What next for school age mothers?

Emerging issues from a Qualitative Study of the Causeway School Age Mothers (S.A.M) Project

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This study focuses on the views and experiences of young women attending the Causeway School Age Mothers (S.A.M.) project. It also examines the views and opinions of a range of health, education, and social care professionals working at local and regional level. The research found that:

- The model of support provided by the S.A.M. project is vital to young pregnant and parenting women at a crucial stage of their life.
- The emotional, social, and practical support provided by the S.A.M. project was viewed by both the young women and professionals as being equally as important as the educational support provided.
- The S.A.M. project is an example of successful partnership working at a local level and responding to local need.
- The S.A.M. project was viewed by a number of the young women as providing ‘a window of opportunity’ to consider a range of options available to them for the future.
- Most of the participants welcomed the opportunity to re-focus on their education and training needs in order to continue their education beyond compulsory school age.
- Short term funding has lead to insecurity for the project and uncertainty about the future for both the young women and staff involved with the project.

Background

In 1998, in Northern Ireland there were approximately 1700 births to teenage mothers, 202 of these were to young women aged 16 or younger.

Research has highlighted the fact that teenage parents and their children are a potentially vulnerable group. Studies have also highlighted that many of the poor outcomes associated with teenage pregnancy are preventable if the appropriate support services are put in place (1).

Previous research into the lives of young mothers in Northern Ireland has highlighted the lack of appropriate support for compulsory school age mothers (2-4). It is crucial that the support needs of the pregnant teenager and mother are identified and addressed to ensure the future wellbeing of both mother and child. An unintended teenage pregnancy can place considerable strain on the young woman, the father of the child, and on their families. Providing responsive support and preventive programmes has been found to have both short and long term benefits for all concerned. For this reason Barnardo’s has worked in partnership with other agencies to develop this model of support.

About the Study

The study aimed to describe and critique current policies and practice in relation to supporting school age mothers; and to provide a qualitative analysis of the Causeway S.A.M. project. Interviews were carried out with a sample of young women who attended the S.A.M. project, and with representatives from the partner agencies, local policy makers, and senior civil servants.

Current Policies

The key legislative and policy documents relating to teenage parenthood in Northern Ireland are summarised in Box 1.

Limitations of Current Policies

Despite the Northern Ireland Executive’s clear commitment to addressing the needs of pregnant and parenting teenagers as outlined in the Myths and Reality document, to date no central budget has been made available to provide co-ordinated funding for the implementation of responsive programmes as recommended in the report. Government Policy in NI promotes the philosophy of “joined up” responses and support, but in practice the current structure of funding is fragmented, resulting in short term funding and inadequate delivery of services.
The Causeway School Age Mothers’ Project

The S.A.M. project was established in 1998 to support pregnant or parenting women of compulsory school age. Recognising that young women attending the project have a complex set of needs, the S.A.M. project provides school tuition, access to ante-natal and health care, benefit and careers advice, and on-site quality child care. Key elements of the programme are the provision of social support by developing informal peer networks, and providing non-judgemental support and advice.

The S.A.M. project provides a central base whereby tutors deliver education to the young women in small groups. This approach is a cost effective way of ensuring the statutory obligations of the education board are fulfilled. The small group approach also has the benefit of encouraging greater interaction and discussion than one to one support.

The Causeway project is managed and delivered through a partnership between Barnardo’s, N.E.E.L.B., Ballysally Youth & Community Centre, and N.H.S.S.B./Causeway Health & Social Services Trust. Since its establishment in 1998, the project has provided support to 25 young mothers from the Causeway area.

Emerging Issues – Views of the Young Women Attending the S.A.M. Project

Reasons for Pregnancy

- The reasons the young women outlined for their pregnancy included lack of adequate sex education, unplanned intercourse, poor knowledge and/or access to contraception. Pressure from a partner to have unprotected sex or to become pregnant was also reported as being a factor.

Reactions to Pregnancy

- Many of the young women – particularly the younger women - reported delaying breaking the news of the pregnancy to their parents because of a fear of their reactions.

Education

- The participants' previous experiences of education ranged from disaffection to enjoyment and success.
- Most of the young women hoped to continue their education – most wanted to continue at Further Education colleges rather than return to their base school. "I am
learning more here than at school – I didn’t understand what they were teaching me at school”.

Transitions

- The young women reported that the S.A.M. project helped them make the transition from pregnancy to parenthood. The project provided them with space to “be a mother and a person, not the girl who got pregnant”.
- The antenatal and postnatal support provided by non-judgemental staff made a difference, and was appreciated by the young women.
- The childcare provided on site at the S.A.M. project meant the participants had time to adapt to motherhood while continuing education.
- The practical support provided by S.A.M. in the form of careers, benefits and housing advice helped minimise anxieties and enabled the young women to make informed decisions.

Making a difference

- The S.A.M. project has made a difference to all the young women interviewed. For some, the importance was the opportunity to continue with their studies knowing their child was safe and happy, for others it was the chance to be prepare and adjust to motherhood, but all commented on the importance of the social support provided by staff and participants - “Good to meet with others – made me realise I wasn’t alone”.
- The provision of quality, on-site childcare was instrumental in engaging the young women and in their consideration of the project as a realistic option for them at this point in their lives.

Emerging Issues – Views Of The Professionals

Education

- A consistent theme in all interviews with professionals was the need for improved, school based sex education. The issuing and dissemination of Guidance from the Department of Education was seen as a requirement for this.
- While the S.A.M. project has contributed to schools adopting a more positive approach to supporting school age mothers, some professionals commented on the need for further improvements if returning to their base schools is to be a realistic option for these young women.

Childcare

- While all professionals were clear about the need for quality childcare there was no agreement on how, or by whom, this should be funded. Many believed, however, that funding for childcare was the responsibility of Health and Social Services, possibly through the implementation of the Children’s Services Plans.

(2) Profiles of SAM Participants

**Melanie** became pregnant at 14, the third daughter in her family to become pregnant as a teenager. Prior to her pregnancy Melanie had very negative experiences of school and did not wish to return to her base school. Both Melanie and her family reported that the S.A.M. project was the first positive support they had experienced.

**Jane** became pregnant at 15 and attended the S.A.M. during the late stages of her pregnancy. Jane plans to return to school to repeat year 11.

**Susan** became pregnant at 16 and attended the S.A.M. project during her pregnancy. She had prepared to sit 9 GCSEs but the birth of her baby coincided with her exams. Susan did not return to full-time education because of limited childcare support but hopes to attend part-time evening classes. However, this will mean it takes her much longer to acquire basic education qualifications. Susan continues to link with the project for ongoing support.

**Linda** became pregnant at 15. Having attended the S.A.M. project she completed 3 GCSEs and is now attending FE college. She was enabled to do this through the S.A.M.M.I.S pilot project whereby Causeway Trust have provided funding for childcare for her as a former participant in the S.A.M. project. This maximises the benefits of the S.A.M. project in the longer term.

Names and details have been changed but these case studies are representative of participants.
Regional Policy

- Many believed that the recommendations from the Myths and Reality report need to be implemented from the top down and with funding allocated to each level.
- An identified person with responsibility to co-ordinate prevention and support would ensure services were delivered in a ‘joined up’ manner.
- The successful partnership approach adopted by the Causeway S.A.M. project should inform policy at a regional level.
- Some felt that consideration should be given to the support needs of young parents beyond compulsory school age to ensure the benefits of S.A.M. are not lost.

Practice

- A number of professionals felt that the support needs of grandparents and young fathers should be explored.
- The model of peer support provided through the S.A.M. project has been very effective. Ways should be explored of adapting this model to be used in awareness-raising and preventive work with other young people.
- Alternative approaches to education should be explored to widen young women’s options e.g. on-line and distance learning.

The Way Forward

Policy

- Future policy should be informed by the lessons gained from collaborative approaches at a local level. Policy making should be a two way process.
- The effective partnership exemplified by the S.A.M. project should be replicated.
- Detailed guidance for the education, health, and social care of pregnant and parenting teenagers should be prepared, and a funding and implementation strategy agreed.
- In order for inter-agency and cross-departmental co-operation to be effective the partnership element should be stipulated by the Funder.
- Decisions need to be made at Departmental level about who is responsible for each element of the provision, and how this will be managed. An urgent example of this is the issue of responsibility for provision of childcare.
- Provision should be made in a budgetary context for a childcare allowance for all mothers aged under 18 who wish to remain in, or return to, full-time education and/or training.
- Clearer guidance on benefit support is needed particularly for the under 17 year olds.
- Consideration should be given to introducing Education Maintenance Allowance (E.M.A.), a scheme which is currently being piloted in England, to facilitate continued education & training.
- A structure for inclusion of the views and experiences of participants should be developed.

Department of Education, Education Boards and Schools

- Publish and disseminate Guidance on Relationships and Sex Education in schools.
- Publish and disseminate Guidance on the pastoral care of pregnant and parenting teenagers.
- Disseminate the Framework Strategy for the Education of School Age Mothers.
- Disseminate examples of good practice.
- Schools should be required to develop policies on Sex Education and on Pastoral Care of Pregnant Teenage Mothers.
and Parenting Teenagers based on Department Guidance.

- A clear statement should be issued confirming that Health and Safety cannot be used as a reason for preventing a pregnant pupil from attending full-time education.

D.H.S.S.&PS., Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts

- Explore ways of ensuring the needs of pregnant and parenting young women are identified and addressed through inter-agency cooperation and co-ordination. It is important that the current opportunities which exist to provide support through Children Services Planning are maximised.

- Explore issue of responsibility for provision and funding of childcare.

- Consideration should be given to improving information about, and access to, contraceptive services.

- At Regional level there needs to be integration between the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy and the Sexual Health Strategy. At Board level links need to be made with Public Health and Health Promotion.

Practice

- Continue to offer a holistic response to the complex set of needs of this group of young women.

- Barnardo’s and S.A.M. partner agencies should work in partnership with schools to highlight the issues around teenage sexuality and pregnancy.

- Disseminate good practice.

- Support young women to develop supports and resources based on their experience to help others in similar situations.

- Explore ways of ensuring the views and experiences of young women influence both policy and service development.

- Consideration should be given to devising ways of meeting the diverse educational needs and abilities of the participants within and beyond the project.

- Provide I.T. resources so that participants can access additional education resources, maintain contact with the base school, and access flexible, distance learning courses to continue education beyond compulsory school age.

- A strategy should be developed and implemented to ensure follow up support after project.

Research

This is a small piece of research providing a snapshot of one time in a young woman’s life. There is a need for further research over a long period of time which can examine outcomes.

Ensuring good outcomes for young parents

It is the experience of Barnardo’s Young Parents’ Network that if support is to be effective it must attend to the complex set of needs which these young women experience. In practice, this will mean that any future models of support should address the core elements of the S.A.M. model: education, health and ante-natal care, personal development, peer support and childcare. However, unless this vital support provided by the S.A.M. project is continued beyond compulsory school age the successful outcomes of the S.A.M. project may not endure in the longer term.

References:


2. Daly A & Warm D, Assessment of Services for Pregnant and Parenting School Girls in North & West Belfast Belfast, North & West Health and Social Services Trust

3. Davies C, Downey A & Murphy H (1996) School Age Mothers: Access to Education Belfast, Save the Children


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Full report is available (£10) from: Barnardo’s Young Parents’ Network 453 Ormeau Road Belfast BT7 3GQ e-mail: ni.youngparents@barnardos.org.uk