

Educational level: *Middle, secondary school*

Beneficiaries: *Students*

Background

In 1996, the UNICEF-funded Diphilana Initiative was created as a flexible learning pilot program at a school in Botswana to enable pregnant students to continue their education.^{1,2}

Description

Prior to the development of the initiative, only some girls were allowed to return to school, and those who were allowed to do so were required to wait one year post-delivery.¹ At Pekenene School, student-mothers are allowed to return when they receive a doctor's consent and can continue for as long as they choose.¹

Although it cannot be directly attributed to the initiative, the Ministry of Education did change its policy in 2000, reducing the wait time for pregnant students to return post-delivery from 12 months to 6 months.² In fact, increasing numbers of countries have established national policies enabling pregnant school learners to either stay in school during their pregnancy (continuation) or return to school after they give birth (re-entry). (Note that some countries still have expulsion policies, which require pregnant students to withdraw from school.) In sub-Saharan Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Malawi, Zambia, and Swaziland have re-entry policies while Cameroon and Madagascar have continuation policies.¹ Countries, including Chile, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Panama, Puerto Rico, and Colombia, have passed laws supporting the rights of pregnant girls to receive education.¹

Results

Reviewers rated this practice as featuring the following gender transformative characteristics:

- Transform family, school, and/or work arrangements so that women are not economically or socially penalized/disadvantaged for caregiving (*critical criterion*)
- Change or attempt to change an imbalance of power or otherwise level the playing field (*critical criterion*)
- Challenge and change common discriminatory gender beliefs or norms (*critical criterion*).

Reviewers noted the insufficient amount of documentation and evidence on this practice. Some documents describe the context in which the Diphilana Initiative operated. A 2001 UNICEF evaluation found that students at the school, whether or not they participated in the initiative, "were targeted and abused by some members of the community, notably working men, because their school was 'known to have a facility that takes care of their babies.'"² However, a UNICEF-produced case study observed that most components of the Diphilana Initiative were not fully implemented.³ It is therefore unclear as to whether this practice was actually implemented in Botswana.

The design of the practice does have gender transformative potential. Developing continuation policies, whether at national or institutional levels, communicates to pregnant

girls that they have the right to stay in school, challenging discriminatory norms and transforming school arrangements for pregnant students.

Implementation lessons learned

Program planners should anticipate resistance in their intervention designs and engage the community to create buy-in. Although teachers' and students' attitudes towards the Diphilana Initiative (and this practice) changed over time to be generally positive, parents—especially men—and other community members felt strongly against it.² The 2003 evaluation of the Diphilana Initiative suggests that this lack of ownership may have derived from a sense on the part of some community members that the initiative did not benefit the general community but only one school.² While the government expected the community to sustain the initiative, community members viewed the initiative as a UNICEF activity and did not have buy-in.³ The Diphilana experience strongly suggests the need for an assessment of community caregiving norms early in the process of designing interventions; involvement of men and women in the design of the initiative; and careful monitoring of program implementation and effects.

National-level continuation policies should also be accompanied by advocacy and awareness-raising. While the policy and legal environment has improved in many countries, the implementation of these policies has faced numerous challenges, such as lack of awareness, lack of compliance, and stigma.¹

Summary conclusions

Of national-level policies regarding pregnant students (continuation, re-entry, expulsion), continuation policies have the most gender transformative potential. By allowing pregnant students to continue their education, this practice levels the playing field for student-mothers and changes a significant educational barrier. Implementation challenges still remain, however, as seen with the Diphilana Initiative. As with many types of policies, this practice must be accompanied by stakeholder engagement and awareness-raising to facilitate acceptance of the practice and its intended effects.

Reference(s) and source(s)

1. Hubbard, Dianne. 2008. School policy on learner pregnancy in Namibia: background to reform. Gender Research & Advocacy Project Legal Assistance Center. www.lac.org/na/projects/grap/Pdf/learnerpregnancyfull.pdf (accessed June 27, 2011).
2. Unterhalter, Elaine, Emily Kioko-Echessa, Rob Pattman, Rajee Rajagopalan, and Fatmatta N'Jai. 2004. Scaling up girls' education: Towards a scorecard on girls' education in the Commonwealth. Beyond Access Project, Institute of Education, University of London and Oxfam Great Britain. http://www.iiav.nl/epublications/2004/scaling_up.pdf (accessed June 1, 2011).
3. Chapman, David W., Emert, Holly, and Coyne, Botsalano. 2003. Evaluation of the African Girls' Education Initiative. Country Case Study: Botswana. UNICEF. www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/files/Botswana_Case_Study.pdf (accessed June 1, 2011).