

# PARENTING STUDENTS IN SECONDARY SCHOOL SETTINGS: THE CHALLENGE OF THE 'DILEMMA OF DIFFERENCE'

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## ABSTRACT

Pregnant and parenting young people are not often found in mainstream educational pathways in school settings. Schools that seek to include groups of pregnant and parenting students within Year 11 and 12 programs face a range of problems. The paper draws on international evidence and an Australian case study of a school based program for pregnant and parenting students to highlight systemic, curricular, pedagogical and transition issues that confront schools, teachers and young people in managing the dilemma of difference in mainstream settings. In doing so, it identifies some factors that require strategic attention from schools in producing effective teaching and learning within programs designed to retain, re-attract and support pregnant and parenting students.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Early parenthood is a significant cause of dropping out of school for teenage girls. Given later social and financial wellbeing are related to school completion, schools are in a unique position in being able to provide both retention intervention and efforts to ameliorate the life chance consequences of non-completion by teenage parents.

However, pregnant and parenting young women are not often found in mainstream educational pathways in schools and similar settings. More often than not, they are excluded, eased-out, or self-select an exit from pathways leading to the completion of Year 12 (Smyth et al. 2000). Where they do continue their school education, it is often portrayed as an individualised story of triumph against the odds. Schools that seek to include groups of pregnant and parenting students within their Year 11 and 12 programs face a range of policy, financial, educational, welfare and public-image problems.

This paper draws on international evidence and an Australian case study of a school based program for pregnant and parenting young women to highlight systemic, curricular, pedagogical, and transition issues that confront schools, teachers and young people in managing the *dilemma of difference* (Minnow 1990, in Kelly 2000) in mainstream educational settings. In doing so, it explores the question of what makes effective teaching and learning for teachers and parenting students in mainstream school settings.

## 2 DISCUSSION

### 2.1 SOCIAL CONTEXT

While proportionally birth rates for young mothers are falling in Australia (Laws & Sullivan 2004), they can be much higher than the average in specific locations. For

example, in Corio (in Victoria) the 2001 birth rate exceeded 92 births per 1,000 for women aged 15-24 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001) which is approximately five times the national rate. Corio, a suburb of Geelong, is often identified as one of the most disadvantaged communities in the Australian state of Victoria (Schubert 2007; Brady 1999) where factors including low income, low educational achievement, long-term unemployment and dependence on social security undermine the health and wellbeing of individuals and reduce life prospects that are not dependent upon welfare (Bradbury 2006; Littlejohn 1998).

Teenage mothers in Corio face a complex challenge. Not only do they face the same task as other teenagers in negotiating school completion and transition from school to sustainable employment and/or further education and training, they also face the risks of transition to adulthood and first-time parenthood under conditions of social and economic disadvantage. The Young Parents Access Project (YPAP) at Corio Bay Senior College (CBSC) is one local response to this multi-faceted challenge that aims to “retain, re-attract and support young parents into the education system and improve education levels and future educational and employment opportunities for this target group” (Armstrong 2003).

## **2.2 POLICY CONTEXT**

In Victoria, the Kirby Report into Post Compulsory Education and Training (Kirby 2000) advocated that schools develop partnerships with local community agencies to support students to successfully complete their schooling and make effective transitions into further education, training or employment. Following patterns evident elsewhere (Warmington et al. 2005), the Victorian government instituted policy reform and departmental reorganisation favouring an interagency approach in finding local solutions to local problems.

Within this policy climate for partnerships between community agencies and education providers, a major initiative has been the establishment of Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) (Department of Education, Victoria 2002) to link education and training providers, industry, local government and other stakeholders in a shared responsibility for young people in the post compulsory education sector. In Geelong, the LLEN (SGR LLEN) has provided strategic support and funds for the development of the YPAP and the establishment of a childcare centre at CBSC (Harrison et al. 2004).

## **2.3 THE CHILDCARE CENTRE AND THE YPAP**

The need for a response to teenage parenting had been apparent to the staff at CBSC for many years. The school encouraged pregnant teenagers to continue their education regardless of their pregnancy and had developed flexible solutions to practically support them. Access to childcare can be the factor that makes the challenge of parenting and schooling too difficult, particularly for adolescent parents living independently. However, CBSC understood that access means not only availability but also feasibility – even if places are available in community childcare adolescent parents often live in the vicinity of the school and the logistics of taking up an available place without access to transport creates a disincentive to school attendance.

A Working Party formed in May 2002 with representatives from local, State and Federal government agencies interested in supporting the establishment of in-school childcare. From this beginning, a difficult journey characterised by policy, funding and logistical tensions (Angwin & Kamp 2007) culminated in June 2004 when the Young Parents Access Project was officially launched by the then Minister for Education Services and Minister for Employment and Youth Affairs. In 2006, 25 students were taking part in the YPAP program and 40 children were attending the childcare centre at CBSC.

## 2.4 INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDIES AND EVIDENCE

The United States leads the world in the education of teenage parents where provision is often framed by a high degree of surveillance and control and an imperative to have teenage parents take responsibility for actions and consequences (Luttrell 2003). While these have not been motives for the YPAP, there are parallels between the challenges at CBSC and those reported in recent North American research about education for teenage parents.

In a study of two schools in Canada, Kelly (2000) makes use of *the dilemma of difference* to interpret and analyse the contradictions and tensions produced through the inclusion of teenage parents in mainstream schooling. The dilemma is presented as a question: 'when does treating people differently emphasize their differences and stigmatize or hinder them on that basis? And when does treating people the same become insensitive to their difference and likely to stigmatize or hinder them on *that* basis?' This concept is transferable to an Australian context because the contradictions and tensions are common to the politics of inclusion found in such programs irrespective of the setting. The dilemma of difference goes to the heart of how young parenting students navigate their personal and educational lives both within and outside school. Moreover, it also goes to the heart of the educational and welfare efforts that administrators, advocates and teachers deal with in supporting and teaching them effectively.

Luttrell's (2003) five year study demonstrates how pregnant and parenting students are subject to particular and insidious shaming and pathologising practices that diminish their sense of self and profoundly affect their chances of success in and beyond school. Strong stereotypes related to this group - poor, working class, failing in school - are produced and reproduced in school settings, making them scapegoats for a range of social ills. While Luttrell's study is set in a different social and cultural milieu to CBSC, similar practices are evident in the educational experiences of young women participating in the YPAP.

Pillow (2003) reports a connection between how a school defines the 'problem' of teenage parenting and the policies and services they put in place. She argues that two metaphors describe educational approaches to parenting students: pregnancy as a cold (something that you get over) and pregnancy as a disability/disease (something that you don't get over and requires major intervention). There are limitations in these models as pregnancy is sometimes neither a cold nor a disability and sometimes it is both. The theme 'pregnancy as a cold' leads to parenting students being treated as any other student. 'Pregnancy as a disease' restricts educational opportunity through students only being afforded additional support by first being identified as deficient by virtue of being teenage parents. Typically, this can be seen in statements about pregnant and parenting students not 'fitting' into regular school (Pillow 2003).

These international studies point to discriminatory practices that occur at both administrative and classroom levels. For example, policies around attendance are 'often the first site of trouble'. If schools do not have written policies explicitly addressing how to make decisions about absences for parenting students the decision will rest on individual discretion and this does not work in providing equitable access (Pillow 2003).

School administrators, teachers, support workers and pregnant and parenting students at CBSC face similar challenges for ensuring successful participation by learners who are both *different to the rest* and *just like all the rest*.

## 2.5 RESEARCH PROJECT AND DATA

Since 2002, interview studies have been conducted with pregnant and parenting young people (Shacklock et al. 2005) and a case study undertaken into the establishment of the childcare centre (Harrison et al. 2004; Angwin et al. 2004) and YPAP at CBSC.

Composite (anonymised) case study narratives, or stories, of the teaching and learning experience at CBSC for YPAP students have been constructed from interviews with 12 young mums and 10 staff members at the school (Shacklock et al. 2006). The stories recognise the complexity of the lives and work of those involved and present an opportunity for multiple readings of the same events and people, either wholly or in fragments, which will likely invoke different interpretations and questions (Stronach & Maclure 1997). The aim is not to simplify, but instead to invite deep interpretation and further discussion (Shacklock et al. 2006).

## 2.6 DAWN'S STORY

The research team first met Dawn when she was seventeen, nominally in Year 11 at CBSC, the mother of a toddler and soon to be pregnant with her second child. Alongside her story we present a staff member's story of Dawn elicited from separate interviews conducted around the same time.

*I've never liked school. It didn't bother me that much because I thought that I would leave at the end of Year 10 anyway because I didn't want to do Year 11 and 12. I wanted to get at least my Year 10 because I knew for a lot of courses you need it and there are a lot of jobs that like that but I ended up leaving school in first term of Year 10.*

*I found out I was pregnant and that sort of sealed the deal. I told them at school and they said that I could stay there and they would try and accommodate me as best they could, but I knew there wasn't really much that they could do.*

*Mum knew I hated school and that nothing she could do would keep me there so ... yeah there was not much she could do, and so I just left.*

*I did try and get jobs for about the first three months but most employers as soon as they found out I was pregnant it was sort of "no sorry this job isn't suitable for you".*

*After my baby was born I got bored. Staying home every day is very boring. There wasn't a day care for him and it was hard for me to go anywhere 'cause I haven't got a car or anything.*

*A lady from BAYSA rang up and she asked if I could come in for a chat and said she would help me. She found out if there were any places going at Corio and any childcare as well and we just arranged an appointment.*

Dawn's just new to us this year - a very bright young woman and seems to be very motivated particularly in some subjects. She's got potential, but we have to be careful because she's got attendance problems and that's where we need early intervention if that starts dropping away.

I did a little bit of checking and found that she wasn't attending all of her classes although her attendance has improved. She hasn't missed one of mine and as I've said she's going to finish the year's work in half a year. She arrives on time and she stays right to the end.

She has been required to do some things that she resists but she doesn't find the work hard. She is a girl able to cope I think with whatever she's doing.

She said that she likes the self-paced learning thing because it's much easier to just slot in and do your own work and then leave.

I think she realizes that she has to support her child and get back into the workforce and so she sees this as a way of getting a job. And so she is going to do it and that is why she doesn't miss a class.

It's difficult enough for a student anyway, a teenager to do VCE and they've got someone at home to cook their meals and do the washing and they don't have to worry about paying bills and all that sort of stuff. You know, for most they just come to

*arranged an appointment.*

*I decided to give it a try 'cause it's not exactly a school, you don't have to wear uniform and you don't have classes every single lesson. I don't think some teachers know who I am anyway. Spares are good because I can do things that I don't have time to do when you have a baby ... if I have to pay a bill or go to Medicare, I can just duck over there and do it.*

*I still don't like school much 'cause it's just school and I have to do things that I've done before. I should pass my subjects but I have some catch-up classes to do 'cause I have a lot of absences because of my son. He was in hospital and I had catch-up classes to do here but I had to miss them 'cause I was up there for three days. Now it will be "Oh, Dawn I've been looking for you, where have you been?" For one subject I have only missed one class but that's a 1.25 to 4.30 class.*

*Next year I'm doing Year 12 subjects, but I'll be back next year 'cause I have nothing else to do ... but I'm gonna plan on looking for a casual job or something in between school next year ... see what happens.*

school and go home. But these young mums have got to do all that themselves.

Just to get back into the swing of it, plus all the responsibilities of looking after a child, getting here in the morning and then at the end you got to go home and feed the baby and then if you're going to do any homework you've got to set that aside and do that when you've had a full day anyway.

I don't know for what reason, but many have picked up a workload that's too heavy I think for them. They should have a reduced workload and they should have been eased back into it.

So I think, I think along the way there is a misleading impression that they can get their VCE in two years. In Dawn's case, she realises it's going to be a three year VCE, and she's now saying, 'No I don't want to come back next year.' For her, this amount of time is really daunting.

A lot of students are back in that two-week timeslot at the end of the school year doing extra work to catch up. I did ask her to stay back there one week and she didn't make it.

These stories make it possible to identify practices that are effective and those that need to be addressed in new or different ways in order to achieve and realise the aims of the YPAP initiative. Two of these, the dilemma of difference and attendance are discussed here.

### **2.6.1 SAME-YET-DIFFERENT TENSIONS**

Though the YPAP, CBSC supports young parents as *students different to the rest* but, whether intended or explicitly stated, or not, the school's teachers operate from an expectation that students need to conduct their participation in learning *as if they were not pregnant or parenting*. This is an ontological contradiction and sets up conditions for failure (Harrison & Shacklock 2007).

YPAP students have similar desires for learning and school success as other students but this desire is translated into practice through different life circumstances. While the school may be good at providing personal support, it may struggle to provide additional (or extended) opportunities to complete and hand-up work on different time-lines. This is crucial because it is about working to ensure success as opposed to hoping that these students can marshal the stamina and personal resources to cope like any other student.

These *same-yet-different* tensions (Kelly 2000) are central to the politics of inclusive schooling. The dilemma of difference works in both visible and invisible ways through assumptions and practices in mainstream school settings and it is fundamental to understanding how YPAP can deliver on its aims. A key question is: when do same-yet-

different tensions become contradictions that produce conditions under which YPAP students are more likely to experience failure?

### **2.6.2 ATTENDANCE**

Irregular attendance is one issue mentioned and returned to in interviews, generating powerful and often stressful feelings amongst participants at both professional and personal levels. Dawn's story is typical.

The bottom line is that if these students are not at school their chances of achieving successful educational and life outcomes are severely diminished. Kelly (2000), Luttrell (2003) and Pillow (2003) each identify tensions between discipline, punishment and positive inducement in teachers' efforts to ensure educational success for pregnant and parenting students. Given system imperatives, and the existence of strong and often opposing ideological investments amongst the various players regarding what schools are for, these tensions are not easily reconciled. However, this problem is not unique to CBSC and it is not confined to pregnant and parenting students because regular school non-attendance is an intractable systemic problem (Osler & Vincent 2003).

The question is how to turn the problem of attendance on its head, or to remove it from the educational equation. In this particular context, how does CBSC make education, rather than attendance, the issue? This is not to suggest that education is not of concern to the school, but what seems to happen is that it becomes the silent 'other' when attendance is valorised and equated problematically with success. As long as maintaining the integrity of the system is seen as paramount, pregnant and parenting students will always be seen as problems because of attendance.

### **2.6.3 MORE OBSERVATIONS ON GOOD PRACTICE**

Other issues about systemic and school policy and organisational practices impacting upon teaching and learning experiences for YPAP students and staff are listed (with no implicit priority) below.

- Previous educational histories
- Individual re-entry challenges
- Readiness assessments and subject choices
- Pathway counselling and planning
- Induction to school as a learning site
- (Re)induction to learning practices
- Transitions and early success
- Flexible modes of learning and assessment
- Progress monitoring and review
- Positive teacher-student relationships
- Support and advocacy

## **3 CONCLUSIONS**

Issues for the YPAP at CBSC can be linked to themes about learning in alternative settings and working effectively with at-risk students. While not surprising, it is a reminder that insights from experience and research in diverse settings can speak to specific contexts.

Key principles for sustainable programs for at-risk students in alternative settings described by Cole (2004) for the Dusseldorp Skills Forum reflect the issues identified from the CBSC experience. They are that young people at-risk:

- can learn and want to be appreciated and successful;
- must be provided with learning options;
- must be provided with programs that cater for their individual development needs;

- must be provided with programs that are sufficiently flexible to respond to individual needs and circumstances; and
- must be provided with programs that are effectively linked to vocational pathways.

While arguably already present to some extent at CBSC, most of these characteristics can be developed further through reflection, innovation and experimentation.

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