

■ But new research is helping schools make sure girls don't get left behind

Shock Bay teenage pregnancy rates

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GROUND-BREAKING research at Nelson Mandela Bay schools has revealed shocking pregnancy rates among pupils as young as 15, with one school having to deal with 35 pregnant pupils within the past year.

But though the school principal says the problem is widespread, and getting worse, the research has allowed authorities to institute programmes that help pregnant girls finish their studies.

In the first study of its kind for the Bay, research by Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University education professor Randal Grebe has found that pregnancy rates among pupils – especially in areas where poverty is rife – are continuing to increase, specifically because the problem is widely ignored by communities.

Grebe focused his research on Gelvendale High School, which is one of the city's worst-affected schools when it comes to teen pregnancies.

Of about 650 girls at the school – there are 1 300 pupils in total – 35 were pregnant this year.

According to essays by the pregnant pupils, submitted anonymously as part of the project, parenthood and the prospect of raising children was extremely daunting.

"My boyfriend was supportive when I told him I was pregnant, but he has not seen the baby yet. He has not given me any financial support," wrote a 17-year-old pupil who recently gave birth.

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A matric pupil, 19, wrote how she feared telling her family she was pregnant because she thought they would be disappointed.

"An unplanned pregnancy could ruin your whole future," she wrote.

A report detailing a fellow matric's feelings about her pregnancy said: "She feels she disappointed not only herself and her parents, but also her teachers."

Principal Farah Hendricks, who has been at the school for 26 years, said the problem had been getting progressively worse, but was a much

wider phenomenon and not restricted to her school.

"The rate of pregnancy is escalating," she said. "It's an issue we have opened our eyes to since we started the project (with Grebe) at the beginning of the year. What we have decided now is to speak with the (pregnant) pupils and open channels of communication with them."

Since beginning the project at the school, Hendricks said pupils were no longer sent home when they fell pregnant – as is policy at most schools – but instead were encouraged to continue their studies for as long as possible, doing home assignments when they

could no longer attend class.

Grebe found a critical lack of education for pupils who fell pregnant, exacerbating the poverty cycle because they dropped out of school.

His research also revealed a lack of open and frank discussions with pupils about sex, and an absence of education for prospective young fathers on their responsibilities as parents. Rampant poverty, sexual coercion from boys and trading sex for material possessions were all major factors.

Grebe – with the help of Childline and teachers from the school – held workshops in the September holidays to educate the girls on the options

available to them as parents.

"It was the first school where Childline was enlisted to become actively involved (with the issue)," he said.

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"When we do it again, we will be addressing other pressing needs as well. As far as the inaugural project, it has been a success."

Grebe's research, which

was aided by other studies such as from the Human Sciences Research Council, forms part of the Integrated School Development and Improvement Project, funded by the DG Murray Trust and administered by NMMU's Centre for Educational Research, Technology and Innovation.

While similar projects to increase maths literacy and other skills are ongoing at 18 other Bay schools in impoverished communities, Grebe said Gelvandale High was the flagship project because it could be rolled out and implemented by other schools.

Based on the success of the Gelvandale project, it will be

expanded to 20 other schools from next year, specifically in impoverished communities in Kirkwood, Addo and Uitenhage, according to project administrator Vernon Naidoo.

"Our philosophy is that schools should tell us what their biggest problems are (at Gelvandale High, it was teen pregnancy) and we help them tackle that," said Naidoo.

Specialists have pointed towards massive societal gender imbalances as a major cause of the problem.

Rhodes University's Public Services Accountability Monitor's media and advocacy head, Derek Luyt, said much of it boiled down to women

being disempowered.

"A lot of women are pressurised into sex at a young age, and it's very difficult for a young woman who is culturally only seen as complete when she has a partner to turn that down," said Luyt.

"Until women are materially independent, these kinds of things will continue. In many cases, women are unable to negotiate the terms of sexual contact (such as asking their partners to wear a condom)."

From next year, Grebe said the project would expand its focus from aiding pregnant teens to pregnancy prevention and HIV/Aids awareness campaigns among pupils.