

6. FACILITATING ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY FOR TEENAGE PARENTS: STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF TEEN PARENT PROGRAMS

Our findings make clear that the provision of any vocational education in the context of special programs for teen parents requires difficult decisions and tradeoffs among a number of pressing needs. More difficult still is the provision of vocational education that pregnant and parenting teens are able and willing to use. Program enrollees may not take advantage of vocational education opportunities for a number of reasons, including lack of time, lack of child care flexibility, reluctance to leave the program site, and lack of a clear sense of its importance. Despite strong beliefs among program staff that teen mothers must become economically self-sufficient, they may not push vocational education for reasons of their own, including concerns about interfering in personal decisions and conveying negative messages to teen parents, beliefs in the primacy of parenting education, and sympathy for the many demands young mothers face.

Limited attention in most teen parent programs to these issues and the dilemmas that underlie them reduces the use and utility of vocational education. In the discussion that follows, we explore some of these issues and dilemmas and suggest ways to make vocational education more available and useful to teen mothers.

MEETING LONG-TERM NEEDS IN SHORT-TERM PROGRAMS: PARENTING, BASIC SKILLS, AND JOB-SKILLS TRAINING

The provision of vocational education in resource- and time-poor programs creates dilemmas for staff and enrollees. Although staff would like to provide enrollees with everything they need, providing everything may not be possible. Difficult choices must often be made about what to emphasize and what to ignore. One common choice perceived by staff pits parenting against vocational education. Given limited time and resources, and limited energy and attention on the part of teen mothers, many program staff to whom we spoke believed it unrealistic to try to focus on both. If forced to make this choice, respondents almost everywhere would—sometimes reluctantly—choose parenting. In the programs in which we interviewed, the parenting focus was evident, and in our sample, parenting education activities were featured in every program. Creating competent parents was almost universally found to be a major program goal.

The reasons for the focus on parenting are several. First, program staff are deeply concerned about the ability of young teens—many barely out of childhood themselves—to take care of a baby. They may have babysat younger siblings or other children, but, respondents believe, few are prepared for the enormous, multifaceted responsibilities associated with being the primary or sole caretaker of an infant. Many assert that the risks of child abuse in this population are very high.¹ They particularly worry about those mothers who plan to live alone after delivery.

¹The empirical data on this point are inconclusive. Some studies report better parenting by older mothers (e.g., Kinard and Klerman, 1980), others find no age effects (e.g., Ragozin et al., 1982), and there is some evidence that the relationship, if it exists, may not be linear (e.g., Jones, Green, and Krauss, 1980).

Second, the focus on parenting contributes to the achievement of another common program goal—dropout prevention. Program staff often indicated that parenting material is regarded by enrollees as highly relevant to their lives. Numerous enrollees we interviewed remarked upon the usefulness of the parenting course and child care lab content, and pointedly contrasted the relevance of the parenting curriculum with the irrelevance of past school work.

In a number of programs, the parenting component was quite time-intensive, involving both formal coursework and time in the child care lab. This time commitment to parenting often foreclosed the possibility of other electives, including vocational education. Rarely had the implications of these requirements been discussed.

Nevertheless, the lack of time available for vocational education was rued by many program staff who believe that many teen mothers are recognizing for the first time that they might need to acquire job skills to support their child. A few staff members were concerned that the message that enrollees get from curricula heavily focused on parenting is that this is the *only* component of being a parent that matters. They believed that young mothers need to be taught that being a good parent includes performance in a wage-earning role as well.

Many programs reach an uneasy compromise between the need to impart both parenting and job-skills training by focusing on child development and parenting and providing work socialization material and guidance. Staff in these programs commonly express the hope that once the baby is born and parenting becomes more integrated into the mothers' lives, there would be more time and energy for job-skills training. In the time-limited programs, staff encourage enrollees to plan some involvement in vocational education when they return to regular school. However, few made any concrete efforts to facilitate the transition to such training. In those programs in which teen parents could remain until graduation, this approach often prevailed as well.

A second choice pits basic skill development against vocational education. Staff everywhere believed that integrating basic and job skills training would be ideal. Such integration would increase the likelihood of remaining in the program by providing usable training at the onset, and by reducing the total amount of time required to achieve job-skills proficiency. Recent evaluation data (e.g., Burghardt and Gordon, 1990) suggest that the integration of academic remediation and job-skills training results in more program enrollees working sooner and for higher wages. But such integration rarely occurs. More stringent vocational education eligibility requirements in most school districts have made this goal more difficult to achieve. JOBS programs that refer teen parents back to regular school programs do not contribute to this goal either. Even in community-based programs intent on integrating the two, these efforts have often stalled when teen mothers could not meet even minimal (e.g., 4th grade) literacy levels.

The attempt to address longer-term job-skills training and educational needs within the context of short-term programs is often problematic. Moreover, staff believe that many teen parents are not ready to act on all of their needs while enrolled in the program. For these reasons, it is important to think about addressing the needs of program enrollees over time. Helping enrollees to identify other service providers and to understand how to contact them is crucial to this effort. One way to do this is to formalize links between the teen parent program and other services. Articulation agreements, for example, smooth the often difficult transitions between service providers. Formal opportunities, such as a teen parent scholarship given annually by a local community college in one district we visited, serve to reinforce the message that teen parents are welcome and that support is available.

The programs we visited are moving in the direction of thinking sequentially and in some cases actually providing sequential services. One program in our sample has formally committed itself to establishing support nets of services for teen parents leaving the program. The guidance efforts in all programs are another step in the right direction. One program, with a goal of work-ready graduates, was particularly strong in this area, incorporating guidance material into all course activities and providing a career counselor who ran intensive seminars on career options and training opportunities available in the community. Such clear links to future education and training reduce the costs and barriers to pursuing these activities.

These links should be personalized and behavioral. Personal plans that describe where further education or training will be sought and where child care can be obtained, which agencies can help to finance transport, child care, and tuition, and where and how a job can be sought following employment preparation are ways to facilitate progress. While enrolled in the program, teen parents should be encouraged to work on such plans by contacting agencies likely to be part of achieving personal goals, such as child care providers, counselors at post-secondary education and training sites, and agencies providing financial aid and other single-parent services. The development of longer-term employability plans (Bishop, 1988) would be one way to concretize this process.

In a number of the programs in our sample, students are permitted to remain in comprehensive programs for extended periods and in some cases through high school graduation. In these programs, the limited vocational education offerings that may be both understandable and tolerable in the short term severely limit career training options for long-term enrollees. Lack of explicit efforts to plan for training after leaving the program did nothing to mitigate this problem or its effects.

CHALLENGE OR ACCOMMODATION: RECONCILING TEEN MOTHERS' NEEDS AND LIMITS

The short-term nature of most of the programs that we visited has important implications for the delivery of services to program enrollees during their stay in the program and beyond. In school-based and school-sponsored teen parent programs, the prevailing crisis model obliges programs to provide enrollees virtually everything that they will need to function effectively as students, parents, and adults—all in the period immediately surrounding delivery.

Within the crisis model, vocational education holds an ambivalent place. On the one hand, job-skills training is clearly a part of “everything,” and staff everywhere note its importance for teen parents, as discussed above. On the other hand, limited resources preclude the provision of “everything,” and often vocational education is perceived as one thing that has to wait. Sometimes the wait must occur because there is no program time available, particularly when the program day is very short, or the parenting requirements are time-consuming and continuous. In other cases, staff believe that young mothers cannot handle the acquisition of additional adult role skills at this crisis point in their lives.

Vocational education, after all, deals with life after parenthood, something that many teen mothers have not begun to consider. The struggle to integrate parenting with adolescent and student roles, neither of which many teen mothers were handling particularly well before pregnancy, may tax them to their limits. Staff often believe that introducing job-skills training may push teen mothers too hard. This may be particularly true of the populations of teen parents who choose to

come to comprehensive programs. At this time, when in most places teen pregnancy is far less stigmatized than ever before, the decision to leave one's peers and one's school to come to a special teen parent program says something about the young women who enroll there. Our interviews suggest that many come from very traditional homes, where work for women receives limited support. Most young women enrolled in comprehensive programs to whom we spoke indicated that they had come to the program to get away from peers and find some special support and protection. Staff believe that program enrollees are more frightened, less ambitious, and more likely to feel overwhelmed by their situation than teen mothers who stick it out in mainstream or regular school programs. For these young women in particular, being a teen mother may represent sufficient challenge. Adding vocational education to the mix could defeat them.

This view of vocational education as a source of potential overload contrasts sharply with one of the key functions vocational education is envisioned to serve for other high risk groups: a vital hook that keeps students interested in school when success in academic pursuits is elusive and school seems otherwise irrelevant (e.g., Oakes, 1986b). For teen mothers, parenting coursework and the emotional support provided by teen parent programs appear to serve the functions accorded to vocational education for nonparenting students.² Learning about the coming of a new baby in parenting classes is interesting, engaging, and highly relevant to their lives. Since teen parents have, at least at a behavioral level, accepted the parenting role when they decided to carry their pregnancy to term and keep their infant, parenting education is seen as a means to facilitate performance in that role. Far fewer are clear about their role as worker; for those who do accept that role, it often seems remote.

The issue of overload is a particularly important one for younger teen mothers. Staff everywhere agree that the idea of job-skills training or even work socialization for 13- or 14-year-olds does not make sense. It is not something they would be getting had they not become parents; being in a situation where it is expected of them is counter-productive. This is particularly true when the available vocational education opportunities are provided by a voc-tech center, staff argue. Often, the vocational programs there require the passage of proficiency tests and junior or senior standing; this excludes the youngest mothers.

Two programs we visited accept middle school-aged mothers.³ In one, these mothers are separated from older enrollees and spend their time in a single classroom doing middle school coursework exclusively. In the other, the youngest mothers enroll in a basic skills/remedial education program usually used by voc-tech students as a means of preparing for proficiency exams.

Numerous respondents noted that programming for the youngest teen mothers must take into account their difficult histories. Several program staff members volunteered that very young teen mothers are frequently victims of sexual abuse or other family dysfunction and thus cannot handle too many pressures. Moreover, the long period and many credits that they will need to complete high school, combined with their emotional immaturity, create their own pressures. Re-

²Indeed, some have expressed concern that teen parent programs offer too much support and are thus too appealing. To meet these objections, some programs have established policies that do not permit girls with second pregnancies to enroll.

³The remaining nine programs in our fieldwork sample do not accept these youngest mothers. In most instances, staff reasons for not serving this group include the inappropriateness of the curriculum for mothers this age, the lack of middle school certification on the part of staff, and the lack of resources to establish a separate program for them.

search repeatedly confirms that the likelihood of school completion is inversely related to the age at first birth (e.g., Upchurch and McCarthy, 1989; Mott and Marsiglio, 1985).

These concerns about teen parent overload, combined with limited program resources, often result in vocational education being given “lip service”—important in principle but unstressed in the program. The lack of unambiguous staff support for vocational education no doubt contributes to our finding that even when varied vocational education opportunities exist, few teen parents take advantage of them.

OPTIMIZING JOB-SKILLS ACQUISITION IN A CHANGING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION CONTEXT

In recent years, vocational education advocates have increasingly advocated a model that inculcates generic skills at the secondary level and reserves advanced job-skills training to post-secondary institutions. A major factor in this movement is the enormous cost involved in equipping up-to-date, high-technology job-skills training facilities. Secondary schools lack such funds. Consequently, the job training provided at the secondary level has become increasingly out-moded and of limited use to students and employers.

At the same time, secondary programs have also become more rigorous, in response to the more general push toward academic reform. Research evidence indicating that sequenced vocational education programs are more effective in inculcating usable job skills than individual courses (e.g., Stern et al., 1985) has also fostered a more rigorous approach to vocational education programming in secondary schools. Increasingly, these more rigorous programs require proficiency testing for admission and insist that program enrollees adhere to strict attendance requirements.

The push toward more rigorous and sequenced vocational education may make it less appealing to teen parents, who lack basic skills and are often overwhelmed by parenting and school responsibilities. The likelihood that they will remain in longer-term programs appears poor, given high dropout rates among teen mothers (e.g., McGee, 1988a, Mauldon and Morrison, 1989), although recent evidence suggests that some of the apparent dropout among teen mothers may be a temporary phenomenon (e.g., Mauldon and Morrison, 1989).

Yet the notion of sequencing may in fact be quite compatible with the ways that teen parent programs currently handle vocational education. Many teen parent programs currently sequence vocational education, often by limiting their vocational education focus to work socialization, career exploration, and guidance around these issues. This limited vocational education focus flows from a usually implicit decision to address other needs, mainly parenting and basic skills training, and to avoid the difficulties inherent in attempting to provide meaningful vocational education within the context of a short-term program.

Rarely, however, have programs that have chosen this path recognized and built in the supports necessary to ensure that teen parents pursue vocational or other post-secondary education beyond their time in the program. There are few, if any, efforts made to help young mothers apply the career-related information that they have acquired in the program to scheduling choices at comprehensive high schools or voc-tech schools when they leave the program, and there are even fewer attempts to help them make a transition to post-secondary education or community-based training opportunities.

RETHINKING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION FOR TEEN MOTHERS

New trends in vocational education and the difficulties in providing vocational education to teen mothers in the context of school-based programs suggest that some rethinking of this issue by program planners and vocational educators is in order. A first effort might well involve a careful examination of the temporal assumptions implicit in the vocational education opportunities provided, and how they mesh with the program model. If the program is short-term, for example, and enrollees are never permitted to stay past a semester or two, vocational education might well focus on work socialization, expansion of career awareness, and reinforcement of the message in the parenting curriculum that a good mother is a mother who provides financially for her child. Critical to such an approach would be active longer-term planning and articulation agreements at the secondary and post-secondary level.

However, if the program is long-term either by design or in fact, that is, many students remain for long periods in a “short-term” program, vocational education may need to be different. In this situation, it would be important to look at the graduation rate, and the rate at which teen mothers graduating from the program enroll in post-secondary programs. Sadly, few programs are equipped to make these assessments, lacking as they do long-term data on enrollees’ outcomes. Such information would obviously help program planners to determine whether crisis model assumptions, e.g., that many enrollees drop out of school or do not go on to post-secondary education (immediately or later), held in their population. If they did, it would support the need for job-skills training in the program. However, if teen parents completed school and pursued post-secondary education in large numbers, it might be that job awareness, intensive counseling and planning around the transition to secondary or post-secondary education, and the development of articulation agreements would enable many enrollees to acquire such training after program completion. Such scrutiny would be particularly important with regard to the youngest teen mothers, as discussed above.

It would be critical as well to examine patterns of vocational education use by program enrollees. We learned during our fieldwork that a full menu of vocational education opportunities often does not translate into a high level of use, even when free bus service and coordination with the child care center’s operating hours are available. In several programs providing off-site vocational education services and transportation, no one was currently enrolled off-site, and no one had gone for years. Instead, enrollees took the very limited, isolated vocational education courses available within the program. For all intents and purposes, these off-site opportunities did not exist. Enrollments in courses provided in collocated programs were somewhat higher, but use rates remained fairly low.

In such programs, it would be important to rethink the purpose and priority of vocational education and to examine the nature of the barriers that exist to vocational education enrollment. It may be that enrollees are getting a message that other foci are more appropriate and necessary. It may be that the costs of leaving the program are too high. Or teen parents may be made to feel unwelcome. Teen parent program staff would do well to examine whether their own reluctance to “interfere” in important decisions that enrollees make may be perceived by them as a lack of support for these choices. It may be that interested enrollees simply need a bit of a push for them to make the commitment to leave the program during the day. And if no one goes, it also might be necessary to think about what, if any, additions to the vocational education curriculum the program should offer on-site.

Providing usable and useful vocational education for teen mothers enrolled in special programs is a goal beset by logistical, psychological, and educational problems. It is not, however, an impossible one. Numerous young mothers to whom we spoke were currently engaged in vocational education or job-skills training in or through the teen parent program. Many had both well-defined post-secondary goals and well-defined plans to reach them. These young women benefited from a combination of active family and staff support for these choices, schedules that permitted the pursuit of vocational education, and a variety of options from which to choose. In each case, child care was adequate to accommodate vocational education programs.

The individual successes we observed suggest ways to improve vocational education access and outcomes for all teen mothers. Key to increasing use of vocational education opportunities are adequate child care, making vocational education a program priority, and active staff support for it.

CHILD CARE

The availability of child care is critical to successful involvement in any education or training activities. Funds for child care are often limited, resulting in waiting lists and constrained hours that may preclude enrollments in specialized training programs. The potential of the FSA to increase the supply of child care had not yet been realized in the programs in our sample; use of FSA funds for this purpose would enable more teen parents to pursue education and training.

As noted repeatedly by respondents, the location of child care in most instances dictates the school program in which a teen mother will enroll. Certainly, the location of the major or only child care center serving teen parents deserves an examination in the context of any attempt to expand or realize vocational education opportunities. When the center is located at the site of the teen parent program, a location that makes sense on a number of grounds, it may reduce the inclination of teen mothers to involve themselves in off-site vocational education opportunities.

Such limitations are, of course, inherent in locating the child care center in *any* particular site. For this reason, some consideration of alternative ways to deliver child care services, e.g., family day care satellites closely connected to the teen parent program, might be in order. Decentralized child care would allow teen parents to more freely choose among school programs and would in many cases substantially reduce the costs of remaining in school.⁴

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AS A PROGRAM PRIORITY

Vocational education is rarely a major program component despite widespread staff concern about economic self-sufficiency. Many programs choose to focus on what they see as teen mothers' most pressing needs—self-esteem, basic skills, and parenting. Our data suggest that when vocational education and job-skills training become a formal program priority either because outside funders require it or because program staff support it—use of vocational education and job skills or training opportunities increases dramatically. Although in the former programs such use is certainly encouraged by the realization that the program will be assessed in part by level of use, in the latter programs increased use appeared to flow from simply making vocational education a consensual program goal. The effects of such goals on staff and enrollee behavior can be

⁴The authors are indebted to Fern Marx for her insights concerning this issue.

powerful. In a program where job training was an important program goal and post-secondary education was stressed as the best means of imparting work skills, virtually all enrollees both completed high school and enrolled in post-secondary training.

But even when staff decide that program time must focus elsewhere, vocational education can be successfully promoted. Work socialization and career awareness activities combined with limited shadowing programs may be adequate in short-term programs, if they are paired with active, personalized vocational planning. Articulation agreements, individual employability plans, and explicit, active support for vocational planning may be far more important in the long run in helping teen mothers achieve economic independence than short-term job-skills training. Making the links between limited, program-based vocational education and vocational resources outside the program will convey its importance to teen mothers and facilitate their achievement of their own career goals.

STAFF SUPPORT

Key to any reassessment of vocational education in the context of programs for pregnant and parenting teens is the adequacy and intensity of guidance and staff support. Although teen parent programs pride themselves on the provision of emotional support and self-esteem building, we found that more practical and longer-range support for career planning was often lacking. Rethinking the common hands-off policy with regard to directing students toward vocational education and nontraditional occupations would be a critical first step.

Part of a more active staff commitment to vocational education would involve greater recognition of barriers to vocational education that teen mothers face. A key one is the need to mix with nonparenting students in off-site or co-site vocational education. Many teen mothers are attracted to special programs because they provide support and isolation not available elsewhere. Such young mothers are understandably reluctant to leave the program to take vocational education. In these cases, staff awareness and support might help some young mothers to overcome their resistance, or it might result in the design of a long-term plan for vocational training.

If realistic training options are not available, transportation links are lacking, or vocational education is not appropriate during program enrollment for a teen mother, program staff can encourage later vocational training by using the period of program enrollment to actively promote employment preparation and the exploration of careers. The program could provide aptitude testing and work socialization designed to convince teen mothers of their ability to prepare for and succeed at well-paying jobs.

Staff should also monitor the message that the program sends about vocational education. Verbal support without behavioral backup may leave teen mothers believing that staff think career preparation is of minor importance. Schedules that focus heavily on parenting skills and that include no career planning may convey to enrollees that parenting, and not paid work, is what really matters.

SUMMARY

The provision of vocational education in the context of programs for pregnant and parenting students poses many practical problems as well as some fundamental dilemmas. Program planners'

efforts to provide vocational education opportunities that are truly accessible are often stymied by program structure and the reluctance of program enrollees to assume the costs involved in traveling off-site and mixing with their nonparenting peers. The provision of accessible vocational education is also stymied by widespread failure to examine the assumptions that underlie the mix and intensity of services that teen parent programs provide or to consider the ways in which vocational education fits into broader program goals and activities and temporally into young mothers' lives.

Teen parent programs have taken on a great deal—a reflection of the many pressing needs that teen mothers bring to them. Whether or not these programs can or even should attempt to provide vocational education and if so, what kinds, remains an open question. Much depends on program goals, school district, community and program resources, and the service model to which the program ascribes. But regardless of what vocational education is provided by the program, stronger emphasis on the need for job-skills training at some point, combined with concrete, personalized career planning, would greatly benefit program enrollees and send them an important, if more complex, message about the joys and responsibilities of parenting.