

## **The university community engagement as an instrument for social cohesion to enhance self-regulation among the teenage mothers in the rural areas of Makhado municipality**

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### **1 Abstract**

Teenage stage is marked by physical body changes and accelerated brain development (Kail & Cavanuagh, 2016). Such development is characterized by self-focus, impulsiveness, poor cognitive control, and inability to plan (Guerra, Williamson & Lucas-Molina, 2012; UNICEF, 2013). Furthermore, the stage is marked by limited dependence on parental involvement in direction and decision making. In the case of teenage mothers, the normal development is weighed with mothering and social life challenges. The need of personal freedom among teenagers brings unwanted and negative outcomes leading to self-regulation inabilities (Guerre et al., 2012). Self-regulation is the ability to manage thoughts, acts, and behavior to achieve long-term goals.

The psychology scholars described self-regulation as a personality trait that is influenced by multiple factors. Such factors include personal, biological and environmental factors (Haydon & Kendall-Taylor, 2015). The development of self-regulation is influenced by the personal, caregiver support and environmental factors. The biological factors are fundamental in providing the initial personal development. The biological factors require cognitive development to plan and implement goals (Allen & Sheeber, 2009; Murray, Rosanbalm, Christopoulos & Hamoudi, 2015). More so, personal development requires support from parents or significant as co-regulators (UNICEF, 2013). The complexities of teenage mothering and development of self-regulation skills requires bringing all the factors into consideration (Casey & Caudle, 2013).

The study employed participatory action research through the university community engagement approach. The design was profitable in promoting freedom, democracy, social justice, respect of original knowledge and transformation (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007; Langdon & Larweh, 2015). The study was coached by bricolage theoretical framework. Ethical clearance was obtained during the main PhD from the university (Mudau, 2018). The study co-researchers included teenage mothers, parents, neighbors, community members and related leaders, neighbors and the research committee. This was to ensure collaborative problem identification, collaborative efforts in finding solutions with sustainable outcomes. The research process had occasions of reciprocal power sharing among co-researchers. The research committee promoted social justice and inclusiveness through cyclic meetings with different groups such as, teenage mothers and parents separately, parents or teenage mothers with the researcher alone, community member and the researcher committee respectively. This was to identify challenges, mitigate possible threats to social cohesion, by offering an opportunity for the voice the marginalized groups to heard. Critical dialogue among co-researchers provided an opportunity to deconstruct and reconstruct long-standing social practices that prohibited free interaction among co-researchers.

The study setting was a rural community within the Makhado municipality, in Limpopo South Africa. The community is ruled by two chiefs. To cultivate favorable community entry, the phase of data



generation was between the two chiefs and the lead researcher. The chiefs agreed to work together to establish a common platform to share resources in finding solutions on enhancing self-regulation among teenage mothers. This cascaded to phase two of data generation in general community meeting at the respective chief's kraal. This was an uncommon scene among community members. To enhance trust and equity, a research team was democratically elected from both groups under each leadership. The research teams' brainstorming session identified challenges such as lack of teamwork among community leaders, poor communication between adults and teenage mothers, isolations and marginalization of teenage mothers, lack of goal setting and planning among teenage mothers.

The third phase was facilitated by the research team through a series of meetings, telephonic conversations, focused group discussions and general community meetings to generate further data. Through the multi-methods, multi-paradigm approach of bricolage provided the needed world-views to conduct the study. Parallel meetings were held among community leaders, general teenagers, a group of teenage mothers, parents and boys only. As a methodological bricoleur I facilitated tinkering through multiple data generation methods to enhance social cohesion aimed at enhancing self-regulation among teenage mothers (Senyard, 2015). Among others, critical ethnography was used to enhance critical dialogue to obtain deeper meaning of observed actions, behavior, spoken words and practices. Co-researchers critically asked questions among each to obtain answers on observed disconnecting social practices.

Departing away from the positivist power-laden approach, the study ensured social justice by including the voice, perceptions, preferences and knowledge of teenage mothers to create their own solutions and experiment on them. A spiral of meetings identified solutions such as general teenagers' meeting, teenage mothers meeting, use of local school for meeting, playing of indigenous games to enhance unity among adults and teenage mothers. Furthermore, teenage mothers only meeting was aimed at promoting freedom and privacy among the marginalized group. Progressively, a conducive environment was created to enhance integration of parents and teenage mothers. Parents and teenage mothers shared their experience, personal judgements that led to isolation, emotional challenges, and estranged relationship among each other.

Data were analyzed through critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Van Dijk, 1993). Social and textual discursive practices were critically deconstructed to enhance mutual understanding. Critical dialogue facilitated deconstruction of language and cultural barriers that were misunderstood by teenage mothers. In the same manner, co-researchers recreated commonly understood and socially appreciated practices. More so, co-researchers engaged in critical dialogue to reconstruct social practices that perpetuated marginalization and self-regulation disabilities among teenage mothers.

On the other hand, community leaders ensured continuous monitoring and support of the study by encouraging members to attend and providing resources for meetings. Findings were that through the participatory action research community members developed shared vision to find solutions to enhance self-regulation among teenage mothers. The marginalized teenage mothers were encouraged to vent frustrations that originated from their homes and the community at large. The transformative effect of community engagement is that co-researchers acknowledged their own shortcomings and were willing to address them. The success of the strategy was evidenced by teenage mothers' free willingness to cascade lessons to others in the community. In conclusion the community engagement approach proved to be the vital instrument to address multiple emergent problems. The instrument catalyzed social cohesion, mutual understanding, reciprocal respect and sustainable transformation. The approach is recommended for complex problems to enhance sustainable co-owned solutions.

**Keywords:** self-regulation, social cohesion, community engagement,



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