

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

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Abstract

Teenage pregnancy has become a high profile issue in Britain where the Government has set a target of halving the rate of conceptions among under 18s by the year 2010. The SEU Report on Teenage pregnancy (SEU 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.

This paper reports on research funded by the Department for Education and Skills in six areas of England to evaluate the Standards Fund Grant for Teenage Pregnancy. The Fund provides additional finance for Local Education Authorities in areas with high under-18 conception rates to enhance provision for “re-integration” of young mothers into the education system.

Findings suggest that a dedicated re-integration officer can help young mothers to continue with education, whether in mainstream schooling or special units, provided that good child-care facilities are available. However, it has also become evident that the government strategy is flawed in its stress on re-integration into mainstream schooling, as the assumption appears to be that it is always pregnancy which leads to disengagement, whereas in many of the cases of the young mothers interviewed it seemed that disengagement from schooling and low educational aspirations were key factors prior to pregnancy. For these latter young women, re-integration may prove difficult and the alternative of supportive provision of education in a special unit may be more productive.

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Introduction

Teenage pregnancy has become a high profile issue in Britain where the English Government has set a target to reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy by the year 2010, by 50% among under 18s in England. Another of the government's key goals set out in the Social Exclusion Report on teenage pregnancy (SEU 1999) is to get more teenage parents into education, training or employment, in order to reduce their risk of long-term social exclusion.

Both goals are of particular importance for the minority of teenage women who conceive under the age of 16 and 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 two aspects of pre-16 pregnancy in relation to educational experience and aspirations:

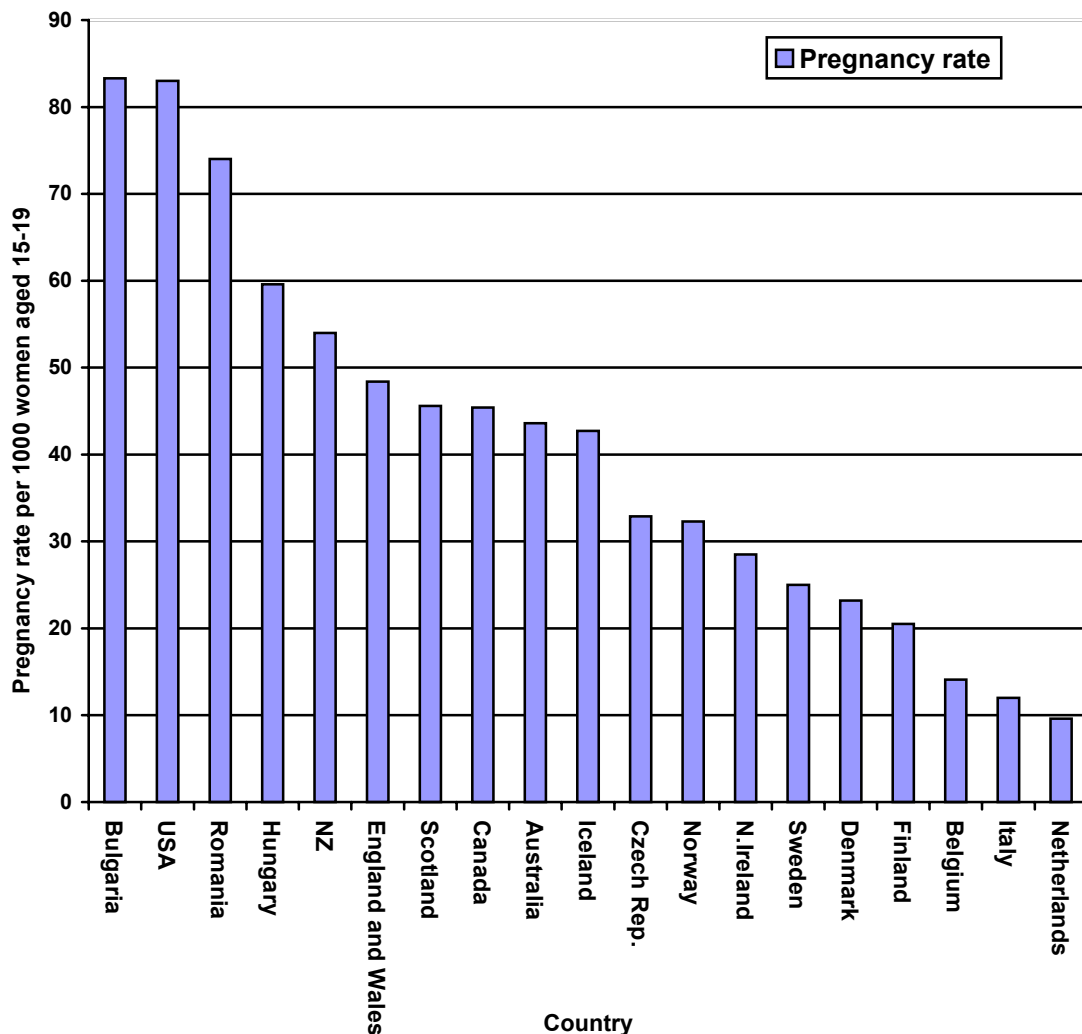
- The impact of low educational aspirations and/or disaffection with the education system on the incidence of teenage pregnancy,
- The impact of teenage pregnancy and motherhood on young women's educational achievements and the influence of a government policy initiative and differing local strategies on the reintegration of young mothers into education.

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

Teenage Pregnancy in the UK

It is now recognised that for the last twenty years, that Britain has had the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in the European Union and that rates are now on par with most countries of Central Eastern Europe. Furthermore the gap between the countries of Britain and other European countries has been widening so that the British pattern is closer to that of other 'Anglo-Saxon' countries such as New Zealand and Australia – and that trends in the 1980s were very similar – albeit at a lower level – to those found in the US (See Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Approximated pregnancy (birth + abortion) rates per 1000 women aged 15-19, 1996.



Source: Singh & Darroch 2000.

The reasons for these differences have been discussed extensively (See Babb 1994; Vilar 1994; Botting 1998; Kane & Wellings 1999; Cheesbrough et al. 1999; Hosie 2001, 2002; Hosie & Silver 2001, Turner 2000) and although they are still not fully understood, international research has indicated that key factors include:

- Socio-economic status, in particular income distribution across society,
- Level of gender equality within society,
- Access to sex education at school, in particular presented in the context of positive prevention strategies,
- Access to sexual health services that meet the needs of young people,
- Normalised expectation of continued education beyond age 16.

Education and Teenage Pregnancy

One relationship that has been established is the link between low educational aspirations and achievement and higher rates of teenage pregnancy (Morrison 1985; Kraft et al. 1991; Moore et al. 1995; Stevens-Simon & Lowly 1995; Luker 1996; Turner 2001). However, the assumption often exists that pregnancy is the reason that young women drop out of school and fail to finish their education. Recent research (See Hosie 2001, 2002), including the research I go on to talk about today (Selman et al. 2001), has begun to highlight that often that relationship is the wrong way around and in fact, it is the case that many young women have either been officially excluded from school or have effectively disengaged themselves from education, prior to pregnancy. For this reason it seems likely, that any assessment of strategies to encourage a return to education would meet complications where disengagement from the school had commenced prior to the pregnancy/birth.

The Standards Fund Grant for Teenage Pregnancy

One such initiative by the English government to help re-integrate young mothers back into mainstream education (school) began in September 2000 and I was involved as part of a team of researchers at Newcastle university to evaluate this initiative. The Grant provided additional finance for 45 Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in areas with high under-18 conception rates to enhance provision for 'reintegration' of young mothers into the education system.

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, Southwark has the highest under-18 pregnancy rate in England and 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 1 gives the conception rates for under 16s and under 18s in the six areas studied and also for Newcastle upon Tyne.

Table 1: Standards Fund Study Areas: 1997-9 statistics

LEA	U18 Conception Rate	Under16 Conception Rate
Durham	54.5	11.1
Northumberland	43.2	7.8
Leeds	52.6	10.6
Newham	61.2	11.8
Sandwell	67.8	13.4
Southwark	85.8	16.3
England	46.0	8.7

Prior to the existence of the Grant, pregnant schoolgirls within the six 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, which usually meant between 3-5 hours per week.

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 a Further Education (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 were monitored using baseline data from before the project on school attendance and achievement. Qualitative data was also collected through in-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

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, 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 Education Welfare Officer 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 attendees 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 (15-16) young mothers who had missed a substantial amount of Year 10 (14-15), 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 became evident early into the research that the government strategy was flawed in its stress on reintegration into mainstream schooling, as the assumption appeared to be that it was always pregnancy that lead to disengagement, whereas for many of the pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers we 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.

For these young women, it has been important for Reintegration Officers to recognise that reintegration into mainstream schooling was 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.

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 young mothers are expected to re-engage with education, in particular for those previously disengaged.

The Impact of Reintegration Officers

The research 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.

Since the arrival of the Reintegration Officers, school teachers noted that now their job was easier, they had a person that they can call as soon as they found out a girl was 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.

The Impact of Different Educational Alternatives

A key finding of this research 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 improvements in 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 – not forcing out on 'health and safety' grounds
- Part-time timetables in school
- Teachers being informed by nominated teacher about pregnancy
- Suitable 'resting-room' facility
- Allowing water in classrooms and toilet breaks without explanation to the whole class.
- Providing extra help with school work as necessary – particularly on reintegration
- Flexibility over school uniform
- Being included in regular classes rather than being located in a separate classroom to study so as not to 'encourage' similar behaviour
- Appreciation of the difficulties of combining motherhood and school

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

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.

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

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 young women 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. One of the most important findings was 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.

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 been developed in the area in which they live. We would see the extension of the role of reintegration 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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