

**Teenage Pregnancy in Young Women of
School Age: an exploration of
disengagement from the education system**

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Introduction

Teenage pregnancy has become a high profile issue in Britain where the English Government and Scottish Executive have both set targets to reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy by the year 2010, by 50% among under 18s in England and by 20% among 13-15 year olds in Scotland. The SEU report on teenage pregnancy (Social Exclusion Unit 1999) highlights a second goal of getting more teenage parents into education, training or employment, to reduce their risk of long-term social exclusion.

Both goals are of particular importance for the minority of teenage women conceiving under the age of 16 for whom pregnancy often leads to a disruption of education or arises in the context of prior disengagement from schooling – including formal exclusion by school authorities.

The aim of this paper is to explore:

- The impact of teenage pregnancy and motherhood on young women's educational achievements and the influence of government policy initiative and differing local strategies on the reintegration of young mothers into education.

This will be explored in detail using findings from research commissioned by DfES to monitor the Standards Fund Grant for Teenage Pregnancy.

Education and Teenage Pregnancy: The Standards Fund Grant for Teenage Pregnancy

This paper reports on research funded by the Department for Education and Skills to monitor LEAs' use of the Standards Fund Grant for Teenage Pregnancy in six areas of England. The Grant provides additional finance for LEAs in areas with high under-18 conception rates to enhance provision for 'reintegration' of young mothers into the education system. The Grant also provides funds to encourage the development of school-based prevention projects, but for the purpose of this presentation our focus will be on the former provision.

The areas chosen for evaluation include two counties in the North-East (Durham and Northumberland), where there are pockets of high pregnancy rates in former mining areas (Easington and Wansbeck); two London Boroughs (Newham and Southwark, which has the highest under-18 pregnancy rate in England: - both have high levels of deprivation and high proportions of young people from ethnic minorities); the City of Leeds in North Yorkshire; and Sandwell near Birmingham.

Table 5 gives the conception rates for under 16s and under 18s in the six areas studied.

Table 6: Standards Fund Study Areas: 1997-9 statistics

LEA	U18 Conception Rate	Abortion Ratio %	Underage Conception Rate
Durham	54.5	31	11.1 ¹
<i>Easington</i>	73.3	27	
Northumberland	43.2	38	7.8
<i>Wansbeck</i>	70.6	31	
Leeds	52.6	38	10.6
Sandwell	67.8	38	13.4
Southwark	85.8	58	16.3 ³
Newham+	61.2	43	11.8 ⁴

1. HA = Durham (inc Darlington UA)
2. HA = Newcastle and North Tyneside
3. HA = Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham
4. HA = East London & City

** = Excellence in Cities

Prior to the existence of the Grant, pregnant schoolgirls within the seven areas had a limited range of approaches available to them with regard to their continued education. In Sandwell, almost all pregnant schoolgirls would attend a specialist

Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) for pregnant schoolgirls. In Durham three part-time units have been developed since 1995 for the maternity-leave period of a young women's pregnancy and in the remaining areas the main option other than mainstream school for pregnant schoolgirls was home tuition.

The introduction of the Grant has resulted in the continued development of alternatives to mainstream school already in use within some areas as well as a range of new alternatives such as connections with City learning Centres (CLCs) and an FE college in Leeds. In addition the Grant has enabled most areas to have a dedicated Reintegration Officer who has the responsibility for liaising with schools, raising awareness around the issue teenage pregnancy and education, establishing procedures for pregnant schoolgirls, baseline data collection, overcoming barriers to reintegration, improving the attendance of pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers in education and providing general support for these young women.

The various educational alternatives are being monitored using baseline data from before the project on school attendance and achievement. Qualitative data has also been sought through depth interviews with pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers – (using samples from before and after the introduction of new strategies) as well as schoolteachers, Reintegration Officers and Specialist Learning Mentors.

Findings from the Research

The research commenced in September 2000 and we can only report on provisional findings on the emerging role of Reintegration Officers and changes in young women's experiences of pregnancy, motherhood and education.

Issues of concern prior to the Standards Fund Grant

Prior to the Standards Fund Grant, the level of help available to a pregnant schoolgirls depended to a great degree on what provision already existed within an LEA and how high a priority teenage pregnancy was within the LEA.

Particular issues of concern prior to the introduction of the Standards Fund Grant can be summarised as follows:

- Very little was known by LEAs about the numbers and educational activities and needs of pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers,
- Many girls entitled to home tuition would not receive any as a result of schools being unaware of correct procedure or attempting to hide the fact that a pupil was pregnant by failing to inform the appropriate EWO or failing to fill in relevant request forms,
- A significant proportion of the pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers in all areas had effectively dis-engaged themselves or were erratic attenders prior to pregnancy, and therefore, without adequate follow-up on non-attendance, many of the LEAs did not respond to their needs because they were unaware that the need existed,
- In some areas, evidence of off-rolling, incorrect attendance records at school, forced 29 week leave and admissions refusals for Year 11 young mothers who had missed a substantial amount of Year 10, were particular areas of concern.
- Evidence also existed that although schools were not excluding on the basis of pregnancy, pregnant schoolgirls were being made aware that they were either not welcome and hence chose to leave of their own accord, or that in the interest of their health and safety the school did not believe that, school was the best place for them.
- Many schools noted that girls could remain in school as long as ‘they felt comfortable’ in doing so, but did not necessarily see it as the school’s duty to make sure that they were comfortable.

Young women’s experience of motherhood and education

It has become evident that the government strategy is flawed in its stress on reintegration into mainstream schooling, as the assumption appears to be that it is always pregnancy which leads to disengagement, whereas for many of the pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers we have interviewed, disengagement from school and low educational aspirations were key factors prior to pregnancy. In particular disengagement as a result of being bullied at school was a common factor in many of these young women’s lives.

“It’s been the same in every school I’ve gone to, I’ve either been bullied or there’s never been no-one that disked me, or something like, they just never took to me.”

“I enjoyed primary school but when I moved to middle school I began to be bullied by a group of Year 9 girls. Mum arranged for me to be moved as the school were not doing anything to help the situation. But when I started at my new school, in order to fit in I did what my new friends did which was to bunk off school. So my attendance became very poor, cause I was trying to fit in an not be bullied like last time.”

For these young women, it has been important for Reintegration Officers to recognise that reintegration into mainstream schooling is not necessarily the best or most appropriate option. A young woman who has disengaged herself from school prior to pregnancy, is unlikely to want to return to mainstream education directly, if at all, and for her to do so would place her educationally at a disadvantage in relation to her peers.

“I think they could have done so much more to help... One teacher, when I went back to school made me feel really bad for having the baby, he called me stupid. And then they put me back a year, they just decided. I sort of felt like everyone was making my decisions for me. I wanted to carry on in the year I was in. I really hated it, they put me back with students younger than me and with me being in the situation I was, just made fun of me all the time. I left after one month.”

Early on in the process of Reintegration Officers establishing themselves within their LEAs, a common factor has been the recognition that provision needs to be flexible, if we are to expect young mothers to re-engage with education, in particular for those previously disengaged.

The Impact of Reintegration Officers

Preliminary findings suggest that a dedicated Reintegration Officer can help pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers to continue with their education, whether with home tuition, in mainstream schooling, in college or in specialist units, provided that good childcare facilities are available.

In many cases, pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers have responded positively to their Reintegration Officer and shown a great deal of desire to succeed, in part because they want to be able to provide for their child, but also because someone has, often for the first time in many of these young women's lives, shown an interest in their welfare and cared what happened to them. The area where there appears to have been the greatest impact in this way, has been with young mothers who had disengaged from school before pregnancy and had remained disengaged with little effort from the LEA or school to re-engage them, prior to the Standards Fund Grant.

“I did not enjoy school, I stopped going. Then a learning mentor told me about Thomas Danby (FE college) and I went from about my 30th week and then came straight back once the baby was born...I'd rather be there than going to school. I like the things that I do there...If I had not been contacted by them I probably wouldn't have gone back to education. The programme is much better, there's less pressure and you get to talk with people who 'understand'...They're nicer, they help, both staff and other girls... When I first went, I knew it was going to work. I liked it, meeting new people an that, people in the same situation.”

Since the arrival of the Reintegration Officers, teachers noted that now their job is easier, they have a person that they can call as soon as they find out a girl is pregnant. As a result most in most areas, there has been a notable increase in the speed at which pregnant schoolgirls are now being picked by LEAs and discussions about their educational needs addressed.

Schools have also noted that the work that Reintegration Officers (and Specialist Learning Mentors working with Reintegration Officers) have done in schools to help impact upon the attitudes in general about teenage pregnancy has been invaluable.

“For the young women, yes there is a difference, I think in the past, I think the stigma has reduced, the way that Bryony (SLM) has worked has actually been to educate and raise the awareness of staff and the school because that's been a huge problem. There is so much stigma attached to them in society, and I think unfortunately we've had members of staff who've thought – she shouldn't be in school! Or it's their own fault or making moral judgements about them. And I think gradually over this last

year and a half, the awareness and the empathy from staff has improved, much more acceptance, more acceptable. And it's, we're not anywhere near there yet, not 100% perfect, but I think it's really, it's certainly helping. ”

The Impact of Different Educational Alternatives

A key finding of this research so far has been that there is no one form of education or educational alternative that suits all young women or all LEAs. The key answer appears to be flexibility. However, there have been noted improvements in many of the LEAs with regard to the educational alternatives that have been developed as a result of the Standards Fund Grant as well as improvements in attitude and flexibility of schools towards alternative arrangements to enable pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers to remain in school. Below are some of the issues highlighted by teachers, Reintegration Officers and pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers in the areas under study, as good and bad practice with regard to the different types of provision.

Mainstream School

Good practice

- Teacher and Peer support and positive attitudes
- Involving the pregnant schoolgirl/young mother in discussions about her future education
- Acknowledging that it is the young women, not the school's decision when she should go on maternity leave
- Part-time timetables in school
- Teachers being informed by nominated teacher about pregnancy
- Suitable 'resting-room' facility
- Providing extra help with school work as necessary – particularly on reintegration

“It's not a good school for education, not a really high standard school, but when it comes down to teenage pregnancy, they really did stand by me. I stayed till very late in my pregnancy and the teachers were always there if you needed to talk”.

“I couldn't believe how supportive they were, I got the feeling I wasn't the first person that had gotten pregnant! My head of year, she was supportive, and said I could stay on as long as I wanted to and was comfortable and that when it got too much they could organise home tuition. They made me a part-time timetable, so I only had to go in for my key subjects. And when I left just this week, cause I'm due really soon, lots of the teachers gave me work for my break and my media teacher gave an important assignment that the others will get later in the year, so that I can get started over the summer and she said she would help if I was behind when I got back, media's my best subject, and they know I want to do well, so they've been really good.”

Mainstream School

Bad practice

- Negative staff attitudes towards pregnant schoolgirl/ young mother – assumption that life and education are now over
- Discussions about education not involving pregnant schoolgirl/young mother
- Forcing pregnant schoolgirl to leave school on grounds of ‘health and safety’
- Off-rolling of pregnant schoolgirls
- Not entering pregnant schoolgirls/ young mothers for GCSEs when they have missed considerable amount of school time and may affect league tables
- Not allowing water in the classroom
- Not allowing toilet breaks without explanation to whole classroom
- Inflexibility over timetable
- Inflexibility over school uniform
- Being located in a separate classroom to study so as not to ‘encourage’ similar behaviour
- No appreciation of the difficulties of combining motherhood and school

“I’ve had a couple, no, three girls in hospital now, with serious kidney problems. And I think it’s because they are not able to drink enough and use the loo when they like. At the hospital they told me it was a common problem if you don’t get plenty of fluids when you’re pregnant.”

“I know one school where they lock the loos and you have to go and get a key from the office. Well, when you’re pregnant you need to go all the time, so I reckon they don’t drink enough ‘cause they’re worried about not being able to go to the loo.”

“They just said, that if I get hurt then it’s on their backs and basically they didn’t want it. I was annoyed because I couldn’t do my GCSEs. I got my social worker to go up a few times, to try and ask them why, but they just told him the same thing they told me. That if I get hurt or I get pushed about at school then it’s on their backs.”

Specialist units

Good Practice

- Peer support of other young women ‘in the same boat’
- Part-time timetables if required
- Generally not full-time as in school
- Continued engagement with an educational environment throughout latter stages of pregnancy
- Support in preparation for motherhood
- It’s not school

“I just thought it was hard going to school full time, coming home, if a had homework, doing that, looking after her at the same time, so the unit has made things much easier”.

“I don’t know, I think if maybe if I didn’t know about the unit here, I don’t think I would have [stayed on in education], because I had exams and I think I would have thought, I’ve missed that much work... I don’t think I would have stayed at home and did the work that I did here, like by myself.”

“My tutor told me about the unit and I wasn’t necessarily going to come, but then all the pregnancy things... I was tired all the time and then I thought that 2 hours would be easier than 5 cause I used to sleep all afternoon, so I thought – I was thinking that would be better really and then eh.. so she just said about it, so I came to the unit”

Specialist units

Bad Practice

- Unit teachers may not be specialists in the subjects a pregnant schoolgirl/ young mother is studying
- Limited help for those intending to return to study A-levels
- Schools may encourage attendance at unit so as to remove pregnant schoolgirl visibility from school – remaining at school becomes less of an option

“I was behind on a long, really, cause being at the unit there wasn't all the resources I needed. Ann helped by buying like, she got in a book in that I could use. But it didn't have everything I needed and Ann tried to help by helping us with what she knew, but she wasn't specialising in the subject she found it, well not really hard but she couldn't be helpful with everything and I got quite a bit behind.”

Home tuition

Good Practice

In areas such as Northumberland where specialist units are not plausible due to geography, home tuition is an important option.

- School subject teachers providing the home tuition can help keep the connection between the young women and her school
- Many young mothers want time to bond with their baby before returning to school and home tuition can help with this process
- Number of hours per girl can be maximised by combining tuition provision for girls from similar locales, these small groups would then potentially provide the ‘social support network’ valued by girls in unit and college provisions.

“I wanted to stay at home for the first 4 months before returning so that it was me that bonded with my baby not my foster mother and so they arranged for me to have a home tutor for four months and I did.”

Home tuition

Bad Practice

- On average home tuition is offered for only 3-5 hours per week
- Often the tutor is provided by the LEA not from the school
- Cases of tutors arguing over who should provide the education was seen to be over money, rather than with the welfare of the young women in mind
- Some found home tuition to be very basic, an assumption that the pregnant schoolgirl would not be interested in her education
- Young women would only receive home tuition if the school informed the LEA and in one area as many as 50% of pregnant schoolgirls prior to the Standards Fund Grant were not receiving their entitled home tuition

“It was only 5 hours and it was a waste of time, all I did was copy out of books, she was a maths, a specialist in maths, and I’m not being funny but she was, I was more intelligent than her. She sat there, I was 15 year old then and she was sitting there having me learning my two and three times table, she was thick. I think she thought that because I was stupid enough to get pregnant at that age that I was stupid full stop and that I wouldn’t be interested in doing schoolwork. If I had had something better I would have tried harder, I would have, cause all the work that I missed out in school, I couldn’t really do, cause some of the things I needed help with.”

“We have peculiar things go on as well though, we had this one incident where two teachers were arguing over who was going to be paid to do the home tuition for this particular girl and I’m not sure that both teachers had the educational interest of the girl at heart. That surprised me, it was quite a difficult situation really, and I would like to put out guidance about who is appropriate to do home tuition, when and why and by whom.”

FE College

Good practice

- Alternative educational setting, more adult environment than school
- Young women have the option to explore other courses they may wish to continue at college
- Peer support of other young women ‘in the same boat’
- Part-time timetables
- Generally not full-time as in school
- Continued engagement with an educational environment throughout latter stages of pregnancy
- Support in preparation for motherhood (specific course at Leeds)
- Baby-room and Crèche facilities, so young mothers can return as soon as they want
- Childcare facilities actively encourages young mothers to begin to trust paid-for childcare as an option other than family

“Being with people in the same situations, cause sometimes you feel like you’re friends, yeah they try and be supportive because they’re your friends but they still don’t understand and they still judge you a bit. But when you go to Thomas Danby, there’s other people and they know what you’re going through and it’s like other people that are there that are going through the same things, so they’re not going to judge you because they’re in the same situation and it’s good.”

“I really enjoyed it, well being round other young people in the same position, cause I thought I was the only one.”

“If they had rejected school, why not try a slightly more adult environment (FE college) where they wouldn’t stick out like a sore thumb, because there would be other young mothers there, 17, 18, 19 and where you could say, ‘life isn’t over, education isn’t over’, college is a realistic proposition. It was a way forward that had never occurred to them before, it raised their aspirations, raised their self-esteem visibly”.

FE College

Bad practice

None of the young women interviewed had anything negative to say about the college, the main concerns came from the co-ordinator in Leeds and some teachers that because the young women enjoyed the college so much, that those who had been happy to remain in school were perhaps doing too many of the alternative activities at the college instead of staying in school. The co-ordinator noted that it was a case of finding the right balance between school and alternative provisions for those young women who were previously happy at school.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The success of the Government's teenage pregnancy strategy will depend on whether it can achieve the twin aims of reducing under 18 conception rates and reducing the risk of long-term social exclusion for those young women who do become pregnant and choose to keep their babies. There is a danger that this second goal may be neglected in the pursuit of the clear targets for reducing conception rates by 2010.

This paper has reported on one strand of the initiative to reduce social exclusion – the goal of getting more teenage parents into education. Initial findings on the funding of re-integration officers through the Standards Fund Grant suggest that there is much to be gained by the appointment in LEAs of someone with the central task of maximising the continuation in education of “school-age” mothers, but that the success of such a strategy also depends on the availability of a range of alternatives to a return to mainstream education.

Many of the young women we talked to had dropped out of education before they became pregnant and for these young mothers reintegration into schools – and particularly into the school they had already left or been excluded from – was often unattractive. For many of these the availability of a specialist referral unit or a college of education as a point of re-entry offered a genuine opportunity to rethink engagement with education in the light of their changed circumstances and responsibilities. In principle home tuition offered a further option, but the reality was that many schools do not inform LEAs of the need and that often the amount of tuition is very limited. One of the most important findings to date is that the appointment of reintegration officers has encouraged LEAs to develop a more flexible approach to a range of provision, including remaining in schools.

Low educational aspirations and lack of self-esteem are key factors in pre-16 pregnancy in England. These can be compounded by a lack of support for young mothers and for young women who opt for an abortion. Flexible reintegration policies offer hope that teenage pregnancy need not mean an end to education. School-based projects aimed at increasing self-esteem – which had been developed

with the help of the Standards Fund Grant in several of the areas studied - show promise for reducing under-age pregnancies and minimising repeat pregnancies in those who have already conceived. Both approaches can only succeed if they change the culture of schools and the attitudes of staff to young women who become pregnant under the age of 16. Likewise there are many other government initiatives – such as Surestart Plus and the EMA pilots – which could support the developments in schools.

At present most of these initiatives are located in a minority of local authorities, albeit often those with the highest U18 conception rates, as a consequence, a majority of young mothers in England continue to have limited opportunities to re-enter education and remain dependent on whatever pattern of provision happens to have developed in the area in which they live. We would see the extension of the role of re-integration officer to many more LEAs as an important first step in ensuring that the educational needs of all young mothers – especially those who become pregnant under 16 - are made a priority

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