid key professional courses that are rigorous and involving in preference of less paying careers like midwifery and social work which are accommodative of their triple roles and are less demanding in time and practice just to accommodate the demands of parenting. She associates this to the sheer need to accommodate their babies in school schedules. This implies that the nation is not only losing out on potential professionals but also resulting to frustrating mismatch of unfulfilled career interests and the forced career engagement for convenience that is not only frustrating but also low paying. In fact, the report notes numerous drop outs from midway the course due to childcare roles, job demands for those in employment and other family employment. Also, (Chemjor & Mwangi, 2015) basically focus on challenges of students mothers in public universities in Kenya. They take a wider view of student parent experiences; challenges of policy and practice that tends to disadvantage and therefore exclude girl mothers at university. During the research, they did content analysis of Students Handbook from Nairobi, Egerton and Laikipia universities and observed that the handbooks specifically excluded student mothers from halls of residence and recommend deferring studies during pregnancy, and thereafter seeking re-admission to halls of residence without babies. This illustrates retarded change in policy and practice to accommodate

the fast changing world of education phenomena. Basically, challenges are many as highlighted by (Nelima, 2011; Chemjor & Mwangi, 2015; Lyonnette, 2015 and Tanya & Spilovoy 2014).

Designing Intervention

Like in any serious academic institution, research into intervention ensures challenges do not pass unattended. Dr. Claire Lyonnette (2015) who spearheaded the Nuffield study in an attempt at advocacy requests for provision of condensed lectures at university, to create time and space for effective baby care by student mothers. She also places appeal to individual lecturers to exercise flexibility and accommodation of the student mothers when issues of difficulty arose especially for the undergraduate student mothers. Effective career advice geared towards their needs and facilitated support can be given by connecting them to other student mothers as well as appreciating and commending their efforts in handling the triple roles (Brennan & Osborne, 2008; Atfield, & Behle, 2010).

The same phenomenon is reflected by (Spilovoy, 2013) who did a phenomenological study of student mothers at university and also focuses on mature entry students. The researcher in this dissertation highlights the challenges, successes and failure of the student mothers in completing online bachelors degree programs at The Benedictine University; Illinois. As much as the postmodern intervention into student mother education fails to touch base with the undergraduate group, the research acts as an eye opener regarding possible measures of intervention in curriculum related challenges. Just like Anaya (2014) from the University of Northern Colorado, with factors like race, technological advancement and culture in the face of cultural pluralism in America, there is need to be wary of blind copying in whatever successful measures others have adopted. In Kenya, research reflects shortfalls in this field and therefore intervention gets retarded or ignored.

Conclusion

In conclusion, student mother status differs in context especially depending on the societal mindset. If positively perceived, its effects may not be traumatizing. If otherwise, then issues of depression, shock – from unplanned pregnancy, fatigue from the triple role demand and social stigma will eventually impede on academic achievement. On the other hand, adequate guidance in parenting, family support, peers' inclusion and financial support may ensure both achievement and create education fulfillment. It is clear that measures like in-service training for faculty counselors, gender mainstreaming, Staff for those who do well in the student mother integration and institutional policy formulation, encourage their participation in university activities and formation of support groups will make their education meaningful.

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