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Please cite this paper as:

Wightman, L., & Moriarty, B. (2012). *Pathways and partnerships: Preparing teachers to build expectations and capacity among teenage parents*. Refereed paper presented at 'Going for gold! Reshaping teacher education for the future', the annual conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA), Adelaide, 1–4 July.

Published by: Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA)

Available via stable URL: https://atea.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2012_wightman_and_moriarty.pdf

Review status: Refereed—abstract and full paper blind peer-reviewed

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Pathways and partnerships: Preparing teachers to build expectations and capacity among teenage parents

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Abstract

In 2011, Kate Ellis, Minister for the Status of Women, outlined Australian government policy and plans to assist teenage parents who have not attained a Year 12 education to engage in activities and develop pathways to improve their own educational opportunities and those of their children. In a longitudinal study involving 232 young mothers, Oxford, Lee and Lohr (2010) found that the absence of future plans for education seriously impacted on employment prospects. It is proposed in this paper that positive lifelong learning pathways for young parents who have not completed their secondary education are largely contingent upon strategic partnerships between relevant organisations and agencies. These partnerships and government initiatives together impact on young parents and their education at a time when their circumstances make it difficult for these young parents to appreciate the relevance of their formal education.

The case study on which this paper is based examined the broad question: What does lifelong learning mean in the context of the lives of women who become mothers as teenagers? Eight mothers who participated in a young parents program completed a qualitative questionnaire and 4 of these participants also took part in a follow-up focus group interview to evaluate the program. The results highlight the importance of addressing the immediate needs of young parents and helping them to face the barriers that confront them if they are to avoid social exclusion and remain engaged in learning. The findings have implications for teacher education. Understanding both the formal and informal aspects of lifelong learning theory, developing the ability to work in partnership with relevant others and having awareness of government policy, help to prepare teachers who can build expectations and capacity for future learning among the diverse range of their students, including those who become parents at an early age.

Keywords: Teacher education and partnerships, lifelong learning pathways, formal and informal lifelong learning, young parents

Introduction

Young parents of school age have a range of needs that are interdependent and diverse and these needs can dominate their lives to the extent that concentrating on formal education can become difficult and low in priority. Teenagers who become parents before completing their secondary education often find it more difficult than older first-time parents to continue with their formal education (Boden, Ferguson & Horwood, 2007; Boulden, 2000; Pittaway, 2005). This is where understanding the formal and informal aspects of lifelong learning and how together they can help to influence positive lifelong learning pathways for young parents is important. By ensuring that

education for young parents is relevant to and accommodates their current circumstances means that participation in education is more likely to be continued, even if it takes a little longer or more support to complete their formal secondary schooling. This is preferable to exclusion from education, which can lead to financial and social disadvantage for young parents and their children and is often accompanied by long-term dependence on society because of the difficulty of gaining and sustaining employment without formal qualifications. As Oxford et al. (2010) concluded from a large-scale study that examined adolescent mothers' transition into adulthood, when young mothers do not complete their formal high school education or fail to complete it by the age of 19, their long-term prospects for employment and their chances of later undertaking formal higher education are reduced. This longer-term view needs to be considered when working with parents of secondary school age. This view is also consistent with the Australian government's policy and plans around assisting all teenage parents who have not completed their secondary schooling to engage in activities and to develop pathways for their continued education. Young parents programs that are relevant and timely have the potential to keep participants engaged in learning. It is this continued engagement that is needed in order for pathways for continued education to be developed around the current circumstances of teenage parents. The evaluation of a young parents program reported in this paper focused on participants' perspectives of the program and enabled issues around relevance and timeliness to be explored.

Teenage parents face a range of barriers that can make their continued engagement in formal education difficult and disrupt their lifelong learning pathways. Research that identifies the barriers to education that are often faced by teenage parents, the issues that schools face in addressing these barriers and how understanding aspects of lifelong learning can be helpful in planning for the current and future needs of young parents is examined in the next section of this paper. The methods employed in the case study evaluation of a young parents program are explained and the results presented. The paper then returns to the broader context and implications for teacher education programs that prepare secondary teachers for schooling contexts where an understanding of lifelong learning, an awareness of government policy and an ability to work in partnership with relevant others is needed in order to help ensure that young parents of school age develop positive learning pathways.

Background: Educating School-Aged Parents and Lifelong Learning Theory

In a literature review that focused on healthy young parents in education Barling (2007) found that the barriers that prevent the majority of young mothers from completing their secondary education are preventable. These barriers, which are discussed below, can be complex. They need to be understood and addressed in order for young parents to have real options and opportunities for continuing their education along positive learning pathways and building expectations and capacity for lifelong learning.

It is interesting to note that the education departments in four Australian states and one territory all have readily available information on the internet about supporting pregnant students. School policies and procedures that do not accommodate the needs of pregnant and parenting teenagers is one of the barriers that Barling (2007) drew from the review of literature. While this barrier has

been addressed by some schools in Australia, underneath it sits a range of other barriers or issues that can impact on the ability of schools to make appropriate adjustments to their policies and procedures. Barling pointed to practical difficulties around childcare and transportation that can affect continued access to high school education for teenage parents. Situations identified by Baker, Clark, Crowl and Carlson (2009), in which young parents may have previously exhibited antisocial behaviours or whose interactions with teachers and others in authority have been negative, present further issues and challenges for schools. It is also known, however, that many teenagers discontinue their antisocial and risk-taking behaviours and become more mature and responsible when they become parents (Price-Robertson, 2010).

It is at this point that many pregnant and parenting teenagers are most receptive to the help and information around pregnancy and parenting that can be provided through partnerships between schools and outside agencies that can deliver these programs. Providing support and devising pathways that keep teenage parents engaged in education through formal and informal learning that is relevant to their current needs and future prospects is important. It is when the young parents become overwhelmed by the prospects and realities of parenthood that their own formal education can be neglected. The demands of parenting, financial and other concerns and even subsequent pregnancies can lead to social exclusion such that further barriers to education may increase over time. Social exclusion, it has been argued by Stenfors-Hayes, Griffiths and Ogunleye (2008) has the potential to be reduced through lifelong learning. Parenting programs that are organised through the school and where teenage parents remain connected to their peers and the education system offer perhaps the best chance of keeping these students engaged with education and the formal and informal aspects of lifelong learning.

Providing parenting programs within traditionally formal learning contexts such as schools and other contexts highlights how lifelong learning does not always follow a predictable pathway. There is likely to be a period during their schooling when young parents might benefit more from a greater mixture of informal learning compared to formal learning than might otherwise have been the case. If adjustments can be made to the normal progression, then it is more likely that teenagers who are parents will complete their high school education and be eligible to continue with higher education later, thus impacting on their lifelong learning trajectory. The formal and informal aspects of lifelong learning, according to Beddie (2004) can be described together as life-wide learning that occurs in a range of contexts. Teenagers who become parents while they are of school age of necessity need to broaden the scope of their learning to include other life-wide experiences that may not otherwise have been relevant to them at such an early age. Programs for young parents, such as the one that is the focus of the study reported here, can provide both formal and informal learning opportunities that together help young people to remain engaged in learning that is relevant and timely. It is important to know what participants in parenting programs regard as relevant delivery and content as these aspects of these programs are crucial to their success.

In terms of delivery, Baker et al. (2009) identified teaching styles to which these students tend not to respond well and which can act as barriers to participants. Other research (for example, Malin and Morrow, 2009; Soriano, Clark and Wise, 2008) provides insights into what young parents regard as priorities in terms of delivery and content of programs intended to help them adjust to and cope with parenthood. Programs that are fairly informal, not too structured or didactic provide participants with opportunities to suggest input into the content and do not treat participants like

children have been found to be most effective. For these reasons, the evaluation of the young parents program that is reported in this paper focused on what the participants thought about the delivery and content of that program.

Methods

The program for young parents that was evaluated in this study was developed to provide a relaxed and supportive environment in which young parents could seek, share and gain information that they needed in order to face pregnancy and raising their young children. The program aimed to reduce feelings of isolation through peer support; provide education about children's growth and development and parenting; and promote the health and wellbeing of children and parents through education about healthy lifestyle choices. Thus the informal approach was complemented by formal presentations on some of these topics. By focusing on the delivery as well as the content of the program, therefore, the evaluation highlighted both informal and formal lifelong learning opportunities that occurred during the program.

Fifteen young mothers participated in the program, which was delivered on a weekly basis over a calendar year in four, 12-week modules that responded to the participants' needs and requests. All of the mothers were first time parents and some mothers were married or had partners, while others were single. They ranged in age from 15 to 25 years and were able to join the program at any time during the year. Some mothers came to the program while they were pregnant and, together with the other parents, brought their children to the weekly sessions after the birth. The midwife was the regular facilitator who invited guest speakers from community organisations to present workshops to enable participants to make connections with the local community. The program had informal connections to the local high schools through the school nurses who referred pregnant and parenting students.

A case study approach was used to evaluate the delivery and content of the program from the perspectives of program participants. Data were collected over a six-week period to enable adequate access to study participants. It was important to select from among the participants in the program a smaller group of mothers who represented the diversity of parents who attended the program in terms of age and circumstances. All eight participants in the study completed a questionnaire relating to background, biographical information and their opinions about the delivery and content of the programme. It was on the basis of these individual responses that four respondents were then invited to take part in a semi-structured focus group interview.

The focus group interview, which was conducted over a three-hour period, was audio-recorded with the permission of the participants and according to the ethical clearance obtained for the research project. The audio recording enabled the analysis of data obtained during the interview to be based on the exact words used by participants. The purpose of the focus group interview was both to verify certain information provided in the questionnaire and to probe perspectives on the delivery and content of the program. This was approached through a combination of informal conversation and trigger questioning during the focus group interview when points raised were explored in more depth. Participants could interact with each other, share their ideas and talk freely and openly about

what they felt was important to them. It was in conducting the focus group interview that the researcher, who was also the facilitator of the program, needed to be particularly vigilant of her dual status as both program presenter and later as researcher, a point emphasised more generally by McMillan and Schumacher (2006). It was therefore important to be aware of the need to ensure that it was participants' perspectives about the informal and formal learning opportunities afforded by the program that were elicited, regardless of the program facilitator's own thoughts and ideas.

Inductive analysis was used to analyse the transcripts of the interview such that concepts and themes were coded as they emerged. Reviewing the over arching questions about the delivery and content of the programme provided the framework for tabling the response around pregnancy, birth, parenting, peer support and qualities of the facilitator. The presentation of the results emphasises what the participants thought about the delivery and content of the program in terms of its ability to address their immediate needs and to help them to adjust to pregnancy and parenting.

Results

The results of the study indicate that the participants identified aspects about the structure of the program, the dynamics that developed within the group during the weekly meetings and the qualifications of the facilitator to be features of the program that were important to them. Together with content on pregnancy and birth and practical and positive parenting, these aspects of the delivery of the program were found by the participants to be directly related to their immediate needs.

The participants in the focus group interview in particular reported that meeting weekly was appropriate because so much happened in their lives during the week that they were ready to talk about issues that had arisen and to receive information that was relevant to their needs. Casey (real names are not used) appreciated the opportunity to be part of a group that was "always helpful and supportive", regardless of what type of session it was, whereas others indicated that they preferred to commence the session with a debrief and the opportunity to talk and ask questions before the more structured part of the meeting commenced.

Both the questionnaire and focus group interview responses referred to the dynamics and peer support that were evident on a weekly basis. Participants spoke about how helpful it was to hear about the experiences of other members and how the group provided peer support when they needed it the most. In particular, Kerrie spoke about feeling comfortable "to ask questions...without feeling stupid" and Dayle went on to talk about how "people were a great support" and "helped me to gain confidence". A common theme related to meeting others and being able to make friends with people who were in a similar situation and who offered care and support. Sally, whose child was in care, however, felt that the other participants in the program did not understand "how it felt to have to hand back my kid to the foster mum".

Participants agreed on the importance of having a midwife to facilitate the program and found this to be a positive and helpful aspect of the program. Anita spoke about "the valuable information

from the midwife” and Kerrie noted more specifically that “any time we had a question about anything she (the midwife) would come up with the answer straight away”. There was general agreement about the importance of having a facilitator who had the specific knowledge about pregnancy and birth that all participants needed. The group agreed with Kathy that the facilitator needed to be accepting and flexible and in particular to be non-judgemental.

In terms of the content of the program participants found that the day-to-day practical information on how to care for a baby was useful. Kathy found the topics on “how to cope with a baby....and how to cope with stress” very helpful. The value of play as a topic was raised by several participants and one in particular mentioned in both the questionnaire and the interview that spending more time playing with the children rather than just talking about play would have helped her to apply the new knowledge to practice. Others spoke about how learning about the role of the father was helpful to both themselves and their partners. All participants, regardless of whether they had partners, talked about practical issues around being a parent. Budgeting, learning about community organisations that can help with food vouchers and developing the confidence to take advice from family and extended family were some of the topics raised by participants. These group discussions provided valuable information and enabled the participants to learn from each other, although Anita would have liked to have had the opportunity to talk about personal problems and to talk more about “fathers and mothers”. Other participants felt that more time needed to be spent discussing information on relationships and balancing the role of parent with individual learning needs.

Findings and Implications for Teacher Education

The findings of this study are consistent with research by Malin and Morrow (2009) and Soriano et al. (2008) that identified the features about the delivery and content of parenting programs that impact on their success. The participants in the research identified needs that were of immediate concern to them and how the program for young parents helped them to find answers and solutions that they needed. Questions around pregnancy and parenting were answered by the midwife who had the specialised knowledge and peers provided information around how to obtain help from local organisations. These findings emphasise for schools that provide access to parenting programs the importance of participants having regular contact with a midwife, preferably in an informal setting. Given also the findings of the longitudinal study by Oxford et al. (2010) relating to the impact of not completing formal secondary education by the age of 19 years, young parents programs have an important role to play in keeping teenage parents engaged in learning that is relevant and timely. It is this ongoing connection with education at a time when these young parents are likely to experience barriers to continuing their education that is so important for their lifelong learning trajectories.

Young parents programs that enable entry at any time of the year may have the ability to respond to the immediate needs of young parents and facilitate interactions with other young parents who are at different stages of pregnancy and early parenting. This flexibility can also help to promote care and support among participants and avoid the social exclusion that concerned Stenfors-Hayes et al. (2008). This flexibility does not remove barriers such as transport and childcare that Barling (2007) identified can make it difficult for young parents to remain in school. It also does not address challenging antisocial behaviours that Baker et al. (2009) noted that some young parents may have

previously demonstrated. Flexibility in young parents programs can, however, provide incentives for addressing these barriers.

When schools work in partnership with other organisations to deliver programs whose facilitators have the specialised knowledge that pregnant and parenting teenagers need, the programs can be seen as relevant and timely and give many students a positive new start as they begin to adjust to the prospect and the reality of becoming a parent. Australian secondary schools may have increasing numbers of pregnant and parenting teenagers as government policy and plans require that teenage parents who have not completed their secondary schooling be assisted to engage in activities and to develop pathways for their education. There are undoubtedly many challenges for schools that provide parenting programs and decisions around staffing responsibilities need to be made. Schools that employ secondary teacher education graduates who know about government policy, how to work collaboratively with a range of stakeholders and understand lifelong learning theory are likely to be better placed to work with teenage parents. These schools are more likely to develop educational plans and pathways that respond to the immediate needs of pregnant and parenting teenagers who are then able to complete their secondary education and to build their expectations and capacity for lifelong learning.

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