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### 'Slappers like you don't belong in this school': the educational inclusion/exclusion of pregnant schoolgirls

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## **‘Slappers like you don’t belong in this school’: the educational inclusion/exclusion of pregnant schoolgirls**

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Policy in England identifies pregnant schoolgirls as a particularly vulnerable group and emphasises the importance of education as a way of improving the life chances of those who become pregnant while young. This paper draws on repeat interviews conducted over a twelve-month period to compare and contrast the stories of four young women. The narratives show that despite a common policy framework, there is great variability between schools in staff attitudes towards and responses to pupil pregnancy which produce different accommodations and support for pregnant girls, and seem likely to produce very different outcomes. We mobilise Iris Marion Young’s five faces of oppression to conduct a second reading of the stories. This situates the specificity of the girls’ school experiences into a wider socio-cultural and economic framing and indicates what might be involved in actually initiating and implementing the kinds of changes that the first ‘face value’ reading suggests are necessary.

**Keywords:** inclusion/exclusion; pregnant schoolgirls; Iris Marion Young

### **Teenage pregnancy and education: the policy context**

The previous New Labour government in England identified pregnant schoolgirls as a particularly vulnerable group. Its social policies emphasise the importance of education as a key means of improving the life chances of those who become pregnant while young (Social Exclusion Unit 1999; Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) 2007a), drawing on research which demonstrates that those who become pregnant while still at school are more likely than their peers to leave school by the age of 16 and less likely to leave with qualifications (Kiernan 1995; Teenage Pregnancy Unit 2005). The combination of lack of educational qualifications and the demands of motherhood is believed to restrict educational opportunities, resulting in poor employment prospects and an increased likelihood of the young mother and her child living in poverty (DCSF 2007a). Pregnant schoolgirls are thus seen as a particularly vulnerable group because of the link between educational failure and subsequent social exclusion for them and their children.

The launch of the national teenage pregnancy strategy in England in 1999 marked the beginning of a focused ten-year campaign to reduce teenage conception rates and increase participation of teenage parents in education, training or employment. One of the four cornerstones of the strategy, ‘better support’, focuses on improving outcomes for young mothers. Linked closely to this cornerstone is the second main aim of the

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strategy – that of getting 60% of pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers into education, employment or training (Social Exclusion Unit 1999). Achieving this target is assumed to help to reduce the negative health, social and economic correlates of teenage pregnancy.

Policy-makers and researchers alike appear to agree about the nature of the challenges that pregnant and mothering teenagers face in continuing their education. Local authorities, for example, have been found to place a low priority on supporting pregnant and mothering teenagers back into education (Audit Commission 1999; Coleman and Dennison 1998). There is also evidence of some pupils being excluded from school, or strongly ‘encouraged’ not to attend because of pregnancy, while others stop attending because of bullying (DCSF 2007b; Harris et al. 2005; Osler and Vincent 2003). Given this kind of evidence it was not surprising that in 2001, in support of the national teenage pregnancy strategy, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) issued guidance on the education of school-aged parents (DfES 2001) which outlined expectations about the education of pregnant schoolgirls and schoolgirl mothers. The intervention was intended to address the low priority afforded the education of pregnant and mothering pupils found among schools and local authorities, and the guidance stressed the importance of local authorities and schools working together to ensure that pregnant and mothering pupils remain in education.

However, local authorities have no *specific* statutory duties in relation to pregnant or parenting teens as is the case with young people permanently excluded from school. They *are* required to provide a ‘suitable education’ for all pupils for whom they are responsible, including pupils of compulsory school age who are pregnant or become parents. They are also required to provide a nominated official for teenage pregnancy – someone whose main function is to facilitate the on-going education of a pregnant pupil and her successful reintegration to education after the six-week post-natal check-up. In principle, this officer should be made aware of all schoolgirl pregnancies within a local authority.

The 2001 guidance for schools stated that pregnancy is not a reason for exclusion and that health and safety reasons should not be used to prevent a pupil from attending. This point is reiterated in other key documents, such as those relevant to managing attendance and exclusions (DfES 2003, 2005; DCSF 2007b). As stated in point 14.4 of the 2001 guidance:

The school should ensure that the young woman continues learning as long as possible up until the birth by exploring all opportunities for curriculum support available. (DfES 2001, 5)

In order to fulfil this goal, schools may refer pregnant girls to alternative educational provision such as a pupil referral unit, or provide work for her to do at home when she cannot attend. In the case of attendance at a pupil referral unit, links with the mainstream school are to be maintained with the aim of subsequent reintegration.

This paper focuses on the way in which this policy is being carried out. In particular our purpose is to contribute to redressing the limited attention paid to educational issues that has been noted within the wider literature on teenage pregnancy, and in particular the limited attention given to the educational experiences of those who are still of statutory school age (Pillow 2004; Dawson and Hosie 2005). We also aim to shift attention away from the pregnant teenager herself to the institutional barriers she and others like her face. In so doing, we take a theoretical stance which provides

analytic links with other groups of pupils alienated by and from their education. We begin by giving some details of the research on which this paper is based, and then outline our theoretical approach.

### **Research in one local authority**

The data on which this paper is based are drawn from a larger doctoral study on the educational experiences of pregnant schoolgirls and schoolgirl mothers. The study aims to deepen understandings about girls' educational experiences and the factors that influence their decision-making, actions, and outcomes. A key aspect of the research involves an evaluation of the relative strengths and limitations of current policy and practice and its connections with other policies which address social exclusion and inclusion.

As participants' experiences and their perceptions of those experiences were central to the study, a qualitative interview approach was adopted (Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Rapley 2004). In-depth, semi-structured repeat interviews (McDowell 2001; Reinharz 1992) were undertaken with 14 young women in one local authority in England between March 2007 and March 2008. Interviews were between 35 and 55 minutes in duration and were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Participants were accessed, with the support of the local authority teenage pregnancy coordinator and the reintegration officer, through a range of educational institutions and services. The local authority concerned did provide a pupil referral unit for pregnant and mothering schoolgirls which could accommodate a limited number of pupils.

Young women were invited to participate via an initial meeting arranged at the educational institution – or in two cases, through the Connexions service.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the research was explained and issues of informed consent, right of withdrawal and anonymity were discussed (Morrow and Richards 1996; Williamson et al. 2005). Information sheets and consent forms were left and subsequently collected. Where participants were 16 years or younger, written parental consent was also obtained.

At the time of the first interview participants ranged in age from 15 to 18 years, with the majority (eleven) aged 16 or 17 years. Nine were already parents while the remaining five were pregnant. Twelve of the 14 participants were still of statutory school age when they first became pregnant. Second interviews had been undertaken with twelve of the original 14, nine had also undertaken a third interview.

The four participants whose stories form the basis of this paper were selected to represent the variation in school response to pupil pregnancy that was found across the wider study. A narrative analysis (Elliott 2005; Hollway and Jefferson 2000) focused on identifying the sorts of school actions that helped a participant to remain engaged in education and those that hindered. Attention was given to both process and outcome and also how participants perceived and reacted to their varying circumstances. All names used in this paper are fictitious.

### **The theoretical approach to educational exclusion**

Much of the work on teenage pregnancy is located within a positivist, medical framework and focuses on the risk factors and adverse outcomes associated with teenage pregnancy. Such work has contributed to the problematisation of teenage pregnancy which is presented almost exclusively in negative terms. The individualised, pathologising

discourses that have emerged from such research have been challenged by some critical feminist theorists. In their work, issues of power, oppression, regulation and normalisation have been explored primarily through a Foucauldian analysis (e.g. Carabine 2001; Geronimus 1997; Luttrell 2003; Pillow 2004). We situate our project with this latter group. We are interested not only in the specific and situated nature of the experiences of teenage mothers in schools and in the workings of policy, but we also want to understand more about the ways in which these educational practices are produced from deeper patterned social workings, those that Canadian feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith dubs 'the relations of ruling' (Smith 1987). We seek therefore to address both the particularity of four young teenage mothers, but also the ways in which their lives and choices are framed by the ongoing processes of the (re)production of gender, race and class through schooling (e.g. Ball 2006; Connell et al. 1982).

In this paper, we bring the work of feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young (Young 1990) to the four stories generated through the research. Young (1990) suggests that 'Social justice requires not the melting away of difference, but institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group difference without oppression' (47). Mobilising insights from feminism, critical theory and postmodernism she critiques a view of social justice which is solely about redistribution. She sees redistributive politics as narrowly focused, ignoring the importance of non-material goods such as rights, opportunities and self-respect as well as providing limited understandings of wider social structural and institutional contexts/structures/cultures. Young refers specifically to the classed and gendered division of labour and the social and institutional (re)production of class inequalities, both of which play key roles in maintaining the status quo. She proposes that unless matters other than the economic are addressed, there can be no pathway to the achievement of social justice in the longer term.

Instead of a prime focus on the economic, Young proposes a view of social justice that places the concepts of oppression and domination front and centre. She suggests that, rather than a theory and politics which 'divides and rules', it is necessary to see the commonalities of experience among and between marginalised social groups and the social relations and practices in which they are embedded. We are aware of critiques of her argument, but in this paper we work with her theorisation in order to see what it might add to other feminist and critical analyses of teenage pregnancy.<sup>2</sup>

Young identifies five different but overlapping practices that contribute to social injustice. These she calls the 'five faces of oppression'. The first, 'exploitation', refers to the ways in which the energies or labour of one group benefits those in power. 'Marginalisation' refers to the ways in which particular social groups are excluded from full and valued participation in society. Those who have little status, authority and autonomy are considered by Young to experience 'powerlessness'. The fourth face, 'cultural imperialism' focuses on the ways in which the experiences, culture, values and ways of thinking of the powerful become normative, so that anything that sits outside is considered 'other'. And the fifth face, 'violence' refers to any form of personal attack based solely on identity or membership of a particular social group. Young argues that these five relations/practices, in varying degrees and combinations, are integral to the experiences of any member of any excluded group and further, that the presence of any one of these criteria is enough to refer to a group as oppressed – or in the rhetoric of UK policy, excluded.<sup>3</sup>

We bring this theorisation to the stories of four young women.

### **Four stories of being pregnant at school**

Focusing primarily on aspects of participant's stories that related to education, four contrasting experiences are presented to examine: how schools reacted when a pupil pregnancy was revealed, what processes and outcomes resulted and how this was experienced and perceived by participants. Key attitudes and school actions that are in-line with policy and which are likely to contribute to a more inclusive experience and better educational outcomes are then highlighted.

All four pupils became pregnant during Year 11. One was a highly motivated high achieving pupil who was taking 14 GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) subjects. Another had lost educational interest and motivation after a miscarriage in Year 10 and was already barely attending prior to becoming pregnant again in Year 11. The remaining two could be considered average students. One had some 'out-of-school' challenges which impacted on her attendance and relationships at school but she appeared motivated to achieve some GCSEs. The other was a regular attender who also wanted her GCSEs. We start with the latter.

#### ***Ashley***

Ashley's pregnancy, confirmed at six weeks, came as a huge shock and her initial reaction was dominated by considerable anxiety. This centred around anticipated negative reactions from others (family, peers, school staff, the wider public) but also on the impact this would have on her education and future employment prospects. Regarding the latter she explained:

I thought, 'I'm not going to get my GCSE's, I'm not going to go to college and I'm not going to get the job that I want to get'.

When Ashley's mother telephoned the school to inform them of Ashley's pregnancy she was told about the pupil referral unit for pregnant and mothering teenagers and it was implied/assumed that Ashley's education would continue there. A meeting with her Head of Year and the local authority reintegration officer was organised at school to discuss options and make arrangements. For Ashley, it was a surprise to find that this was to be her last day at her school. Although she knew that her pregnancy was a point of gossip among her peers, she was not expecting to have to leave quite so soon and would liked to have had the chance to say good-bye to her friends. While in principle, remaining in school may have been an option, in practice, this was not one that the school was keen to support. Health and safety concerns were put forward to justify this stance. As Ashley explained:

Well they said that I could [stay] but they were worried in case anything happened to me because there were footballs being kicked around everywhere and they were scared in case I had an accident.

Ashley got the impression that it was not necessarily her needs but rather potential inconvenience to the school that was motivating the school's reluctance for her to continue with them.

We did talk briefly about [me staying] ... well they preferred me to go somewhere else ... 'cause she [Head of Year] was saying like they'd have to put more effort into me if I was staying there, because of health and safety reasons ... they didn't seem keen on it.



Ashley understood the health and safety concerns of the school but thought that a few simple measures such as leaving class a few minutes early to avoid the crowded corridors would go some way towards minimising these. Lunchtimes were not a concern to her as she left the premises.

The following week, at ten weeks into her pregnancy, Ashley duly started at the pupil referral unit. In-line with government guidance, she stayed on the roll of her mainstream school while at the pupil referral unit. However, once there, her old school made minimal effort to keep in touch, provide coursework or to communicate important information about her GCSEs. This poor communication resulted in her missing out on some essential coursework which ultimately led to a fail in one of the GCSE subjects in which she had had high hopes.

So for Ashley, attendance at the pupil referral unit early in her pregnancy was something she went along with rather than was actively part of. Although she perceived benefits to being there, such as the lower teacher to pupil ratio and less formal structure of that environment, the process of getting there was not an empowering one for her. She was shocked at the end of the meeting at school, to find that she would not be returning. She had no opportunity to say good-bye to friends and perceived considerable reluctance on the part of the school to having her continue. She attributed this partly to the additional effort that maintaining her in school might require although she thought that the health and safety concerns were reasonable. She felt rejected by her school and felt unconvinced that they were genuinely concerned about her education. It appeared that she no longer belonged.

### *Shae*

Shae had a somewhat more tumultuous journey through secondary schooling in comparison to Ashley – but like Ashley, she reported taking her education more seriously as she approached her final years of schooling. At the time she became pregnant, her mother's precarious housing situation meant that Shae was spending 'a few nights here and a few nights there'. She sometimes skipped school and when she did attend, often did not have the correct uniform. A perceived lack of understanding and support for her 'out-of-school' circumstances contributed to conflictual relationships with some teachers.

Shae was eight weeks into her pregnancy when it was confirmed. Like Ashley, she was shocked. She was also initially in denial and she did not tell anyone except her partner for some time. She knew her family would be upset and she was also concerned about the impact her pregnancy would have on her education. When her mother, school staff and pupils eventually found out about her pregnancy through third parties, reactions were mixed. Among her peers there was mostly acceptance while among staff she felt acceptance from some and disapproval from others. In her words, although nothing was said directly: 'You could see it on some of their faces ... like, "you're nothing"'.

In terms of initial school response, the pupil referral unit was seen as an appropriate option. However, after consultation with Shae, her Head of Year was instrumental in persuading the head teacher to support her continued attendance at school until she had finished most of her GCSE coursework. Small but important accommodations such as allowing her to leave class a few minutes early to avoid the crush in the corridor were implemented to minimise health and safety concerns and as her pregnancy progressed, a reduced timetable was suggested to allow her to concentrate on her core

subjects. The same teacher also assumed responsibility for delivering work to the pupil referral unit that Shae subsequently attended and for ensuring that she was kept informed of all examination arrangements. As Shae explained:

She was the one that was like asking the head teacher if I could stay there for a bit longer to do my course work and pushing him into ... like, if I was to stay a bit longer, then when the kids go out for break then make it so that I could go out earlier. And she was the one who got me into [the pupil referral unit] ... and she's the one that comes in now and brings me my work [to the pupil referral unit].

As a result of actions such as these Shae continued to feel part of her school and felt encouraged to take her education seriously. Interestingly, and as Shae was quick to point out, her attitudes towards her education improved on finding she was pregnant. It seemed that the anticipated responsibilities of motherhood resulted in greater determination and motivation around gaining educational qualifications. This is a theme that was repeated by many of the participants in this study. In Shae's words:

I don't think I would have done my GCSEs if I hadn't had Max, 'cause I was skiving, going off with my friends. And now I think, 'it's not just my future, I've got a baby now, I have to care for him'. It's not all about friends any more.

Shae felt very much accepted within her school by both staff and pupils. Among peers, her 'difference' was more a point of interest than taunting. She found the thought of starting in a new centre (the pupil referral unit), where she did not know anyone, daunting but her desire to stay in her mainstream school appeared to be motivated both by her wish to complete coursework and to maintain her friendships.

By the time she was seven months pregnant, the stairs were less manageable and staff suggested that it was time to go to the pupil referral unit. The comments in the excerpt below imply that the decision about when to go was still very much with Shae:

They could see me struggling, 'cause at [school] it's like flight after flight [of stairs]. I had to go to a lesson on D floor, and that's like two flights to get up there each time. And Miss Lawrence ... she'd see me waddling up the stairs and getting out of breath and she'd be laughing at [with] me saying, 'you've really got to go Shae, you can't stay with your friends'.

Shae remained in mainstream until she was more than seven months pregnant, returning to school to sit most of her examinations. In contrast to Ashley, she stayed in touch with friends and teachers and attended her end of year 'prom'. She also felt like she had a genuine choice about educational placement and the timing of her departure from school. In the meantime, the school made accommodations to address health and safety concerns. When she finally left, good communication between school and pupil referral unit contributed to good educational outcomes. The actions taken by the school meant that this pupil continued to feel part of her school and to feel supported and cared for.

These different school reactions could have been influenced by pupil factors. A pupil's behavioural and academic history in a school is likely to influence a school's willingness to invest time and energy in supporting a pupil. In the case of these two pupils however, it was Shae who had the more chequered history within her school – yet it was her school that was more accepting and supportive. Even when she was not physically present in her school, she felt like she still belonged.



**Stacy**

For this pupil, a pregnancy in Year 11 and the school's disapproving reaction and lack of support and follow-up appeared to be a determining factor in her complete disengagement from education. She reported that Years 7 and 8 had progressed well enough and that she had attended regularly. During Year 9 however, she explained that the pressure of SATs and her friendships with older adolescents outside of school contributed to a loss of interest and motivation in school. A pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage in Year 10 coincided with a further deterioration in her attendance and in her relationships with staff. During Year 11 she became pregnant again and was told by the school not to return. According to her school, remaining in mainstream education was not an option – pregnant pupils had to go to the pupil referral unit.

They said we can't have you in school whilst you are pregnant. It just causes too much attention and we don't allow it anyway.

Stacy perceived the health and safety reasons put forward to justify her exclusion as an excuse. She acknowledged the risk associated with crowded, bustling corridors but pointed out, as did a number of other participants, that a female staff member who is pregnant can continue working until late into her pregnancy. She highlighted a further inconsistency – one that suggests unacknowledged and unspoken views about the deserving and undeserving. She explained that she sees pregnancy as no different from pupils with some other sort of difference but who are accommodated in school – and she reminds us that pregnancy is not a contagious condition:

Like when one lad said, 'why do you have to leave?' [And I said], 'Well they say it's because of health and safety ... but I think that it's like an excuse'. If they say that, then why should a kid that's got Down's Syndrome or something like that be allowed in a mainstream school when there's kids who are running past and fighting ... or someone who's broke their leg and are on crutches ... they're still allowed at school. They make exceptions for being like that but not if you're pregnant. ... It's not an illness. It's not like chicken pox that everyone can catch.

Stacy thought that the school response to her pregnancy was more to do with maintaining a particular reputation – a reputation that did not want to acknowledge adolescent sexual activity:

Reputation ... word gets round, like they go to these teacher conferences and some people think it's disgusting [to have a pregnant pupil in school]. Also, it probably looks bad for the school because it's like they're allowing underage sex.

Stacy was informed of the existence of the pupil referral unit, but unlike Ashley and Shae, there appeared to be no liaison with the local authority reintegration officer and no process to ensure an effective transition to this educational alternative. When she stopped attending school altogether, there was eventually some follow-up from a local authority education welfare officer but this was not consistent and did not resolve her situation. Although she remained on her school roll and was sent her examination timetable, incomplete coursework meant she had to drop out of most subjects. For Stacy, an already diminishing sense of belonging was exacerbated by her school's reaction to her pregnancy. As a pregnant pupil, she clearly did not belong in her school.

### **Rebecca**

Like Ashley and Shae, Rebecca's pregnancy in Year 11 came as a shock to both herself and her family. She described being distraught and thinking that this would impact on her plans to go to university. Her mother informed the school and a meeting was convened. Rebecca was initially directed to the pupil referral unit. Her uncertainty about this proposal was confirmed when she and her mother visited the unit and she realised that she would be unable to continue with all her GCSEs. Home tuition was discussed as another alternative but this would only be a few hours a week and again, would impact on her ability to continue with all her GCSEs. What Rebecca wanted was to continue working towards her 14 GCSEs with her friends at her mainstream school.

Rebecca's school was initially reluctant for her to continue but she did not see pregnancy as a reason for being 'sectioned' (excluded). Like Stacy, she rejected the 'pregnancy as disease' discourse that she perceived. It also seems that her pregnancy provided an additional incentive for her to do well in her exams and thus to 'prove everybody wrong':

I said to my teachers and Miss [Head of Year] and everyone that was there [at the meeting], basically, why should I go and do my studying at home just because I'm pregnant. I've not got some disease, I'm just carrying a baby. There's no point in me being sectioned like that. I'm still as capable of doing my GCSEs ... as I [subsequently] proved ... and that's maybe why I did so well, because I wanted to prove everybody wrong. And it took me a lot of persuading, 'cause they weren't happy about it at first, but I did it.

And so, with the support of her Head of Year and Head teacher it was agreed that Rebecca would stay. Interestingly, Rebecca thought the fact that she was a high achieving student and would therefore contribute positively to her school's league table results was influential in the school's willingness to accommodate her desire to stay in mainstream.

Staff reactions were mixed. Rebecca reported that her Head of Year and Head teacher were very supportive, as were most of her subject teachers, 'once they got used to the idea'. However, not all staff were equally supportive and she was the recipient of judgmental comments or looks from some staff and peers. She described a comment from a staff member who was not one of her subject teachers but who was called in to cover for her usual teacher on one occasion. She explained:

He was teaching our lesson and I was just chatting with my partner [classmate] ... I was asking him what he was on about 'cause I didn't quite understand it. That teacher then turned around and said to me, 'slappers like you don't belong in this school'.

Rebecca was understandably shocked and very upset to receive such a blatantly prejudiced comment. She reported not knowing what to do and felt unable to stay in class at that point. While she later suggested that such an inappropriate comment was the exception rather than the norm, her experience is an important reminder that dealing with stigma and prejudice remains a reality for those who become pregnant while young.

Rebecca was the first pregnant pupil at her school who had chosen to remain. The school consequently found itself on a steep learning curve. Despite senior management support, the lack of agreed process meant it was left to Rebecca to inform her subject teachers and request accommodations as and when a need arose. She found

herself having to manage some awkward situations – whether or not working with certain chemicals in science was safe for her unborn child, growing out of her school uniform, having to justify her use of the toilet during a lesson. Regarding the latter she explained:

One thing they did do that was quite decent is that they gave me a toilet pass. But it was only because I brought the issue up, because I needed the loo, and I said to my English teacher, I said, ‘I really need the loo, do you mind if I just nip off for two minutes?’ And we ended up having this massive argument. I really *needed* the toilet and she was like, ‘why do you need to go to the toilet so badly?’

At this stage only a few pupils and a few teachers knew of her pregnancy. This was not the time to announce her pregnancy publicly. She felt frustrated and upset:

I was in the middle of a lesson and I didn’t want to say to her in front of all the people in my class. I didn’t feel ready to tell them all, ‘I’m pregnant, I need to go to the toilet’. You know what I mean? So I just walked out, got my bag and went home.

Rebecca’s advice was that all staff should be informed of a pupil pregnancy by senior management but that it should be left to the pregnant pupil to tell friends and classmates. She also thought that every school should have a school policy which specifies how a pupil pregnancy will be responded to and that this should include when and how staff will be informed, what health and safety implications there might be and how they will be addressed, and how uniform and attendance issues will be dealt with.

Rebecca continued in her school and was in her final six weeks of pregnancy when she sat her exams. She succeeded in achieving all 14 of her GCSEs. As illustrated by a very different outcome for another pupil in the same school, a less assertive and less educationally motivated pupil would have struggled to stay in this school. When Rebecca’s friend Rose became pregnant shortly after Rebecca, she simply stopped attending. For this pupil, pregnancy and the lack of follow up when she ceased attending, effectively meant the end of her formal education. For Rebecca however, there was never any doubt about where she belonged. She knew she wanted to complete her education alongside her friends in the school she had been attending for the last four and a half years. She also believed she had a right to do so. Her challenge was not one of uncertainty, but rather one of convincing others that mainstream education was indeed, where she belonged.

### **Reading stories of pregnant school girls**

This section offers two readings of these four stories – the first is a ‘face value’ interpretation and the second uses Young’s five faces as an analytic lens. We then make some suggestions about the utility of each reading.

#### ***Reading one: at face value***

The most striking feature of these stories is that despite a common policy framework, school responses to pupil pregnancy varied greatly. Both within and between schools these ranged from blatant prejudice and a belief that pregnant schoolgirls have no place in a mainstream school, to a non-judgmental acceptance of pregnancy simply as one more difference to be accommodated. There appears to be a considerable gap

between policy and practice. According to policy, all schools should be responding positively and flexibly to accommodate and include pregnant pupils yet according to the experiences of the young women in this study, an inclusive experience seems far from certain. Even when a school is clearly willing for a pupil to continue, the lack of an agreed protocol can place a student in an unenviable situation.

It is clear from these four stories that in order to bridge the current gap between policy and practice, schools need to respond in a non-judgmental way when a pregnancy is revealed, convey an expectation of continued education and a willingness to accommodate changing needs. Flexibility in relation to attendance, uniform, movement around the school and curriculum requirements are practical ways of demonstrating support and of contributing to a sense of belonging.

Failure to act in these ways results from the school's lack of commitment, inadequate understanding, or willingness to adhere to the principles of inclusion or the guidance offered by policy. Further intervention on behalf of teenage mothers must address these school deficits.

### ***Reading two: Young's five faces***

In terms of school experiences, the four stories have some clear links to Young's concepts of cultural imperialism and violence. Implicit within the 'othering' of cultural imperialism, are views of deviance and/or inferiority. While Young refers to large marginalised populations such as women, Blacks and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people, the notion of 'othering' can equally be applied to groups of pupils within schools whose 'difference' is also represented in terms of their deviance or inferiority. Pupils whose learning, behaviour, physical abilities or first language sit outside expected norms can be considered, using the Young definition, to be oppressed, as can pupils who become pregnant before they have completed their secondary education. Young (1990) suggests that 'the dominant culture's stereotyped and inferiorised images of the group must be internalised by group members at least to the extent that they are forced to react to behaviour of others influenced by those images' (59–60). Three of the four participants in this study mentioned negative reactions from school staff – and across the larger sample, all were aware of their stigmatised status. As Young would argue, the social injustice resulting from this form of oppression is that these pregnant teenagers were deprived of an important non-material good – that of respect.

Young's concept of violence refers not only to the threat of actual physical violence that some social groups live with, but also to various forms of harassment, ridicule or intimidation. She considers this a form of oppression because it is degrading and humiliating and because the violence is systemic – that is, it is directed at a particular individual simply because they belong to a particular group with particular attributed characteristics. So in the example provided by Rebecca, the 'slappers like you' comment was a direct attack on her pregnancy which was equated with divergence from a normative morality: by definition, this norm assumes that teenage mothers have no, or low, moral standards. While the looks, comments or silences noted by other participants in the study were less extreme, they nevertheless were derived from the same gendered norm and can be seen as forms of violence. Young argues that living under such a threat deprives the recipients of dignity.

Young notes that cultural imperialism may intersect with violence. Members of oppressed groups who reject dominant definitions and meanings are more likely to be

the recipients of violence. Rebecca's example provides an illustration of this. If she had not rejected the initial expectation that she would continue her education at the pupil referral unit, and the implication that pregnant pupils do not belong in mainstream education, she would not have been the recipient of the 'slapper' comment. Her resistance to othering escalated into violence.

While all pupils are in a situation where they have less power than their teachers and parents, two of the four stories illustrate particular and more severe forms of powerlessness. Both Ashley and Stacy were not properly consulted about their educational options and had minimal influence over decisions that affected them. They were subject to disrespectful treatment because of the stigmatised status they occupied. By contrast Rebecca and Shae were able to exercise some agency with the support of people with more power in the school context.

The majority of the young women in the wider study are also highly likely to experience Young's first three forms of oppression – exploitation, marginalisation, and powerlessness – not only here and now but also in the future. By virtue of the hair-dressing, beauty and social care college courses that many of them are now undertaking, they will experience exploitation and powerlessness in the labour market as their subsequent employment is likely to be poorly paid, insecure and with limited opportunities for advancement. The highly gendered and classed nature of the UK labour market is supported by a specific welfare and industrial regime which has created a large – and growing – gap between rich and poor (Lister 2001; Hills and Stewart 2005; MacDonald and Marsh 2005). The consequences of their school experiences are thus more than simply social exclusion but are also economic and political.

For some participants, Young's concepts of exploitation and powerlessness also refer to the way in which they became pregnant in the first place. As (young) women they are expected to provide emotional and sexual nurturing to their male partners and also to assume responsibility for contraception. Given gender based power differentials, negotiating the use of contraception may not have been easy or straightforward. Should pregnancy occur, it is their rather than their male partner's education, training or employment that is interrupted and when the baby is born, it is the woman who is expected to assume primary (and in some case total) responsibility for caring and providing for that child. For some participants in the study, this means that they will become reliant on state benefits, at least for a period of time.

This then leads to a further form of oppression – marginalisation. Young defines 'marginals' as those that the labour force cannot or will not use. While in developed countries, the risk of complete material deprivation is addressed through welfare systems, being on welfare means little power, control and choice. Additionally, and particularly in the case of teenage mothers – whose normative public image is of becoming pregnant by virtue of their own ignorance, bad choices or wish to become welfare dependent – they are also subject to cultural imperialism and violence and deprived of respect and dignity. It is not simply in school that they will be thought of and treated as 'slappers'. Young's five faces thus exist not only in the girls' educational present but also potentially in their futures as mothers and as community members and workers.

In this reading, the failure of schools to act positively towards pregnant and mothering teenagers can be seen not only in its specificity but also as the workings out of historically embedded social relations and practices which (re)produce classed, raced and gendered inequalities and injustices. Through this reading, it is possible to get a sense of why it is that schools are seemingly unable to act differently towards teenage

mothers. Acting inclusively for teenage mothers is in reality acting against deeply patterned social structures. ‘Technical fixes’ that focus only on surface issues and events will inevitably struggle against the workings of implicit norms, embedded and embodied modes of behaviour, and deeply rooted economic and political structures and cultures. However, the commonalities of the five faces suggests ways in which teachers, and others who work with pregnant and mothering teenagers, might begin to understand what is happening in this particular instance and also see it as something other than simple causal correlations and instrumental prescriptions.

### **Conclusion: going beyond the technical fix**

Government guidance explicitly states that pregnancy is not a reason for exclusion, nor health and safety valid grounds for discouraging a pupil from continuing. One might well ask why seven years after the issuing of such guidance, schools continue to be so reluctant to encourage and support a pregnant pupil to continue within the mainstream. It is clear from our face value reading of the four stories that in order to bridge the current gap between policy and practice, schools need to respond in a non-judgmental way when a pregnancy is revealed, convey an expectation of continued education and a willingness to accommodate changing needs. Flexibility in relation to attendance, uniform, movement around the school and curriculum requirements are practical ways of demonstrating support and of contributing to a sense of belonging.

Our reading with Young’s lens provides some clues as to what might be involved in doing this. Young argues that social institutions including schools, must move to more just practices via the struggles to understand the five interlocking ways in which social exclusion and inequity are (re)produced. Social justice always requires ways of understanding material realities which go beyond the surface. The implication of Young’s argument is that schools must take on the daunting task of beginning an explicit interrogation of the ways in which they actively (re)produce powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence through their everyday practices, and how, via the workings of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices they bring about lives in which exploitation and marginalisation are writ large. This work begins with listening to the experiences of marginalised students, including teenage mothers, and understanding the ways in which the five faces appear in school practices as similar and dissimilar experiences of exclusion.

Following Young, we suggest that the current policy approach to teenage pregnancy is insufficient. Without generating more deep-seated understandings of the ways in which teenage mothers are shut out of education, policy implementation is likely to be haphazard. Furthermore, commonalities between the experiences of pregnant girls and other marginalised students – all of whom experience variants of the same five faces of oppression – will not be apparent.

The conclusion we draw from our two reading analysis is that policies directed towards socially excluded groups need to do more than simply say what needs to be done. Our face value reading of the stories was necessary in order to see some school practices that did need to be changed. However, the second reading showed what might be involved in taking action. Policy ‘success’ is more likely if there are systematic ways in which teachers can find out about the lives and experiences of the students they teach, and reflect on and discuss dominant normative behaviours and attitudes towards students with differences, mobilising an approach such as that



provided by Young. Achieving social justice is not a matter of changing attitudes and following edicts, but changing understandings in order to address the oppressive structures, cultures and practices of schools.

## Notes

1. Connexions is a centrally funded, locally administered service whose prime remit is to ensure that all 13–19 year olds receive the support or guidance they might need to achieve a smooth transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education or employment.
2. Young's view has been subject to trenchant critique by Nancy Fraser (Fraser 1997a, 1997b, 2000), but the distribution–recognition debate between them has also been reinterpreted by Ann Phillips (Phillips 1999). Her view, and it is one with which we agree, is that both redistribution and recognition are important and in many cases are not able to be easily or sensibly disentangled.
3. The UK rhetoric of social inclusion and exclusion has been critiqued as being too 'cultural' and insufficiently economic – in other words, paying too little attention to the politics of redistribution. Byrne (1999), echoing both Young and Fraser, argues, for example, that the term ought to be 'exploitation' not 'exclusion'.

## Notes on contributors

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