

# **Ethical issues related to research on pregnant school-going teenagers in South Africa**

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## **Introduction**

Pregnant teenagers who attend school are a vulnerable population due to being of young age, being pregnant and being under the authority of a school. Researchers who conduct research with pregnant school-going teenagers should ensure that ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice are observed. This paper discusses the ethical issue related to research with pregnant school-going teenagers as vulnerable population. It describes the process the researcher followed when conducting a study on the experiences of pregnant school-going teenagers on how they were provided with social support by their teachers at school and their parents at home.

## **Pregnant school-going teenagers as vulnerable population**

Pregnant teenagers who are below 20 years of age are classified as children with limited competence to give informed consent (Sutton, Erlen, Glad & Siminoff 2003). Pregnancy also makes teenagers vulnerable population as pregnant women are classified as such. Being a learner at a school makes learners vulnerable for coercion as they are under the authority of the school.

## **The principle of respect for persons**

'Respect for persons' refers to the recognition of personal dignity and autonomy which include the right to full disclosure. The researcher obtained informed consent from the parents for their pregnant daughters to take part in the study voluntarily and obtained assent from the pregnant teenagers. Parents were asked to give consent for their pregnant daughters to participate as their pregnant daughters were not legally competent to give consent on their own (Strode, Slack & Essack 2010; Strode & Slack 2011). To obtain informed consent, both parents and their pregnant daughters were fully informed about the process of the research, the research problem, the purpose and objectives of the study, and the benefits thereof. They

were allowed to ask questions for clarification where they did not understand or needed more information.

The researcher maintained privacy and confidentiality of the information that pregnant school-going teenagers shared by conducting the semi-structured interviews in a private office at the schools and keeping the transcripts in a locked place accessible to the researcher alone. The right to privacy for pregnant school-going teenagers was maintained throughout the study by asking only questions relevant to the aim and objectives of the study. Polit and Beck (2012) indicate that researchers should ensure that their research is not more intrusive than it needs to be and that the participants' privacy is maintained throughout the study. To further ensure privacy, the researcher informed participants not to mention their names, their schools' names and the names of any other person during the interviews so that data cannot be linked to the identities of participants in any way, as suggested by de Vos et al (2011). To maintain confidentiality, the researcher entered into a confidentiality agreement with an independent coder who coded the data during analysis.

The principle of respect for persons also includes the right of participants to withdraw their participation without penalty (Polit & Beck 2012). The researcher explained to the pregnant school-going teenagers that they were free to withdraw from participation even after they had agreed to participate and that they would not be penalised for withdrawing.

### **Principle of beneficence**

The principle of beneficence imposes a duty on researchers to minimise harm and to maximise benefits to participants (Polit & Beck 2012). The researcher indicated in the consent letter to both the parents and their pregnant daughters that there were no risks involved in participating in the study. During the interviews, there were no signs of psychological trauma or distress experienced by the pregnant school-going teenagers that would have required referral for a debriefing session by a counsellor for support. However, the researcher had a counsellor available if debriefing of the pregnant school-going teenagers became necessary. The benefit of participating is sharing of experiences about the health of pregnant school-going teenagers and

giving input on guidelines to facilitate social support for pregnant school-going teenagers attending secondary schools in South Africa.

### **Principle of justice**

The principle of justice connotes fairness and equity which relates to the participants' rights to fair treatment and their right to privacy (Polit & Beck 2012). The researcher ensured that pregnant school-going teenagers, as vulnerable persons, were not targeted to participate in the study for the convenience of the researcher, but to contribute to a public health benefit. The researcher targeted both rural and urban secondary schools to ensure that all pregnant school-going teenagers meeting the criteria were given a chance to participate and to benefit from participating.

### **Scientific integrity of the researcher**

de Vos et al (2011) state that researchers have an obligation to the discipline of science in the way they conduct and report research. The researcher obtained ethical clearance from the Department of Health Studies Ethics Committee at UNISA and permission from Department of Basic Education before commencing with data collection. To further maintain scientific integrity, the researcher followed guidelines for conducting qualitative and theory generating. The researcher, as a professional nurse, further observed the ethical principles of the nursing profession (South African Nursing Council 2013). According to Polit and Beck (2012), in qualitative research approach, researchers are data collecting instruments and also create the analysis process; as such, they have to establish confidence in the findings by indicating their relevant experience and qualifications. The researcher is qualified in nursing, psychology and education and has some experience in conducting and supervising research.

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