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When Schooling is Not Enough Support, Empowerment and Social Regulation of the Teen Mother in Contemporary Canada

Teen mothers in contemporary Canada face many complex challenges. They are often living in poverty and parenting alone, and are also expected to be working toward completion of their high school education. Some teen mothers are working toward high school completion by accessing specialized community-based organizations offering comprehensive (educational, social, clinical, childcare) day support for themselves and their children. This paper provides a glimpse into the extensive everyday “work” of service providers that goes on behind-the-scenes to help the teen mothers manage the tensions between their maternal role and student/worker role under conditions of poverty. We consider two examples: the popular co-operative education course, which is directly linked to students’ academic work and requires them to gain firsthand employment-related experience out in the workplace; and the day-to-day challenges of dealing with State-funded social assistance caseworkers. By focusing on the intersection of gender, education, and class, we highlight how staff worked with and for the young mothers to help them cope with, participate in, and at times be protected from and regulated by, social contexts that were heavily controlled and shaped by others who had greater access to economic, social, and cultural capital.

Teen mothers in contemporary Canada face many complex challenges. They are often living in poverty and parenting alone, and are also expected to be working toward completion of their high school education. Specialized high school programs that aim to help teen mothers to complete their education recognize the importance of offering multidisciplinary support so they can be successful in school. Some teen mothers are continuing their education by accessing specialized community-based organizations offering broad-based support that is designed to serve their varied needs. This paper provides a glimpse

into the nature and extent of the everyday “work” carried out by staff within one such organization to help the teen mom manage the inevitable tensions arising from her oftentimes disadvantaged social location as she pursues the goal of high school completion.

This research is part of a larger research program, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, that is exploring the everyday worlds of several welfare state organizations implicated in the lives of young mothers. One aspect of this research initiative considers how state supported welfare-to-work education programs operate as sites of potential tension wherein young women’s complex identities as mothers, students, and (future) labour force participants are both constructed and fragmented.

The present paper considers the intersection of gender, education, and class within the context of one specialized community-based organization whose primary mission is to help the teen mother to earn her high school diploma by offering a comprehensive (educational, social, clinical, childcare) day support system for her and her child. The analysis is based on a qualitative case study of one community-based organization in Ontario Canada that provides full-time schooling to approximately 50 eligible young mothers from 16–21 years of age. Over a three-month period data were collected via semi-structured interviews with a range of organizational participants (director; a majority of the teachers and student support workers; mental health counselors, and a sample of students), strategic participant observation, and organizational documents made available to us by the organization. In this paper we limit the focus to two important examples of everyday challenges that illustrate the extensive “work” of service providers that goes on behind-the-scenes to support formal schooling. Our discussion draws from the perspectives of a range of service providers working at the Centre who were most closely involved in the two examples provided.

In this paper we draw from three literature threads: social systems theory, feminist scholarship on classed maternal identities, and neoliberal welfare policies impacting teen mothers’ access to social assistance. A social systems perspective helps us to not lose sight of how life inside the organization is simultaneously separated from, connected to, and an integral part of the larger social environment. Such a perspective also draws attention to how organizational policies and practices created and maintained by social actors construct and manage an organization’s multiple links to its external environment as well as its own multiple goals, diverse services, and core shared values (Hoy and Miskel, 2005).

The analysis is also informed by feminist scholarship on classed maternal identities. In particular, we draw on current scholars who expand the work of French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu by incorporating a more textured gender lens into his treatise on social class as a generative, lived, embodied construct. Bourdieuan theory helps spotlight inequities in power and privilege linked to social class that are sustained through an individual’s relative access to as well

as embodiment and deployment of economic capital (money, property), social capital (valuable social connections), and cultural capital (education, socialization within the family, knowledge, certifications) (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Webb, Schirato, and Danaher, 2002). In the paper we highlight how staff worked with and for the young mothers to help them cope with, participate in, and at times be protected from and regulated by, social contexts that were largely controlled and shaped by others who possessed a greater amount of these forms of symbolic capital.

The paper is also informed by current Canadian work-centred and means-tested social policy that attempts to address poverty among young mothers through welfare-to-work strategies that are intended to help them complete their high school education and become economically self-sufficient. In 1999 the province of Ontario launched the “Learning, Earning, and Parenting” (LEAP) program, a targeted strategy within Ontario Works (Ontario’s employment assistance initiative) that is intended “to help young parents aged 16–21 years old complete their [high school] education and to help them and their children become self-reliant” (Government of Ontario, 2001: 5). As implied by its title, the program supports three broad types of activities: schooling activities, activities that support the development of employment-related skills, and activities that foster successful parenting skills. Some LEAP funding is deployed to provide stable institutional supports that have been negotiated at the broader municipal or organizational level—for example, the cost of running shoes in order to participate in a recognized physical education course or the hiring of a certified educational assistant to enhance educational support. Some funding is also available to individual caseworkers to help the young mother client succeed with her individual service plan and fulfill her obligations to the State.

The two examples presented below highlight some of the “work” involved in helping the teen moms cope with competing urgencies and demands linked to their maternal role and student/worker role under conditions of poverty. Our first example provides a specific schooling example—the co-operative education course; and the second example provides a look at how the Centre helped mediate the relationship between the teen mom and LEAP caseworkers.

Co-operative education courses

A very popular form of academic credit at the Centre was the co-operative education course. It provided firsthand employment-related experience out in the workplace. Unlike other academic courses, co-op courses require Ontario students to be out in the workplace and for an extended time (approximately 200 hours) in addition to approximately 30 hours of class time spent preparing for and debriefing about their placement¹ (OME, 2000). Ontario co-op students receive no pay during their placement; and in many ways, the co-op course serves as a kind of gendered and middle-class apprenticeship into the role of “worker citizen.”

During their in-school time at the Centre, the co-op teacher would support students in completing a range of employment-related activities designed to help them reflect on possible career options more generally, obtain necessary work credentials, create written documents about their capabilities and past accomplishments, and practice interpersonal skills. She helped the students to access and explore career options websites; she brought in speakers working in specific occupations; and she helped the students to obtain their age of majority card and a police record check (for some jobs), and to prepare for a health and safety test. She also helped the students develop personal resumes and portfolios, complete placement log sheets about their work, practice writing thank you notes, and prepare for their job placement interview through role-playing exercises.

The students tended to “choose” placements located in the service industry, for example, in offices, schools, retail stores, daycare centres, hospitals, and within public or third-sector services. They looked forward to being out in the workforce; and they were also always quite “excited” and “enthusiastic” about their upcoming job and the idea of getting dressed up for work. They “exude an aura, they are bright and shiny” as they get ready for their interview, one staff member remarked.

But once the placement became part of the day’s work, tensions could easily start to creep in. Mornings that were already demanding became even more so. Prior to co-op, “just the day-to-day routine is a lot for these women,” a counselor observed. She went on to explain:

A lot of [the moms] have to get up really early to get themselves together, get their child together, get themselves [and their child] on the bus and get to school ... doing what needs to be done every day.... So that’s not an easy thing to do. I can barely get here on time and I only have myself to take care of.

As highlighted above, the field placement component of co-op required students to pay greater attention to their dress and grooming, drop their child off at the Centre, spend additional time traveling to the job, and get to work on time. Also, when they or their baby were ill, they were expected to phone the daycare, the teacher, and the placement. “With the co-op, missing a few days of work without calling in is a big thing; you’re fired,” a counselor explained. Staff tried to “teach them not just to follow through with the school expectations but [also] the work expectations. That’s a heavy load. And that’s difficult for students.” What’s more, being out on co-op meant they were cut off from daily Centre support, for example informal contact with the student support workers, supportive peers, and subsidized lunch. Roberta Hamilton, among others, argues that there is a “fundamental incompatibility between reproductive labour and childcare, on the one hand, and paid work on the other... [and there are] profound consequences of this incompatibility” (2005: 134). In many ways, the teen moms who were working to complete their co-op credits, and

the Centre staff who tirelessly supported them, lived this fundamental incompatibility and its consequences on a daily basis.

Over the years the Centre had also worked hard to reduce co-op planning uncertainties by establishing favourable linkages with cooperating organizations. Students could more easily be placed, and the receiving workers were familiar with and more tolerant of the demanding circumstances of the students. For example, if a student had a problem with body odor or dental hygiene, employers were kind and tolerant. Nonetheless, the co-op placement itself could sometimes still become a source of tension. Some students found themselves in a situation they felt was unfair and unjust and they would quit. Service jobs requiring them to work with the public, for example in a retail store or interacting with the larger community, could create tension. A counselor explained:

When you go to work you're expected to dress in a certain way. And when you [work in] a store, you're expected to dress in ... the clothes [that] the stores sell. They don't have a lot of money to go out shopping for a wardrobe. So that creates problems in the workplace, coming inappropriately dressed. Another problem is a job where they have to interact with the community; [or] if their co-op is in a store, their problem [might be] dealing with clients.... So social skills ... may create a problem for them. Their lack of social skills. So those sorts of things ... they have difficulty with, and that's why they're here; to be able to learn what the expectations are.

The above excerpt spotlights how a seemingly straightforward co-op placement can bring to the surface latent gendered and class-related tensions that need to be managed by the young workers. Research into women's experiences in frontline service work, particularly low-status low-paid jobs, has highlighted the hidden "emotional labour" challenges experienced by female workers (e.g., Paules, 1991; Wharton, 1999). By emotional labour we mean "the effort involved in displaying organizationally sanctioned emotions" by the worker when interacting with clients or customers that is considered an "important component of their work" (Wharton, 1999: 160). Specific to young women, a recent study involving middle-class teen women working in frontline retail jobs found that employers and even customers monitored and regulated the young workers' gender "performance" in ways that sometimes undermined the young workers' sense of authenticity and power (Ahola-Sidaway and McKinnon, 2003). In the present study, the comments by the staff member suggest that the young women may experience similar tensions in their frontline service-related co-op placements. What's more, these tensions appear to be exacerbated by noticeable clues that are attributed to a perceived deficiency in their class status ("inappropriate" dress and "lack" of social skills). Steph Lawler (2005), drawing from Bourdieu's concept of habitus (an individual's embodied and preconscious beliefs, appreciations, dispositions that are both durable and generative), makes this point more generally. She argues that classed femininities become socially

embodied within individuals through our manner of speaking, the way we dress and carry ourselves, our attitudes, and so on, which in turn help confer or (in the present case) deny authority.

For the co-op students, perhaps one of the most cathartic group activities taking place at the Centre was the weekly co-op debriefing session. A staff member described the time as an opportunity to reflect on “the good, the bad, and the ugly.” The tone of the sessions seemed particularly conducive to building trust and sharing challenges. Discussions unfolded alongside relaxing nonacademic activities such as rug making, sewing, doll-making and the like.

Relations with Ontario Works (social assistance)

One of the major stressors for Centre students was the ongoing struggle of living far below the poverty line while trying to complete their high school education. “They’re not making enough money to be able to come to school and live their life ... the holistic approach is very important.... It’s not just about education here,” explained a staff member. Most students were on social assistance, a meager monthly allowance made worse by high rental costs and a waiting list for social housing that was measured in years. Centre students, because they were young parents enrolled in a high school program, qualified for some very limited additional support (through the province’s Learning, Earning, and Parenting Program) to help defray personal schooling-related costs (e.g., additional school supplies, transportation). At the same time, this supplement was not a fixed entitlement. It was instead parceled out at the discretion of the student’s Ontario Works caseworker generally on an ad hoc case-by-case month-by-month basis for a specific purpose that could be interpreted by the caseworker as a necessary positive incentive to foster schooling persistence and successful parenting. This ambiguity made it difficult for the client to know what services the program might support, a finding also reported by Mary Anne Jenkins (2003) involving other young mothers participating in the LEAP program in another Ontario city.

Each student on social assistance had her own Ontario Works caseworker. For its part, however, the Centre had long recognized the importance for its success of intervening in the caseworker-client relationship. It went to great lengths to cultivate a trusting working relationship with the local offices and specific caseworkers; and new students were encouraged to get reassigned to one of these caseworkers. One staff member, who had worked at the Centre for several years, was permanently assigned as liaison. Each week the students were encouraged to prepare their questions for their caseworker prior to her weekly visit to the Centre. Although the student remained the primary contact, this batch-processing strategy meant that Centre staff came to know the caseworkers; it helped local staff stay more aware of tensions; it reduced the number of phone calls by clients to their caseworker; and it reduced the amount of time students would have otherwise spent away from the Centre meeting with their caseworker.

The staff liaison's role involved much more than the time and place coordination, however. The following excerpt highlights the pivotal and complex role she played within this client-caseworker relationship that relied so much on an informal means-tested model:

We have a partnership with [the LEAP caseworkers]. They trust us; I trust them. It's based on individual need, so it's not...cut and dry... it's based on request. There's still things that I'm not 100 percent aware of, but there's still things that we can be questioning and asking for our moms. When a girl...asks "Do you think LEAP will cover it?" I always say, "Just ask your worker; don't be shy; always ask." They will get on the phone and bug and bug and bug. It's a great advocacy skill, [and] if they're asking every month for the same thing, it's going to be permanently put on [as a legitimate form of support].... It can be difficult sometimes [to convince the LEAP worker there is a need], especially since a lot of these moms are so poor... can't make ends meet. So when they ask and they're denied and I really feel it's a cause I could advocate for them, I don't mind picking up the phone and saying, "really, anything you could do for this mum...." Again it's making sure they don't take advantage of the system; but if I know they're not coming to school because they spent their bus pass money on food that month, and they're going to lose their spot here because they're not in school, I don't mind picking up the phone and saying, "Okay, for this month, let's try and help her out a bit more." And I think that's what [the caseworkers] need, another professional working closely with them to make them feel like, "Okay, sure, we'll give them the little bit extra this month."

As illustrated above, being dependent on social assistance meant the teen moms were, to borrow from Amy Middleton (2006), "under the scrutiny and gaze of these external [state] bodies which often view [recipients] as cases" rather than as autonomous individuals (77). What's more, the caseworker appears to have had considerable discretion in deciding whether a request had merit, so much so that even an experienced Centre worker did not feel completely knowledgeable about what would be deemed a reasonable request. We also observe that the Centre staff member had cultivated a privileged social location vis-à-vis the caseworker, allowing her to bridge the class and age divide by serving as a knowledge and power broker between the government bureaucracy worker and the young client. At times she became a compelling advocate for ad hoc client support ("...anything you could do for this mum...") an active coach ("...don't be shy; always ask..."), and even a catalyst for policy change on behalf of the local client population ("...it's going to be permanently put on..."). Notably, she felt that her privileged social location as a trusted professional was authoritative enough to sometimes reverse a claim made by a student that had been disqualified by the caseworker, implying that she was able to find common linguistic and social ground with the caseworker

as a discussion among professionals. Lawler makes this point more generally when she writes:

Speech (authoritative or otherwise) goes on between the speaker and the listener. It is in this relationship... that authority either inheres or fails to inhere. Authority cannot simply be claimed by the speaker; it must also be granted by the listener. This is not a question of individual choice, but of doxic rules [shared core values, beliefs, discourses]: there must be sufficient legitimation granted to the speaker. (2005: 123)

The excerpt also highlights how the staff member served as a kind of first-level monitor and regulator of the LEAP policy by sorting out in her own mind what she believed was a “real” need among clients whom she knew were living in persistent poverty and “can’t make ends meet.” In other words, she had cultivated what Bourdieu calls a “feel for the game” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) or what Terry Lovell calls “the practical sense—the ability to function effectively within a given social field” (2000: 12). What’s more, she had learned, and was attempting to teach the young moms, how to participate in this field of action that operated according to its own sense of inner logic which could oftentimes be quite arbitrary and contingent (McNay, 2000).

Concluding comments

This paper has considered the intersection of gender, education, and class by focusing on some of the everyday challenges facing teen mothers and their service providers within one specialized multi-service community-based centre designed to help the teens complete their high school education. We have considered two examples, one directly linked to their academic work and the other directly linked to their social location as individuals receiving social assistance. Through these examples we have attempted to highlight some of the ways that the Centre and its staff managed important tensions and contradictions as it worked to serve its clientele.

Contemporary Canadian society rests on a work-centric ideology, which in large measure defines good citizenship and social contribution in terms of one’s ability to be financially self-sufficient. This ideology is reflected in high school co-operative education programs that provide students with firsthand workplace experience. It is also reflected in State welfare policies that attempt to manage poverty through means-tested welfare-to-work programs. For teen mothers, and the professionals who serve them, this prevailing ideology introduces numerous tensions that require persistent effort, struggle, and courage. This paper has attempted to offer glimpses into how staff at one centre serving teen mothers undertook this very challenging mission.

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¹These figures are referring to two-credit cooperative education courses. The Ontario Ministry of Education encourages multiple-credit courses “because they afford the additional learning time at the placement that is often necessary to enable students to gain the practical experience and the practice they need to fully achieve course expectations” (2000: 29).

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