Research & Evaluation of the Young Parents Education Program 2019 – 2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Young Parents Education Program (YPEP) Learning Hubs provide pregnant and parenting young people, aged between 15 and 21, with an opportunity to complete their education through studying the VCAL (Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning) in a supported and inclusive learning environment. The South East Region of Melbourne has been profiled by the City of Casey, City of Greater Dandenong and Cardinia, as an area of disadvantage. Communities in this region (Cities of Casey, Cardinia, and Greater Dandenong) have recorded low rates of Year 12 completion (16.9%) when compared to the greater Melbourne area. Added to this, census data reveals that the region is home to 1100 young parents (aged between 15 and 21 years of age) (ABS, 2016). Teenage parents present as a vulnerable population and are at risk of becoming socially, economically, and culturally disadvantaged. This report explores factors that contribute to the experiences of young parents within a tailored education program (YPEP), which sought to re-engage them into education and retain them until completion, while also supporting them in their parenting role. As such, it attempts to break the cycles of disadvantage for young parents.

This evaluation utilises a mixed-methodology approach, primarily drawing on qualitative data but also a complementary quantitative survey instrument. This method was valuable in understanding how all of the various stakeholders including the collaborative partners and administrative staff, educators, and the young parents in the Program perceived the Program. Interviews were conducted with the collaborative partners, administrative staff, and educators. The young parents in the Program participated in focus group interviews. Data arising from the interviews were analysed using the process of identifying and coding characteristic patterns or themes emerging (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2009). Thematic analysis of this nature allowed for the identification of specific concepts to guide future iterations of the Program.

Five significant, overarching findings emerged from the evaluation. Firstly, it was important for each student to develop a sense of belonging through the prioritising of individualised support and programs. Secondly, it was evident that the Educator Team occupies a key role in the success of the Program; that they should have a strong knowledge of the VCAL, that they should be flexible with regard to understanding the needs of each parent and the impact this might have on their schooling. Thirdly, the educator should also possess an appropriate understanding of factors that support student wellbeing, as the creation of a nurturing environment is vital for this unique student population. Fourthly, the success of the YPEP depended also on the role of the Early Parenting Support worker. This individual offers knowledge relating to essential parenting skills, nutrition for babies' health, self care and the vital role of mentoring. Finally, the location of the YPEP is also important; it must have ready access to public transport and other services, such as wellbeing support, housing, and welfare advice. On-site resources such as space for the child to sleep, high chairs, cooking facilities, were also important. Underpinning all of these recommendations is the commitment from leadership at the location of the YPEP, for example, the school principal. They need be a strong advocate for the Program, visibly championing those involved, ensuring a sense of belonging for young parents, enabling appropriate resourcing and general support.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In the South East Region, there are 1110 (Census 2016) young people with parenting responsibilities, many of them without family or other supports to assist them with continuing their education and obtaining a Year 12 qualification. Without this benchmark level of education, young parents will find it difficult to compete equitably in the labour market, thereby increasing the likelihood of welfare dependency, homelessness, lower levels of health and wellbeing, etc., together with their baby's life chances being severely impacted in a negative manner. The Young Parents Education Program (YPEP) Learning Hubs provide inclusive learning for young parents that increase the possibility for them to re-engage with their education and work toward obtaining an equivalent Year 12 qualification. The YPEP Learning Hubs commenced operation in 2015 in Cranbourne (this was a site established as a trial for the YPEP and closed but will reopen in 2022), with a site opening in Narre Warren (Foundation Learning Centre - FLC) in 2018 and a site opening in Dandenong in 2019 (this site closed in 2020. This site was also established as a trial for the YPEP). A site located at Hallam Senior College opened in 2020.

This qualitative and quantitative study sought to understand how the various stakeholders, including students, teaching staff, and administrative staff experienced the YPEP intending to understand the needs of young parents enabling them to reengage with their formal education, how the YPEP supports the reengagement of young parents with education and what is needed in the education programs to ensure engagement and retention. Surveys were distributed and individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with teaching and advisory/administrative staff involved with the Narre Warren Foundation Learning Centre site and the Dandenong site during 2019, and Terms 1 and 2 of 2021 with those involved with the Narre Warren Foundation Learning Centre site and the Hallam Senior College site. Focus groups were held with the young parents.

The South East Region (SER) has low rates of Year 12 completion illustrated in statistics noting that just 16.9% of young people in Casey, Cardinia, and Greater Dandenong Region (GDR) have completed Year 10 or less. In the light of this, this research report intended to identify effective ways of providing education to young parents and to consider learning opportunities that could become a central and integral aspect of learning in the SER through the establishment of a regional education framework for young parents. This aligns with the clear direction articulated by the Australian Government in its Work Transitions (http://education.gov.au/school-work-transitions) initiatives, that recognises the importance of education and encourages 'young people to complete school and successfully transition to further education, training or work'. This research will document the experiences of young parents in the South-East Region, as they re-enter their education at a YPEP site, understand what is important in developing successful educational programs for young parents who return to education, and inform the development of this and future programs in Victoria and beyond.

Since first involvement with the Young Parents Education Program in 2015, Monash University researchers have sustained a strong commitment to YPEP, through conducting interviews, surveys, running literacy workshops to support the parents in developing their child's literacy skills, membership of the consortium, and through both formal and informal meetings with staff involved at all levels of the Program. Data has been gathered at all sites, including those at Foundation Learning Centre (Narre Warren), Dandenong Skillinvest, and Hallam Senior College. This report summarises the findings of this research.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Returning to a mainstream school can be an intimidating experience for pregnant or parenting teens. They may be surrounded by other teenagers whose concerns may seem inconsequential or trivial, relative to those of teen parents. Many are likely to experience marginalisation, feeling the awkwardness of stares, and fielding inappropriate comments. These young parents need support to re-engage with their education to ensure that their future aspirations can become reality. The rate of teen pregnancy in Australia is decreasing, with births to teen mothers dropping between 2006 and 2017. The majority of these teen pregnancies occur in women living in remote areas, who come from socio-economic disadvantage or identify as Indigenous (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020). It has been noted that there is a cyclical repetition, that those from disadvantaged backgrounds fall pregnant, embedding the existing disadvantage regarding the educational and financial opportunities of these young women. The teenage pregnancy rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is almost eight times higher than that of non-Indigenous women and it is also higher for young women in rural and remote areas and those who have been in out-of-home care. If intervention is not available for these women, the outcomes for the mother and child are poor, including educational attainment, poverty, physical and mental health, homelessness, child protection services, and issues with the law (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020; Pinzon & Jones, 2012; SmithBattle, 2007). The support provided for young parents has been neglected in terms of policy and practice in Australia (Beauchamp, 2020).

Teenage mothers have traditionally been perceived with negativity, with expectations that the pregnancy and birth of their child will only lead them to a pathway of becoming welfare recipients (Ellis-Sloan, 2018). The outlook is negatively positioned for both mother and infant and is regarded as problematic for society (Ellis-Sloan, 2018). However, there is emerging research around the transformative impact of having a child on the life of the teen parent (SmithBattle, 2018). The stereotype that their educational aspirations and their lives are 'derailed' by becoming a mother are widespread, and yet if these teens have family support and access to community support there could be a minimal disadvantage for the teens (SmithBattle, 2018). While these expectations and aspirations may not correspond with those of their non-childbearing peers, they have been increasing over recent decades, yet what they may encounter is 'role conflict' which relates to the duality of their roles as a parent and as a student (Carlson, 2016). While mainstream schools may be inclusive and supportive, they may not be able to address the very particular requirements of the young parents. Their educational needs may require programs that support them academically and also in terms of accommodating their parenting requirements with mentoring programs that offer a tiered level of support, from academic, to social and emotional, parenting skills, and general life and career skill development (Lin et al., 2019; Rowen et al., 2005).

In SmithBattle's (2005) 12-year longitudinal study conducted with 16 teen mothers, she discovered that the birth of a child to a teen mother was not a predictor of their future and for many, it was a chance to reboot their life and work to address previous layers of adversity and become caring mothers, but this does generally require interaction with others supporting them, whether that be a partner, parent, health care nurse or a teacher. These people can have discussions with the pregnant or parenting teens about their future plans, dreams, and goals and encourage them to pursue these (SmithBattle, 2002; SmithBattle, 2005). This support 'when combined with long-term support, advocacy, mentoring, and linkages to resources, creates and sustains new horizons and connections' (SmithBattle, 2005, p. 845) and it is these elements that need to become the necessary layers in an educational program for parenting teens.

Hindin-Miller (2018) describes the school she helped to establish in New Zealand for teenage parents. She acknowledged that pregnancy can be a turning point for girls to 're/assemble' their life (Hindin-Miller, 2018). The school and the early-childhood centre were physically connected so the young mothers could see and hear their children playing. This assisted the communication with child-care workers and helped with breastfeeding, time with babies, and settling of the babies. Transportation was organised to assist the girls and their babies to travel to and from school and social workers were employed to support the young women with issues such as alcohol and drugs, relationships, finances, housing, legal advice, and advocacy when dealing with a number of agencies. Healthy meals were provided and food was often shared and prepared by the young mothers. Dental services and medical checks were also provided. There was a low student-to-teacher ratio and each young parent had an Individual Learning Plan (ILP), which outlined their career aspirations. The school offered regular secondary school educational subjects as well as some tertiary-level programs. Other co-curricular programs were offered, such as sports, cooking, and crafts. Outings were organised with the young parents and their children, relatives were encouraged to join and guest speakers were often invited. They also were supported to complete their driver's licence and first-aid certificates. It was about the holistic nature of the young women and the support they required and by 'challenging and transforming conventional school practices' including supportive relationships with teachers and other staff members, and the time with other young women and children, the re/assembling of these girls' identities emerged through this 'context offering positive narratives about who they could become as young women, as learners and as parents' (Hindin-Miller, 2018, p. 260).

The school became a home away from home, sometimes a safe haven.

These programs not only support these young women with attaining their educational aspirations, but it also has broader implications, obviously for the parent and child, but also society (Basch, 2011). These programs are likely to become a conduit for these young parents to find meaningful employment and ensure a better future for both themselves and their children. Intervention programs can be successful in supporting young parents and their children. For these programs to be successful, they need to ideally start during their pregnancy. Additionally, they should adopt a multi-disciplinary and multi-generational approach, build resilience, ensure the accessibility of services, address transport and child care barriers, be culturally appropriate and attend to the physical and mental health needs of the participants. The stigma of accessing welfare services needs to be removed. Young parents need to have social and peer support and a safe place for this to take place. If the young mother does not return to education within six months after giving birth, there is an increased likelihood of another pregnancy within two years (Department of Social Services, 2017). An analysis by the Department of Social Services, suggests that 79 percent of young parents will be receiving income support payments in 10 years and 57 percent will be receiving income support payments in 20 years (Department of Social Services, 2017). Further, 'around 16 percent will remain on income support for the rest of their lives' (Department of Social Services, circa 2017, p. 7).

The establishment of the Young Parents Education Program (YPEP)

In researching the provision of a supportive educational program for young teenage parents, the research team considered what was needed to support pregnant and parenting teens. Of significance was the need for a safe and supportive school environment, such as that outlined by Hindin-Miller (2018). Traditional schools often do not provide helpful and practical support, such as academic support, health care, child care, and counselling, and their educational needs may be neglected (Roxas, 2008). The background to the establishment of the YPEP was that two pilot programs supporting young parents were operating with short-term funding and the South East Local Learning and Employment Network (SELLEN) was approached to find a solution. SELLEN brought together stakeholders from education, early childhood and development, and local government to consider a long-term sustainable approach. The Young Parents Education Program (YPEP) began at Cranbourne Secondary College as a pilot project. This Program in Melbourne's southeast region offers pregnant and parenting young people with a program that re-engages them into education by offering a flexible learning environment. They are able to have their babies with them until the child is able to walk or is 12 months of age (whichever comes first). As part of the course offered to students, they are able to undertake a Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) course, offering them a pathway to post-school options. Other stakeholders support the Program by providing expertise to enable these young parents to continue their education and to be more prepared as parents. Parent Support is on-site at all times, so while babies remain the responsibility of the parent, the Parent Support worker assists with feeding, changing, settling, sleeping, and modeling.

The Program offers young parents the opportunity to access support and advice from a range of experts about parenting, early childhood development, financial literacy and counselling, mental health, wellbeing, legal, housing, and more (https://sellen.org.au/ypep/).

The establishment of the YPEP Learning Hubs at three sites in the region, is supported by a consortium of committed stakeholders (listed below alphabetically) from education, early childhood development, parenting, health and wellbeing, local government:

Centrelink, Chisholm Learn, Engage, Connect, City of Casey, City of Greater Dandenong, Community College, Gippsland Department of Education & Training Regional Office, Foundation Learning Centre, Hallam Senior College, Headspace, Monash Health, Monash University, Oakwood School, Our Place, SELLEN, and Windermere.

This partnership provides expertise across multiple areas, informing the educational and support programs that will encourage the return of young parents to school, where their babies are cared for, where they engage well and complete Year 12 education while learning about parenting (https://sellen.org.au/ypep/).

YPEP commenced in 2018 at the Foundation Learning Centre (FLC), Narre Warren, a community-based education and human services organisation offering a range of courses. As with the Cranbourne YPEP, it provides pregnant and parenting young people the opportunity to complete their education in a flexible learning environment. Students are able to bring their baby to class, and a qualified childcare support worker is on-site during classes to assist with care. Students undertake a VCAL course, available at the Intermediate and Senior levels. The curriculum includes classes on developing work-related skills, personal development, literacy, and numeracy. Integrated within these subjects are skills and knowledge relevant to young parents. FLC is located in a local community learning facility, overseen by a Registered Training Organisation (RTO). The facility hosts a number of engagement and support programs for at-risk youth with the YPEP situated in an adjacent building. This means there is a level of privacy, reduced noise, and space for the necessary equipment while still allowing for easy access for staff and students. Importantly, the facility is located next to a train station and near major bus routes. There is also an onsite childcare facility.

The student population in the YPEP at any site has a rolling enrolment – students enrol at any time of the year, they may pause their attendance around the birth of their child and are able to complete their certificates at their own pace (subject to VCAL standards and guidelines). While the Program is open to young parents of any gender, no young fathers have yet enrolled. The Program supports students to obtain their Year 12 certificate in VCAL as well as a Certificate II or III in their chosen Vocational and Education Training (VET) course. Students attend their VCAL classes three days a week in a flexible learning environment with their babies and VET courses once a week. In addition to their Year 12 Certificate, students also learn about parenting skills and how to support the literacy progress of their babies. While all staff contribute to this learning, there is a focused session on early attachment facilitated by a qualified practitioner once a week. The Early Parenting support worker is critical to the flexibility of the learning environment, and much of the VCAL content and assessments are tailored to further support the learning needs of the young mothers. Each student has an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) to support them in obtaining their qualifications and "includes consideration of factors such as wellbeing, career planning, parenting, living arrangements, relationships, legal advice, maternal-child health, mental health, learning needs, support networks, study history and any other factor specific to each student" (Student Induction Booklet, 2019, p. 4).

The site at Hallam Senior College was established in 2020. It is located within the school and pregnant and parenting young people (15 to 21 years) are able to complete their education through studying the VCAL in a supported setting where babies attend with their parents (until walking or 12 months old, whichever comes first). There are no onsite child-care facilities for children older than 12 months or who are walking. The curriculum is co-designed with young parents and incorporates parenting skills and knowledge. Students attend four days per week, including VET studies, with flexible start and finish times. Students are able to access the physical and human resources located within the school that are available to all students enrolled at Hallam Senior College.

At the time of writing this report, YPEP sites at Cranbourne and Dandenong had closed, although the Cranbourne site will be reinstated in 2022 at Cranbourne Secondary College, which has new leadership and culture, as well as good links to public transport and community hubs. YPEP participants will have access to the physical and human resources located within the school that are available to all students enrolled at Cranbourne Secondary College.

Purpose of the evaluation:
This research report documents and evaluates the YPEP Learning Hubs and will systematically examine, collect and analyse data associated with YPEP activities, characteristics, and outcomes using quantitative and qualitative data to draw conclusions about effectiveness, make improvements and inform future YPEP development decisions.

The Evaluation will clarify:
- Does YPEP support young parents to obtain or work towards a Year 12 equivalent education?
- Does YPEP assist young parents with transitioning to parenthood?
- How does the YPEP model support the achievement of a Year 12 equivalent and transitioning to parenthood?
- What can YPEP Learning hubs do better to engage young parents and offer a genuinely holistic education program?
- What is needed for YPEP Learning Hubs to be sustainable?

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION	RATIONALE
Recommendation 1 The provision and retention of an Early Parenting Support worker	**Rationale** The Early Parenting Support worker plays a vital role in supporting the educator but importantly, also in supporting the young parents. The Early Parenting Support worker provides care for babies while the young parents are completing schoolwork, but also acts as an advisor and mentor, providing crucial support to the young parents about parenting.
Recommendation 2 The adoption of a team-teaching approach to reduce the toll on educator	**Rationale** Educators in the YPEP have the role of education, getting to know the student, individualising each student's program, and leading them to success in their VCAL/VET studies. There is also a well-being aspect to the role of the educator that every educator encounters. Often, the lives and the needs of the young parents and their children can override educational priorities and the educator is compelled to manage these needs, even if this is generally not their area of experience, qualification or role. This can take an emotional toll on the educator, so a team-teaching approach where more than one educator is involved with the YPEP at each setting, would work to relieve this toll.
Recommendation 3 Access to human, support and financial resources	**Rationale** Services such as counselling, financial management, career advice, and first aid could be included in the overall educational package for young parents. With these services readily available, the educator would be able to prioritise education and the young parents would have easy access to these essential human resources to support them in times of crisis or to assist them to develop and work toward future career goals. These service providers would be trained in their specific field and be able to bracket their role and support and provide professional advice.
Recommendation 4 The provision of a flexible and responsive learning environment that caters to the needs of the parents on a day-to-day basis.	Each young parent is likely to have unique learning needs, alongside their individual personal needs. These both are pertinent factors in ensuring that the young parents are able to engage with their educational program. Therefore, it is essential that they have a 'living' individual learning plan that is developed with them and relevant personnel, is implemented, monitored, evaluated, and is continuously evolving. This also fits within the guidelines of the Department of Education and Training Victoria, as young parents would be identified as requiring extra learning support for students with additional needs (https://www.education.vic.gov.au/parents/additional-needs/Pages/disability-learning-support.aspx). An individual learning plan would form the basis of personalised instruction as their needs will vary. The young parent's needs vary for each individual but also within each individual and for successful engagement in the YPEP the learning environment must be flexible and responsive to each young parent's needs

Recommendation 4 – cont.	on an ongoing basis. This also ensures they have that sense of belonging within the YPEP.

Recommendation 5 The provision of facilities that are appropriate to the daily requirements of the young parents, including the provision of onsite childcare.	**Rationale** Appropriate space is required so the young parent can have sufficient room to put their child to sleep and a separate and yet close space for the babies to be in, while the young parent is working, so as not to cause too much disruption to their studies. On-site resources are also important, in terms of access to high chairs, cooking facilities to be able to heat baby food or to teach nutrition for babies, and space for prams. Onsite childcare is recommended for those children who are walking or over 12 months of age. This will enable the young parent to feel that their child is close enough to them to ensure they are comfortable and able to engage with their studies, but also to allow them easy access to their child in breaks and for breastfeeding or feeding.

Recommendation 6 Locating the Learning Hub close to public transport and community hubs The provision of facilities that are appropriate to the daily requirements of the young parents, including the provision of onsite childcare.	**Rationale** Most of the young parents are not able to drive as they are not yet 18 or do not have the financial abilities to purchase a car. If their child attends the YPEP with them they often need to catch public transport with the baby and are often encumbered by the paraphernalia of prams, baby bags, etc. If the child is in childcare, the young parents usually enrol the child at a centre close to the YPEP and they have them on public transport with them. This can impact the young parents' engagement with the YPEP, as it can become overwhelming; while the YPEP is supportive if the access to it is not, it impacts attendance.

Recommendation 7 The provision of professional development for educators and collaboration between centres and other similar organisations	**Rationale** Educating young parents is complex and requires specific professional development for the staff to ensure they are fully equipped to support the educational needs of the young parents. Educators will also need to be prepared to accommodate for the wellbeing aspects that will arise, to know the parameters of their role, and understand the role of the referral agencies crucial to the success of the YPEP. They will also need support to encourage the engagement and retention of the young parents in the Program. Collaboration between young parenting programs within the YPEP and other similar programs enables sharing of ideas, debriefing, and problem solving, leading to the development and implementation of best practices.

Recommendation 8	**Rationale**
The adoption of small class sizes	The optimal learning environment involves small class sizes. This allows for highly personalised learning and also ensures space for the babies and their related equipment. It creates the sense of belonging that these young parents require and ensures their feelings of comfort within the Program. It also encourages their ability to form important connections with other young parents to normalise their experiences as a young parent and a student.

METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

In this evaluation the researchers wanted to obtain a sense of how those involved with the Program experienced it and as such adopted a phenomenological position. This allowed the researchers to question the way in which individuals experienced the world (Van Manen, 2015). The intention was to try and understand how all of the various stakeholders including the collaborative partners and administrative staff, educators, and the young parents in the Program experienced and perceived the Program. Two sets of individual interviews were conducted with the collaborative partners, administrative staff, and teachers at FLC, Dandenong Skillinvest, and Hallam Senior College. The young parents in the Program were interviewed using focus group interviews. Focus groups allowed for observation, interaction, and more honest discussion among participants (Morgan, 2013). The number of young women present at each focus group varied due to unforeseen circumstances such as sick children. Focus groups with more than four participants were avoided to ensure that the participants did not feel overwhelmed. They were also provided with the option of being interviewed separately or were given the option of journaling ideas that they did not feel comfortable discussing. It is worth noting that none took up these options. The researchers were unable to interview the young parents at Hallam Senior College due to COVID restrictions and zoom or phone interviews were not considered appropriate. One student who had recently graduated was interviewed via phone as she was very keen to participate.

This qualitative and quantitative study sought to understand how the various stakeholders, including students, teaching staff, and administrative staff experienced the Program. Surveys were distributed and individual semi-structured interviews were held with teaching and advisory/administrative staff involved with the Narre Warren Foundation Learning Centre site and the Dandenong site during 2019, and Terms 1 and 2 of 2021 with those involved with the Narre Warren Foundation Learning Centre site and the Hallam Senior College site (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These semi-structured interviews were loosely directed by a set of questions, which allowed for relevant topics to be covered but allowed for incidental pertinent conversations, while also keeping in mind the desired outcomes of the discussion (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Focus group interviews were conducted with small groups of students involved in the YPEP. Questions contained in the interview guide were developed by the research team, after a consideration of the research outcomes of the study. The survey data, observation of practice, interviews with both educators and students, and conversations with other stakeholders, among others, illustrated a model at work and provided significant insight into how to best accommodate the unique learning profiles of the young parents.

Data arising from the interviews were analysed using the process of identifying and coding characteristic patterns or themes emerging (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2009). The phases of thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clark (2006) guided the process. The research team began firstly by familiarising themselves with the data from the interview transcripts. At this stage, initial ideas and thoughts were recorded. Following this, initial codes were generated from the interview data. This was followed by a systematic search for emerging themes. A thematic map was then constructed to double-check if these themes correlated with initial codes. Themes were then named, in

relation to developing ideas. Finally, selected extracts from the interviews were drawn as evidence for use in the reporting of the study. The quantitative data was collected in three parts. Firstly, the consortium member survey data was collected through a 4 point Likert type scale ranging from strongly agree to somewhat agree (Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree and Somewhat Disagree). Another survey was crafted for students, where the data was collected through a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Thirdly, a data survey was developed for educators using a four-point Likert type scale ranging from strongly agree to somewhat agree. The data for all the surveys were analysed by counting the number of responses for each survey question by the participants. Each survey had additional open-ended questions. The responses were thematically analysed. The data was first organised and similar codes were searched initially. Subsequently, the codes were collapsed into themes (Creswell, 2014).

Whilst the nature of this study was largely evaluative and related to collecting data that would assist both the Program designers and deliverers in the ongoing review and improvement of the Program, analysis of the data revealed an interesting perspective on who this group of young parents were, how they wanted to be seen by others and how others involved with the Program saw them. The following presents a discussion of these findings which are useful for others considering designing or implementing similar such programs.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this research was to determine factors that contribute to the experiences of young parents within a tailored education program, which sought to re-engage them into education, while also supporting them in their parenting role. Additionally, the research sought to reflect on the accommodation measures that aligned with the changing needs of young parents. In doing so the study explored the unique characteristics of an education program, which positioned the needs of young parents at the forefront.

Prioritising the care of the individual student: It was evident that a strengths-based approach, which involved small class sizes that were more understanding of the needs of students, was fundamental to the YPEP. In this regard, the shared experiences of the participants allowed for effective transition protocols, as young parents were able to share a great deal of camaraderie and commonality. One student commented that:

"I could go to any school, but I feel like it's more comfortable to be with other mums and stuff. Where you go to a normal school, they all just talk about teenage stuff or whatever, and here I feel like I get along with everyone because they're all mums and so am I."

In their report, the SHINE group supported this view that it was essential to provide an educational system that was comfortable and non-judgmental for young parents. Reporting on a similar young parents' program in South Australia, the need for a friendly and nurturing culture within the educational environment was viewed as crucial to the advancement of students. Similarly, a New Zealand study noted that the creation of Teen Parents Units (TPUs) improved the educational and life outcomes of young parents by creating spaces where they could thrive, through a re-engagement in education (Kamp et al., 2017). In this context, the researchers reported that students had "transformed" and "benefitted" from an easily accessible educational context, for themselves and their babies. It is evident that successful programs to support the educational initiatives of young parents were successful primarily because of their ability to connect young people in similar circumstances (Bakhtiar et al., 2020; Dickinson & Joe, 2010; McDonald et al., 2009; SmithBattle, 2007). This form of networking of like peers facilitated success, and connected individual students to the initiative (Dickinson & Joe, 2010; Fram, 2005; McLeod et al., 2006; Stiles, 2005).

Flexibility and Responsivity: In considering how the Program has accommodated the changing needs of young parents, the research team sought to consider the structure and organisation of the Program. The Program has repeatedly been acknowledged as "flexible" to the needs of the students, with educators, students, and stakeholders reporting that the fluidity of the Program was a significant element. Important to student needs is that the Programs starts with them, rather than a structured curriculum, yet balancing the requirements to complete the qualification. Additionally, the young parents straddle different roles, that of parent and student simultaneously – the Program had to be cognisant of both these roles. Furthermore, many of the participants were keen to advance their skills, and ensure that they were in a stable educational position for themselves and their babies. As such, the Program had to wrap around student needs, being more accommodating and adjusting the learning and teaching schedule to suit individual learners.

The success of the program was evident in one young parent's accolade that:

"I enjoy coming here. I don't dread it in the morning....It's welcoming…and you feel this isn't a classroom. It just feels like a place you come and learn."

The dynamic of the classroom is an important fundamental element of the learning environment, as the reward of being among like-minded and empathetic peers is supportive to young parents. Additionally, participants felt supported by the co-curricular elements that support their roles as parents. Previous research with support programs for young parents revealed similar values, and findings, with young mothers, feeling supported, sustained, and heard (Dickinson & Joe, 2010; Watson & Vogel, 2017). A flexible program that emphasised the needs of young parents appeared to have greater success (Dickinson & Joe, 2010; Fram, 2005; McDonald et al., 2009; Stiles, 2005). Networking and relationship forming were particularly relevant for teenage parents experiencing a range of challenges, including the care of an infant with a disability and social isolation from family circles (Fram, 2005; Stiles, 2005). While with YPEP, there is the ability for the young parents to have their own dedicated learning space, they were also encouraged to be a part of the wider community of the school or the learning centre, to feel a sense of belonging, and to remove their feelings of stigmatisation.

Education programs for young parents should be flexible and pliable, accommodating changing schedules, unexpected absences, and being sensitive to the ever-altering needs of the student, as with the YPEP. Initiatives to support young parents who are still at school should demonstrate an understanding of the participants' dual roles, as they juggle parenthood and their

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academic workloads (SmithBattle, 2006; Stiles, 2005; Watson & Vogel, 2017). Flexible programs such as the YPEP consistently assume two lenses, one which is holistic, and the other which is specific to individual needs will result in greater success (Butler, 2015).

Optimising the value of the educators: Experienced educators, with a strong knowledge of the VCAL and student wellbeing, were viewed as crucial to the Program. Yet, this role had its complexities, as the educator's primary role is to focus on the curriculum and yet considerable time was focused on the wellbeing needs of the parents, which pulled time away from the curriculum and also took an emotional toll on the educators, who were not trained counsellors. Educators were vital to the success of the Program, as it was crucial for them to build a strong rapport with the young parents while maintaining their professional boundaries. The personality and mindset of the educator and the support are essential to the success of the Program and of how participants respond. Professional support, especially, is perceived as a primary factor that facilitates the Program's success (Stiles, 2005). A team-teaching approach would likely reduce some of the stressors placed on individual educators and enable regular debriefing and brainstorming, which could work to support the educators and sustain their involvement with the Program.

Another crucial layer to the success of the YPEP was the role of the Early Parenting Support worker. They offer knowledge relating to essential life skills, stress management as a parent, nutrition, health and the vital role of mentoring, and the incidental learning associated with this role (Stiles, 2005). A Tasmanian report on teenage parents reflected on "mentors" rather than "educators" within the context of parenting programs and the role of the Early Parenting Support worker most certainly acted as a mentor and was perceived as that by colleagues and by students (Bakhtiar et al., 2020).

In this context, inclusivity is facilitated largely through the educators, the support staff, and the networks, which maintain programs for marginalised young people. The demeanour and investment of the educators within young parent support programs, according to research, are pivotal to its success. Research demonstrates that it is not just academic support that is sought in this context, but other forms of sympathy, empathy, and nurturing (Stiles, 2005). Staff and supportive service providers, who acknowledge the individual journeys of each student are likely to foster greater resiliency among the young parents in their care (Bakhtiar et al., 2020; Watson & Vogel, 2017). The educators and the Early Parenting Support worker were viewed as critical people to the success of the young parents involved in the YPEP.

The location of the educational centre: The location of the YPEP was viewed as important to the willingness and accessibility of young parents to attend and to be engaged in their learning. Attendance can be an issue with the young parents, as they may have a child who is unwell or meetings with external people, such as the maternal health nurse, so ease of accessibility to location or lack of ease, can contribute to fluctuating attendance. Some students were catching more than two forms of public transport with their babies; one student caught three buses and two trains.

Reporting on a similar program in Victoria, the Australian Institute of Family Studies (2014) reiterated the need for an appropriate location, which would serve the needs of young parents. The geographical location is a significant consideration in a program of this nature, as it should be contextualised within a local area with easy access to resources, appropriate networks, and access to transport (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2014). In order to increase the connectedness of the young parents, the Program should be accessible, and within their physical networks. Similarly, a report on parenting programs in the Australian Capital Territory noted the importance of location and positioning of support programs for young parents (Butler, 2015). The report in this location implies that situating parenting programs within an appropriate setting is likely to reduce stigma and create greater normality for the parents.

Accessibility to on-site assistance: The employment of an on-site Early Parenting Support worker facilitated care for the babies, responding to an essential need of the young parents to be able to have their babies alongside them during their study. Furthermore, the effective modeling from staff allowed for students to feel quite supported as young parents, and more holistically as individuals within a vulnerable population. Nutrition and support with settling the baby are examples of the additional role of the Early Parenting Support worker and each participant in the research commented on the importance of this role. Access to the Early Parenting Support worker is crucial to the success of the Program. The success of the on-school site at Hallam Senior College revolved around the ability of the school to be inclusive of the young parents and the staff involved in YPEP and to embed them within the school and provide access to all the facilities available to each student and staff member. Due to the complex nature of the needs of some of the young parents and the importance of them having ease of access to wellbeing support, the addition of a dedicated wellbeing staff member on-site would add to the success of the Program.

Co-curricular activities and support networks: Preparing the young parent for a work-life was seen as crucial to their learning and equipping. A young parent referenced the "opportunities" she was given since joining the Program, and that she appreciated the *"information about organisations…that help us with housing and food…"*. Young parents are likely to experience anxiety over the days that lay ahead, so enabling them through a provision of links and networks is important to the cohesive functioning of the Program. Access to services that can support those who need housing support, domestic violence support, and career guidance are essential for the success of the young parents involved in the YPEP. Again, the need for "early childhood development specialists", the Early Parenting Support worker, and their expertise was seen as critical for success. Support networks for young parents facilitated discussion of common fears, participation in activities and generally acting as a progressive spur (De Jonge, 2001; Niven & Dow, 2016; SmithBattle, 2007). The YPEP provides opportunities for interaction while equipping the young parents with much-needed information for their lives outside the educational context (De Jonge, 2001; Dickinson & Joe, 2010; McDonald et al., 2009; Stiles, 2005).

Personalised learning: Learning and teaching programs that accommodate the needs of young parents are unique in themselves, however, the research team was mindful of the individual elements that distinguished the YPEP from mainstream teaching. In this regard, students noted the "comfort" and "familiarity" of sharing a learning space with other young parents who were empathetic and sympathetic to their needs and circumstances. Additionally, the personalised nature of the YPEP, as one student jestingly described it, as *"you have a teacher in your face all the time"*, was an important feature that facilitated individualised instruction. However, students often thrived working at a pace that was comfortable to their needs, without the rigidity of *"you have to do this and you have to do that"*. In this regard, an adaptable and adjustable learning program was crucial to the needs of the students.

Individualised programs are better positioned for success as they are likely to meet the unique needs of individual young parents (Butler, 2015; National Research Council, 2004; Watson & Vogel, 2017). Young mothers are often motivated to succeed since they want to create a better future for themselves and their children, so in this context, encouraging them individually helps them overcome hurdles and gives them the courage to persevere (Watson & Vogel, 2017). Watson and Vogel (2017) in their American study of teenage mothers reflected that pregnancy sometimes acts as the spur for some students, transforming them from fearful to confident, as they realise so much more is at stake, and this was the case with YPEP with four of the nine students at the Hallam location graduating with their VCAL in the first year of the Program at the school, even with COVID as a factor. Of the other five students, two more have now graduated and the other three are on track to graduate mid-2022. At the FLC location, two students graduated in 2020 and four graduated in 2021. These are great successes. Personalised instruction, within a supportive and nurturing environment such as the YPEP, is more likely to increase the educational outcomes of young parents (National Research Council, 2004).

The curriculum adjustments and modifications are also an important consideration, as these need to constantly be reshaped to suit different student needs. The adaptability of the curriculum is crucial especially since young parents may have time off from school to attend to their babies' needs including doctors' appointments and post-natal care appointments. Teachers recognise that the young parents want "routines" and "a bit of structure", but they also want it to be "relaxed" to suit their changing circumstances. Research supports the premise that a supportive and responsive curriculum is central to the success of educational programs for young parents (Watson & Vogel, 2017). Smaller class sizes which are more accommodating of student needs, having the Early Parenting Support worker and child care services alongside formal educational programs, and the individualisation of the pace of such programs, are lauded as key curricular modifications for success and this is embedded within the YPEP (Watson & Vogel, 2017). Additionally, accommodating student needs through flexibility with attendance, providing alternate pathways as appropriate, and modifying their curriculum, is pivotal to the success of teenage parents in support programs (Watson & Vogel, 2017).

Nurturing environment: It is evident that the nurturing nature of the environment and the individuals involved, are important factors, optimising the success of YPEP. Likewise, the ability to have their babies with them or near them during class time, was an important comfort and security factor for the students, along with the support of the Early Parenting Support worker. One young parent noted that *"it's good that you can bring your baby to school with you"*. The YPEP has facilities for babies, which assists in the education of the student, and assists with their wellbeing, as their baby is within reach, and can be attended to during the academic day. YPEP caters for young parents to bring their baby with them until the child is either a toddler or turns one year of age, but while the Foundation Learning Centre has access to childcare facilities, the Hallam Senior College site

does not and access to a convenient child care facility would enhance the YPEP at this location and any other site, as it is important for the young parents to have their child near to them while they study. At the Foundation Learning Centre, one educator commented that the parents can easily pop out and visit their child and also access other on-site services, whereas this was not an option for those at the Hallam site, who had no ease of access to childcare.

On-site resources are also important, in terms of access to high chairs, cooking facilities to be able to heat baby food or to teach nutrition for babies, space for prams and the baby to sleep, and a separate and yet close space for the babies to be while the young parent is working, so as not to cause too much disruption to their studies.

Young parents as students differ from their mainstream counterparts and therefore require a more adaptable and malleable teaching and learning program. In this regard, resources and facilities are not restricted to just teaching and learning programs but are likely to draw on the wider supports of the community. Strategic partnerships with community groups and governmental organisations are deftly incorporated into the learning programs, creating an adapted and modified curriculum that is better suited to their unique needs and this is an important element of the YPEP (Dickinson & Joe, 2010; McDonald et al., 2009; Stiles, 2005). The YPEP has evolved over its life and lessons learned have been embedded in iterations. Continued involvement of external organisations is required to support the sustainability of the YPEP. The inclusion of students with diverse learning needs is one of the many foci of the Victorian Department of Education and Training and this is one of the many important partnerships needed to ensure that these disadvantaged students have their needs accommodated. The role of the educator and the person who fills that role and support for them is vital, along with the individualised planning and differentiation and wellbeing support. Parenting support from the Early Parenting Support worker is also crucial. The location must be a factor for ease of access and sustained attendance; inclusion within the local environment for both staff and students and access to physical and human resources are required to add to the sense of belonging.

Challenges of the Program:

- Time has been mentioned as a challenge for the educator. A great deal of time is consumed by the educator managing welfare issues rather than educating. Additionally, educators required time to complete the associated paperwork that comes with the nature of the student population required for compliance measures. Teachers need more time for meetings across centres and to develop curriculum and visit other programs. The role of the educator is crucial to the success of the Program, however, there is a relatively high turnover rate of educators. Efforts should be made to ensure a degree of consistency with teaching staff as this is likely to create stability and security for the vulnerable population they are serving.
- Professional development is fundamental to the success of the program, yet there are limited professional development opportunities available in the area of accommodating the needs of young parents through a focused educational program.
- Student attendance also emerges as a potential challenge since the unique positions of the students result in fluctuating attendance, resulting in a subsequent impact on the consistency of the YPEP.
- Sustained funding and resources also present as a challenge since the location, space and facilities need to be appropriate for the cohort and ongoing appropriate levels of funding are required to ensure the sustainability of the Program.
- Efforts should be made to reduce levels of stigmatisation by running the Program within a wider educational setting so students experience a degree of normality.

CONCLUSION

The YPEP has continued to develop under the strong leadership of Mary Tresize-Brown and through the various iterations has continuously been improved. The many variables that are required for the success of the YPEP revolve around appropriate resourcing, both human and physical, and location. Returning to education can be challenging for young parents. They are balancing their roles as a parent and as a student. Stigmatisation, marginalisation, and isolation could occur. Additionally, their individual needs vary. They need to enjoy a sense of belonging that this Program can and does provide. The Program requires that the educational and personal needs of the students are considered and this is accomplished through individualised programs and pathways. The location of the learning hub needs to be carefully considered. They should be accessible to public

transport and to other community resources, to ensure ease of accessibility for the young parents. The retention of the Early Parenting Support worker is vital for the support for the educator, the young parents, and their children. Onsite childcare would also be an enabling factor in encouraging the return to education for the young parents. The Young Parents Education Program is certainly encouraging young parents to return to education. As an initiative in the South East Region, it supports them in their formal education, while cultivating parenting skills to serve them in the present and the future as parents. More locations should be established and the support of mainstream secondary schools should be sought to ensure that the young parents are just another student group who should have access to a quality education.

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