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## ‘It’s the best thing I’ve done in a long while’: teenage mothers’ experiences of educational alternatives

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Pregnant and mothering schoolgirls have been identified as an educationally vulnerable group. Many are not welcomed in their mainstream schools and as a consequence, access a range of educational alternatives. This article presents the views and experiences of 14 young women in the English Midlands, who became pregnant while still of statutory school age, 12 of whom spent time in alternative educational settings. It is based on data gathered from repeat interviews over an 18-month period and shows that all who attended the educational alternatives rated them highly and benefitted from what they had to offer. Using the concept of ‘difference’ as a central analytic theme, the article examines how and why this was the case. The analysis shows that it was through recognising some differences but not others that the educational alternatives were successful in supporting young women’s learning and well-being. Importantly, those that were recognised were done so in non-stigmatising ways. The research also highlights some limitations of the alternatives, alongside the ways in which gender and class continue to impact the educational outcomes and career trajectories of this particular group of students.

**Keywords:** Alternative schooling; E2E; marginalised youth; schoolgirl mothers

### Introduction

Pregnant and mothering schoolgirls are a small but educationally vulnerable group. A consistent finding in research on teenage pregnancy and education is the strong and enduring correlation with poor educational outcomes. Teenage mothers have been found to be more likely to leave school early, less likely to leave with qualifications and less likely to participate in post-compulsory education (Coleman & Dennison, 1998; Wiggins, Oakley, Austerberry, Clemens, & Elbourne, 2005). Keirnan’s (1997) analysis of longitudinal data in the United Kingdom showed that at age 23, 61% of teenage mothers had no qualifications compared to only 26% of those who delayed motherhood. Despite a national campaign and associated policy aimed at supporting educational continuity (SEU (Social Exclusion Unit), 1999), more than one-third of the young mothers who participated in the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy Evaluation (TPU, 2005) were found to have left school before the statutory school leaving age and to experience difficulties in returning to education. Similar trends have been documented in the United States, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom – the four OECD countries with the highest teenager pregnancy rates (see Fergusson & Woodward, 1999; Snow Jones, Astone, Keyl, Young, & Alexander, 1999).

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Research also sheds some light on the reasons behind these findings. Coleman and Dennison's review (1998, p. 312) found that pregnant teenagers and schoolgirl mothers in the United Kingdom lose out 'because of limited resources, rigid policies or outright prejudice against teenage parenthood'. In the United States, Pillow (2004) suggests that lack of clarity within policy leaves local practice open to interpretation and therefore variable. Similarly, practices in the United Kingdom have been found to be variable and to not necessarily reflect the inclusive intent of policy. Teenagers have reported being excluded from school, or 'strongly encouraged' not to attend because of health and safety reasons, while others stop attending because of bullying (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Osler & Vincent, 2003). This, for many, marks the beginning of a more permanent detachment from education. Of those who are not lost to formal education altogether, a good number access some form of educational alternative – some because they choose it and others, because it appears to be the only alternative (Pillow, 2004; Vincent & Thomson, 2010). Understandings about the extent to which such alternatives support better educational outcomes for this vulnerable group of learners are therefore important.

Research that focuses on educational alternatives for pregnant or mothering teenagers is limited but the themes that emerge reflect those found in the wider literature on educational alternatives – namely, that they offer some unique benefits but there are also some limitations. In the United Kingdom, Dawson and Hosie's (2005) research in 10 local authorities, and Rudoe's (2014) ethnographic study of a programme in London, found that alternative provision was successful in re-engaging young women, many of whom had experienced disaffection in their mainstream settings. Rudoe highlights the relaxed and informal environment, as well as attention to students' emotional and practical needs as important factors in this re-engagement. She noted, however, that academic provision was limited and students did not have access to higher level academic study.

In educational alternatives not specifically for pregnant or mothering teenagers, successful outcomes have been attributed to environments that support students emotionally and socially as well as academically (McGregor & Mills, 2012). The smaller, less formal settings, tailored programmes of study and more respectful relationships between staff and students have all been identified as important contributing factors (Fuller & Macfadyen, 2012; Mills, Renshaw, & Zipin, 2013). However, educational alternatives have also been criticised for offering only low-level qualifications that do not necessarily support higher level academic study (Fuller & Macfadyen, 2012; Simmons, Thompson, & Russell, 2014), for overlooking the needs of girls where they are outnumbered by boys (Fuller & Macfadyen, 2012; Osler & Vincent, 2003), and for providing schools with an easy opt-out that removes the need to examine the systemic and institutional barriers that lead to disaffection among some students (Mills et al., 2013).

In their work in educational alternatives for schoolgirl mothers in America, researchers Luttrell (2003) and Pillow (2004) acknowledge the positive aspects of the special provision but are critical of the limited resourcing of separate provision as well as a curriculum that focuses more on the moral and vocational redemption of students than the academic curriculum to which they are entitled. Pillow (2004) rejects rhetoric about the pregnant teenager being removed from the mainstream for her own benefit and safety as instead being primarily for the benefit of the mainstream. This is related to the stigmatised status of teenage pregnancy. Analyses such as those provided by Kelly (2000) suggest that removal from the mainstream is a convenient way of addressing concerns about the moral contamination of other students. Pillow (2004) additionally argues that while educational alternatives may be helpful, they ignore larger questions of equal opportunity and 'do not

address the structural barriers in schools and society that girls face' (p. 222). These are issues that require further attention.

Through examining the views and experiences of 14 young women in the English Midlands, 12 of whom became pregnant while still of statutory school age, this article explores the merits and limitations of educational alternatives for pregnant and mothering teenagers and in doing so, contributes to understandings about a specific group of marginalised learners whose experiences of education have been under-represented in the wider literatures. The concept of 'difference' is used as a central analytic theme. Difference is generally identified through comparison with an accepted norm – a socially constructed norm that is based on the perceptions and unquestioned assumptions of the dominant culture (Minow, 1990). This creates an identified 'other' who is invariably recognised in ways which devalue, marginalise or stigmatise (de Beauvoir, 1953). For example, in the United Kingdom, pregnant and mothering teenagers have widely been recognised as feckless, irresponsible individuals whose ignorance and poor choices are costly both to themselves and society (see SEU, 1999). This contributes to the stigma and oppression experienced by this group. By focusing on institutional responses to pupil 'difference', the article provides insights into how and why the educational alternatives worked for the young women in this study as well the limitations of what they offered. It concludes that it is only by ignoring some differences while simultaneously attending to others that educational participation can sensibly and fairly be supported. Whether in mainstream or alternative education, this approach may equally be applied to other groups of pupils with other 'differences'.

### **The research**

The data on which this article is based is drawn from a larger doctoral study of the educational experiences of pregnant schoolgirls and schoolgirl mothers. It aimed to explore how the national policy of supporting pregnant and mothering teenagers to stay in education was experienced by young women themselves. Consistent with the research outlined above, the educational achievements of the young women were modest. Seven completed Year 11 (the final year of compulsory schooling) with no A–C GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) grades and a further five achieved between two and four A–C grades. Another student had just started Year 11 while the remaining student stood out as exceptional for her 14 A–C grades.

This article focuses on students' perceptions of the educational alternatives they attended. They are derived from in-depth, semi-structured repeat interviews undertaken over an 18-month period in 2007/2008 and supplemented by the views of some of the professionals that worked with them. Over the course of the study, 12 of the 14 young women in the research attended programmes that catered specifically for pregnant and mothering teenagers. A pupil referral unit (PRU) catered for a number of students while they were still of statutory school age and two entry-to-employment (E2E) programmes supported transition to post-compulsory education. A brief description of each setting is provided below. With the exception of *Young Mums To Be* (YMTB), which was offered nationally, all names used for institutions and individuals are fictional.

### ***The PRU: Phoenix***

PRUs are government-funded educational alternatives for those who 'because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education' (DfE, 2013,

p. 3). The statutory guidance (DfE, 2013) does not define ‘suitable’ and the exact programme on offer varies widely from centre to centre, however, the main focus is educational alongside an expectation to address pupils’ personal and social needs. PRUs typically cater for pupils, mainly boys, who are excluded from school but the local authority within which the research took place provided a PRU for pregnant schoolgirls and school-aged mothers. Phoenix catered for around 18 pupils at a time, was well-staffed and incorporated an on-site nursery and two nursery staff. Its primary aim was to support educational continuity during pregnancy and after childbirth by offering students core subjects for the GCSE alongside some vocational qualifications.

### ***Entry-to-employment***

E2E was a national post-16 work-based programme that focused on the development of knowledge and skills for young people deemed not yet ready for employment or other forms of education or training. It was replaced in 2010 by Foundation Learning which caters for 14–19 year olds. Like PRUs, E2E programmes varied from centre to centre. Programmes of study were expected to be tailored to the individual but to include opportunities to gain nationally recognised qualifications, including those in English, Maths and IT, as well as vocational qualifications.

*YMTB* was an E2E programme designed specifically for pregnant teenagers. It offered an NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) Level 1 award comprised of 12 units of study that focused primarily on the skills and knowledge required to manage pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood. It also supported the development of literacy, numeracy and IT skills. *Stepping Stones* was also an E2E programme exclusively for pregnant and mothering teenagers. The exact programme offered was determined by the two staff members who ran it and by the needs and interests of students but in accordance with national guidance, the focus was on improving basic literacy, numeracy and IT skills. Students were encouraged to work towards nationally recognised qualifications such as OCN (Open College Network) or ALaN (Adult Literacy and Numeracy) awards.

## **Young women’s views and experiences**

### ***Benefits***

Across all three settings, and without exception, the young women spoke highly of the centres and they appreciated and benefited from what they had to offer. Much of what they valued echoes research undertaken in other educational alternatives, both those specifically for pregnant schoolgirls (Dawson & Hosie, 2005) and those that cater for other students (McGregor & Mills, 2012). Student experiences in these centres contrast almost point for point with the secondary school experiences they had found most difficult and which, for some, contributed to their disaffection with school. Students valued the greater range of teaching and learning strategies that were used and enjoyed the combination of small-group and individual work, practical-based activities and computer-based activities. Having programmes tailored to their individual needs and interests and being able to work at their own pace were other recurring themes. Better academic support compared to their school experiences and being educated in smaller classes with less formal structures and relationships with staff were also noted as positive features. These are commonly recurring themes in terms of what works with disaffected young people and

are not further illustrated here. Instead, this article focuses on issues specific to students' pregnant or mothering status.

Being able to continue in education and to gain qualifications despite being pregnant or a young mother, was highly valued. This was particularly important given that most of their schools had been unwilling to support their mainstream education. Those who attended Phoenix were able to continue working towards their GCSE in some subjects. Aimee, who had been 'strongly encouraged' to attend Phoenix from very early in her pregnancy, explained:

I really enjoy it here better than school. And I was just really pleased that I could carry on with my GCSEs ... get the same education as I would at school. (Aimee)

Those who attended Stepping Stones and YMTB did not have access to GCSEs but were able to work towards other nationally recognised qualifications. This was especially valued by those students who did not have the necessary credentials to embark on their preferred college programme. As staff at Stepping Stones noted:

The majority have no qualifications, no GCSEs. They've been excluded. Some have been formally excluded and others just haven't been engaged ... low attendance or didn't take their GCSEs for various reasons.

However, it was not just the tangible outcomes such as qualifications that were helpful, but also less tangible factors such as the development of personal confidence. Several students spoke about attempting but failing college courses before attending Stepping Stones but were successful in managing college courses afterwards. Sonia illustrates how it was not only the literacy and numeracy qualifications she gained while at Stepping Stones but also greater personal confidence that had been crucial in supporting her eventual successful transition to college.

S: I think I jumped into it [college] too soon cause I hadn't been in school for about two years. I came back [to Stepping Stones] cause I weren't ready for college.

K: [pause] So what's different for you, going to college now from that first time?

S: I'm more confident now.

She attributed her growing confidence to close and supportive relationships with staff. Other students verified the importance of the strong pastoral dimension in their successful outcomes. What appeared to be important was staff recognising all aspects of student identities in non-stigmatising ways, including the fact that they were pregnant or young mothers. They also conveyed an expectation and belief that they could succeed in education. Sonia's negative school experiences during her pregnancy and after the birth of her child meant that she left school with no qualifications and feeling like an academic and a personal failure. By positively embracing all aspects of their students, including their different choices and circumstances, staff affirmed their students as both capable learners and mothers.

A: I don't mean to sound big headed, but maybe we are the first adult in their lives that's told them that they can achieve, and that we think they are bright ... and that they are good mothers.

J: The conclusion we come to is it's about confidence. They don't get that positive input during their education that actually validates who they are ... and that it's OK to have different choices. (Stepping Stones staff)

This approach helped counteract the sense of failure and educational alienation students had experienced in their secondary schools and helped them feel academically and socially more confident and ready to re-engage in formal education.

Spending time with other people of a similar age and in the same position as them was identified as a key benefit. This was attributed to the centres providing an emotionally safe place where their youthful pregnancies were accepted rather than condemned. Tracy explained:

There's people here in the same situation as you, whereas at the other schools, if you go there and you're pregnant you'll get called a slag and everything and they'll all be looking at you and stuff.

Schools are not necessarily emotionally or physically safe places for pregnant pupils. Research shows that basic needs such as ready access to a toilet are sometimes refused (Allred & David, 2007), and that other forms of fair and respectful treatment cannot be assumed (Vincent, 2012). The less rigid structures of the alternatives made accessing toilets, food and water easier than when they were in school, but students also valued their shared experience of pregnancy and knowing they would not be negatively judged by classmates or staff. Belonging to a group where their circumstances and choices were not met with condemnation or disapproval but rather with understanding and acceptance provided a refreshing change. This was a way of recognising the oppression that each of them had experienced as a result of their youthful pregnancies.

A closely related benefit that featured prominently in student accounts was the importance of social contact. Other research with young mothers has attributed motivation to pursue educational outlets to their being bored at home and needing social contact (MacDonald & Marsh, 2005). My work supports this. Reasons for attending these programmes included: 'I was on my own a lot of the time' (Sonia) and 'I wanted to do something. I didn't want to just be at home' (Lisa). Sarina explained:

If I can get some skills while I am pregnant then that's better than sitting at home doing nothing ... sitting there thinking that the world is crashing down. You get depressed when you're sitting at home on your own.

And as noted by staff.

A: To be honest, a lot of them join us because they want something to do.

J: Yeah, they come because they want to be out of the house and they want to meet some other mothers. And they want to be in a group where they feel they are not judged for being a mother or pregnant. (Stepping Stones staff)

The PRU offered an on-site nursery. This was valued because it allowed young mothers to continue their education, but their babies were also close to hand so they could feed and change them during the day. Having the nursery on-site made it easy for students to get to know the nursery staff and as a result, they had few worries about being judged as inadequate mothers by these professionals. Anxieties about leaving their babies with someone they do not know and about being judged as inadequate mothers because they are young has been found to act as a barrier to accessing childcare and therefore also education (Dench, Bellis, & Tuohy, 2007). The on-site nursery at Phoenix appeared to be a good way of recognising this barrier.

The nursery, that's a big thing. I don't think a school would be able to have a nursery. Like here ... we can see them at dinner time, give them dinner cause it's in the same building ... and we know the nursery nurses quite well.

Issues of identity and changing identities emerged as an important outcome of attending one of the educational alternatives. Seeing themselves as competent and capable mothers, and developing a mother identity which did not mutually exclude other and additional possibilities, were changes noted by students at Stepping Stones.

It's given us all faith in ourselves that we can do both [motherhood and education] and that just because you're young doesn't mean your life has to be based on being a mum all the time. Here [at Stepping Stones] they are telling you that you can also do other things for yourself. (Megan)

Staff achieved this by continuously encouraging but not pressuring young women to undertake qualifications and consider further educational routes. In doing so they conveyed an expectation that gaining additional educational qualifications at Stepping Stones, and then later at college, was both desirable and possible. Equally important, Clare found that attending YMTB helped her re-evaluated popular stigmatised representations and to develop a more positive identity as a pregnant teenager.

I came out with a different attitude ... [before] I was so embarrassed ... I just completely degraded myself when I found out I was pregnant ... and it made me feel a lot better being there.

Other changes in thinking were also noted. Mia spoke about being influenced by peers in a way that adults may have been less successful. Her initial unwillingness to extract herself from a violent relationship with the father of her child resulted in social services involvement. It seemed that it was not so much the two broken ribs she sustained, or even the realisation that she was physically unable to protect her child at that point, but also the subsequent processing with classmates that led her to eventually end that relationship. Discussions with people her own age rather than those in positions of power were instrumental in this. Speaking of Stepping Stones she said:

It's the best thing I've done in a long while. We get to talk about all sorts of things. Like with the domestic violence stuff, most of the girls, they would give me advice, and although they feel like they're telling me off, I don't mind. And adults are constantly telling me things ... and that makes me sort of rebel against them but when I hear it coming from my friends, like what it's doing to my child ... [it is different]. (Mia)

Staff verified Mia's account and highlighted their intentional 'no direct advice' stance.

No matter how we may feel about it, we don't say 'you've got to finish with him' or anything like that but we'll give clues or suggestions, 'oh, have you tried it this way' or 'have you thought about this or that?' Our focus is giving them the ability to think for themselves and decide for themselves what they want. And if at the end of that, they get rid of that bloke who's been kicking shit out of them then it's their choice. (Stepping Stones staff)

Their non-authoritarian approach and the more equal relationships between teacher and learner represents a different power dynamic than that typically found in students' mainstream schools. This has been highlighted as an important component in the success of other educational alternatives (Connell, 2013; Mills et al., 2013). This approach conveyed



messages about competence and was a way of recognising the young women's abilities to assume greater control and responsibility in their lives.

Megan suggested that an additional advantage of this form of specialist provision was that staff have an understanding of their broader lives and the ways in which the responsibilities of motherhood may complicate a smooth educational passage. She explained:

They're understanding here. You're all here because you're either pregnant or a young mum and you're all going through the same experiences whereas a normal college, the fact that people don't understand that you've got a baby at home, so if she's teething and you've had a really rough night of it ... or she's got chicken pox and she can't go to nursery, they're not going to be ... well they might be understanding but I think that it's a lot easier at a place like this.

An inflexible stance towards pregnant and mothering students was noted by staff at Stepping Stones and has been highlighted in other research (Allred & David, 2007; Vincent, 2012). A teacher at Stepping Stones spoke with some frustration about this lack of flexibility. She observed that schools often do not recognise that being a mother has obvious implications for what else can reasonably be expected, but she and her colleague pointed out that this was equally true of some further education colleges.

It seems to be very inflexible ... just from what the girls have said when they've come to us. If they did have their baby when they were 14 or 15, there just doesn't seem to be that much flexibility within the school system. They seem to have a five day or no day approach rather than saying let's do three days with you where you do this, this and this and see how it goes. (teacher at Stepping Stones)

Several mainstream teachers spoke about the need for a flexible approach and this was reflected in their school practice, as illustrated by the part-time arrangements made for one student who returned to her mainstream school after having her baby. All three educational alternatives accepted late arrivals or early departures from class when a medical appointment could not be scheduled out of class time, alongside non-attendance when a child was ill. Unfortunately such practices do not seem to be widespread. The flexible approach to attendance and progression rates adopted by the educational alternatives was an effective way of recognising the additional demands resulting from being heavily pregnant or the mother of a young child.

### ***Limitations***

As well as benefits, the young women identified some limitations of the educational alternatives. These related to restricted curricula access and uncertainties about the relative merit of alternative qualifications.

Shae explained that she was unable to continue with all her school subjects when she moved to Phoenix, and the extra-curricular activities she had enjoyed were unavailable. She did not frame this aspect of her new educational setting as a disadvantage but rather, spoke about it in a matter of fact way, and appeared to be grateful to continue her education there, even if the curriculum was limited. Interestingly, within the local authority, Phoenix was promoted as a centre that offered individually tailored programmes and encouraged the completion of nationally recognised qualifications. In reality, the limited staff numbers and expertise understandably placed considerable restriction on the breadth

of the curriculum to which students had access. Although not explicit, one reading of Shae's words is that the student is made to fit the system rather than the other way round.

I didn't have many because [at school] I was doing loads of things ... maths and history and science. [At Phoenix] They had to fit me a timetable that was more up to them. So I had to finish expressive arts. I couldn't do that anymore because they don't have that. I was doing PE ... and I couldn't do that anymore [laughter]. And I was doing the choir at school and they don't have that sort of thing ... so just little things like that.

So Shae's educational experiences became more restricted once she began attending Phoenix. Both Luttrell (2003) and Pillow (2004) highlight this as a problematic aspect of the American educational alternatives they studied. In the United Kingdom, two of the higher achieving teenage mothers in Simmons et al. (2014) research on youth transitions found that the educational alternatives they attended only offered qualifications at a lower level than those that the students had already attained. Access to these alternatives kept them in education but did little to support their future employability. Rebecca, who chose not to go to Phoenix, was the only participant who perceived the limited curriculum as a major disadvantage.

I was talking to some of the girls that went there, and they were doing like a maths and an English GCSE. I was doing manufacturing and French and history and geography, as well as maths, English and science. You can't do the GCSEs you want to do.

She was also the only student to remain in mainstream education throughout her pregnancy. She insightfully suggested that her status as a high achieving pupil who would make a positive contribution to her school's league table results was influential in her school's willingness to accommodate her desire to stay in mainstream education.

Yeah, but I think part of that was because I was going to get good exam results and everybody knew that ... so it's good for him [the headteacher] because his league tables look higher.

The pressure on schools to perform in particular ways makes them less willing to work with particular pupils. The high-stakes testing regimes associated with neoliberal reforms have rightly been criticised for working against inclusive education (Connell, 2013).

A related issue was the type of qualifications to which students had access. All three centres offered NVQ, OCN and ALaN awards. Almost all students were working towards one of these, and as noted earlier, valued the opportunity to acquire qualifications while they were pregnant or alongside their mothering responsibilities. In some respects, this is a positive outcome. These qualifications are nationally recognised and thus offer a constructive way of supporting educational continuity. They enable students who have difficulty with mainstream school, or whose strengths are not academic, to demonstrate skills in other areas and to gain a sense of achievement as well as formal qualifications. Gutherson, Davies, and Daszkiewicz (2011) international review of educational alternatives found that accreditation can give a sense of achievement and thus help raise student self-esteem and motivation. In my research, the qualifications that some of the young women gained also provided an alternative route to further education for those without GCSEs. However, student accounts highlighted some important issues with regard to these.

One emerging theme was that of confusion about qualifications and the progression routes they offered. Seven participants expressed uncertainty about what qualifications they had gained and at what level. Many were also unclear about the equivalence of what they had achieved to other nationally recognised qualifications. This exemplifies an issue raised by Thomson and Russell (2007). Alternative education providers in their research offered GCSEs (but not usually many) alongside a range of vocational qualifications. As the authors noted, 'young people were often left to themselves to try to manage the complexities of getting equivalencies of qualifications sorted out' (Thomson & Russell, 2007, p. 23). They found, as did some of the young women in my study, that some OCNs or GCSEs were not enough to access preferred their college programme. Although Shae had some GCSEs, her college choices were limited because they did not include English and Maths. She was unable to access an A Level course and so started a lower level business course instead.

Cause of my four GCSEs, there weren't many courses going that I could do . . . and when he said [what about] Business, I thought I'm fine with that.

Several of the young women were influenced by other people's views of what is appropriate for them. Clare and Lisa were directed into hairdressing NVQs when their pregnancies resulted in them discontinuing their mainstream education. This influenced their subsequent college choices. As Lisa explained:

I would like to do other stuff, but like that's all I know really . . . hairdressing. I was gonna try and do midwifery, but that's a long course, and I've always liked interior design and that sort of thing . . . I can see myself going more down the hairdressing line though. (Lisa)

Some of the professionals expressed frustration about the students' gendered college course choices.

They all want to be nursery nurses, hairdressers and beauticians' (teacher at Stepping Stones)

This is a long-standing issue that has been highlighted in numerous feminist studies (Leathwood, 2006; Tinklin, Croxford, Ducklin, & Frame, 2005) but seems resistant to change.

Two participants reflected on the relative value of the alternative qualifications to which they had access. Sarina, who was attending Stepping Stones when I first met her, was sceptical about the value of the OCNs and ALaNs she had completed, particularly with regard to how future employers might view them. She was also clear in her view that those students who were still of statutory school age (admittedly, a small minority at Stepping Stones), should really be studying for GCSEs. And as a student with only two A–C GCSEs, she would like to have had an opportunity to retake her GCSEs while at Stepping Stones but staff were not qualified to offer this.

You can do an English OCN. It's not a GCSE but it's equivalent . . . but I don't think an OCN stands for very much. When people ask you how many GCSEs you've got, you can't say 'well I've got one in English because I've got an OCN' because it's not the full course. And here, like, they do OCNs on yoga. You couldn't go like to a yoga place and say I've got my level one OCN, I'd like a job. (Sarina)

Other participants also placed particular value on GCSEs or thought that not having them would limit their college options. These accounts resonate with those offered by the young people in Fuller and Macfadyen (2012) study who viewed the vocational qualifications

they were working towards as second best. The authors make an important point when they conclude that, 'Only when traditional and non-traditional educational routes have parity can vocational courses be seen as an option that is not just for educational under-achievers' (p. 99). This issue was recognised in a major review of vocational education in the United Kingdom which noted that while many students benefit from vocational education, 'between a quarter and a third of the post-16 cohort is fed a diet of low-level qualifications, most of which have little or no market value' (Wolf, 2011, p. 7).

### **Making sense of benefits and limitations: the recognition and non-recognition of difference**

The research found that all who attended the educational alternatives rated them highly and the accounts above illustrate aspects of the provision that young women believed enhanced their academic achievements, and for those who were disaffected, made it possible for them to re-engage in education. Important insights into how these positive outcomes were achieved can be gained by considering which differences were recognised in the educational alternatives, and which were not. The noted limitations of the educational alternatives can similarly be understood through an analysis of which differences were recognised and which were not.

A crucial factor underpinning the positive experiences of participants was that staff adopted a positive (non-stigmatising) recognition of the difference of teenage pregnancy/motherhood. That is, there was no judgement conveyed about how they came to be pregnant or about their decisions to continue with a pregnancy at their age. This contrasted with many of the responses received from participants' schools, medical professionals and the general public. Finding themselves in the company of other young women who had similar experiences of oppression was also important and seemed to work as an antidote to the shameful and shaming ways that pregnancy had been responded to in other parts of their lives. Within these institutions, expectations about regular attendance and about working towards nationally recognised qualifications were the same as for any other student and conveyed the message 'you are a pregnant/mothering teenager but you can still complete your education'. In this respect, pregnancy or motherhood *per se* was irrelevant (non-recognised).

At the same time, each of these institutions adopted a flexible response to differences related to the embodied nature of pregnancy or the additional responsibilities of motherhood. In contrast to their mainstream schooling experiences, students in all three educational alternatives had ready and unquestioned access to toilet facilities. This recognised the need to use a toilet more frequently during pregnancy. The on-site nursery at Phoenix made it easier for young mothers who may have been reluctant to leave their baby for long periods of time or with someone they did not know, to do so. At Stepping Stones, staff encouraged regular attendance but simultaneously accepted non-attendance or late arrival when the demands of motherhood had meant a sleepless night or when another engagement, such as a medical appointment, took priority. The recognition of these differences helped support educational continuity by conveying feelings of respect and care that had largely been absent in young women's mainstream schools.

In addition, there were some non-pregnancy/motherhood-related differences that were also recognised in these institutions in non-stigmatising ways. Again, these contrasted with participants' school experiences. All three specialist alternatives had a low teacher to student ratio and provided flexible, tailored programmes of learning with additional academic support available if needed. These learning environments were also

characterised by closer, less formal and more trusting relationships with staff. These factors have long been recognised as integral to successful outcomes in educational alternatives (Thomson & Russell, 2007). The messages conveyed through these arrangements included 'we recognise that past educational experiences may not have been positive', 'we recognise that some of you may have learning gaps or need additional support with your learning' and 'we recognise that not all students learn and progress at the same pace'. Implicit within these messages was the assumption of academic success and progression for all students. The effect of these non-stigmatising forms of recognition and non-recognition was an increase in educational confidence and motivation. This may go some way to explaining why the young women rated them highly with most suggesting that they achieved more at these alternatives than they would have if they had stayed at school.

At the same time there were other differences that remained largely unrecognised within these institutions and which, albeit not necessarily immediately, may well have a detrimental impact on young women in the future and in the meantime, unintentionally reinforce rather than challenge stigmatising individualistic discourses. Like the educational alternatives in Luttrell (2003) and Pillow's (2004) research, all three institutions were characterised by an uncritical and primary focus on educational qualifications and future employment. Few questions were asked about the type or level of qualification gained or the extent to which this would support or inhibit subsequent life chances and choices. Such non-recognition reinforces the assumption implicit within policy (see SEU, 1999), that for young women in their position, qualifications and employment are the route to social and economic salvation and also that motherhood on its own is not a real or valued occupation. This stance fails to recognise the unpaid labour associated with the domestic and caring responsibilities undertaken primarily by women (Gillies, 2007) or any representation of this work as socially useful (Duncan, 2007).

Similarly, this perspective also fails to recognise the intertwined and deeply rooted relationships between gender, class, educational outcomes and the labour market. The hairdressing, beauty therapy and social care courses that participants invariably undertook (or planned to undertake) were unmistakably gendered while the OCNs and NVQs they acquired will facilitate access to further education, but not higher education. Both of these outcomes will tend to lead these young women into lower paying and less secure employment with limited opportunities for progression. Lisa could not have been clearer in her statement about her choice of hairdressing: 'I mean, I would like to do other stuff, but like that's all I know really'. While Stepping Stones stood out as unique in at least broaching some wider social issues, the non-recognition of issues of class and gender meant that the PRU and YMTB continued to perform the same normalising function as participants' schools by supporting meritocratic myths that locate success or failure within the individual. These issues are, of course, not limited to educational alternatives but operate across the education system.

## **Conclusions**

This article began by highlighting the poor educational outcomes experienced by pregnant and mothering teenagers and has aimed to provide insights into how three educational alternatives supported educational continuity for this vulnerable group. This is important because many mainstream schools remain reluctant or unwilling to do so. In line with previous research with teenage mothers in the United Kingdom (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Rudoe, 2014), the research found that the educational alternatives were rated highly by young

women and offered some unique benefits. They provided supportive, nurturing learning environments that were successful in rebuilding students' academic confidence and achievement levels. This was particularly valued by those who had left school with few academic qualifications or feeling like academic failures. The educational alternatives also helped rebuild young women's moral integrity and to help them feel better about themselves as pregnant or mothering teenagers. They offered an antidote to the shame that many of them had internalised on becoming pregnant at a young age. Identities were shaped and young women were supported in assuming greater control and responsibility in their lives. These findings support a case for maintaining educational alternatives such as those described here.

The analytical focus on institutional responses to student 'difference' showed how these outcomes were achieved. By recognising (responding to) some differences while not recognising (responding to) others, the educational alternatives were able to support students' personal circumstances. Differences that were recognised, such as those to do with the embodied nature of pregnancy, were done so in non-stigmatising ways; a student's status as a pregnant or mothering teenagers was not seen as a problem. This analytical approach has wider application. Parallels may be drawn between institutional responses to pupils who become pregnant and pupils with other differences. Those who do not fit, for whatever reason, are seen as not belonging and are effectively excluded from mainstream education in one way or another. Little thought is given to changing institutional structures or systems to accommodate difference and individual deficit discourses are used to define those who do not fit as a troubled or troublesome 'other'. Whether in mainstream or alternative education, more affirming educational experiences will be supported through considering which differences institutions need to respond to and which to leave unrecognised. This requires examining taken-for-granted assumptions that construct particular students or groups of students in stigmatised ways.

The limitations identified by the young women in this study in relation to the curriculum and qualifications they were offered, mirror concerns raised in other research with young mothers as well as those with other learners who find themselves in educational alternatives. Educational pathways matter and the type and level of qualifications gained can have negative future consequences for young people (Simmons et al., 2014). If the social justice imperatives underpinning educational alternatives are to be achieved, then current structures would need to be changed so that educational alternatives offer pathways that are valued by all young people as well as prospective employers. It is also important to recognise that what is most helpful for one pupil might not be most helpful for another. At Stepping Stones, Sarina wanted to be able to do the GCSEs she missed through her disrupted schooling but this option was not available. Other students there were glad to undertake vocationally orientated qualifications. So whether in mainstream or alternative education, better outcomes will be promoted if students are offered viable alternatives of equal value and given access to a range of curricula, qualifications and support. Better long-term outcomes would also be achieved through greater recognition of broader social issues, such as those related to class and gender, and the impact these have on educational trajectories and outcomes.

### Notes on contributor

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