TO PATHS PERSEVERANCE

How some young women succeed in putting together an education and career plan despite early pregnancy and the arrival of a child







TABLE **OF CONTENTS** INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY 1. DIFFICULT CHOICES 2. PREGNANCY, MOTHERHOOD AND SCHOOL: DAILY OBSTACLES 3. **ELEMENTS CONDUCIVE TO STUDENT** 10 RETENTION 4. FOUR PATHS ADOPTED BY YOUNG 15 MOTHERS 5. **RESEARCHERS' SUGGESTIONS** FOR ACTION BY THE COMMUNITIES CONCERNED 18 CONCLUSION 20 This document is a summary of a study carried out by Andrée Larue and Nancy Côté. The full report of this study is available at the following address: http://www.fqrsc.gouv.qc.ca/upload/editeur/RF-Larue.pdf.

Perseverance

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Research conducted by members of RIPOST (Recherches sur les impacts psychologiques, organisationnels et sociaux du travail) of the Centre de santé et de services sociaux de la Vieille-Capitale focused on the paths of 48 young women who became mothers before the age of 20. At the time the study was done, each had a single child under the age of 3.

How did some women succeed in putting together and implementing an education and career plan while facing problems related to pregnancy and motherhood? What support did they receive from their families, spouses, schools, social services, and health and community services? How and to what extent did their behaviour and the choices they made with regard to their academic, work, family and conjugal lives contribute to the success of their plans?

These questions were the focus of this study, conducted between January 2005 and July 2008 under the direction of Andrée Larue, an educational sociologist.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study based on personal accounts. Young mothers were recruited in three Québec regions: Mauricie–Centre-du-Québec, Montérégie and Outaouais. The choice of these regions took into account the number of births, the fertility rate and various characteristics of the territory and population.

The participants had to have spent at least one period of time in school since the announcement of their pregnancy, after which they continued or abandoned their studies, or took them up again. This selection criterion made it possible to reach a population that is generally underrepresented in works on teenage mothers, which often focus on young women more removed from the school system.

The interview with each young mother lasted from two and a half to three hours and was structured around three time periods: before and during the pregnancy and after the child's birth. This made it possible to gather information on the objective conditions of the young women's academic, work, family and conjugal experiences, and on the manner in which they experienced each.

A chronological reconstruction of the material gathered established the chain of events and the behaviours adopted. A longitudinal analysis of the 48 personal accounts was carried out in order to identify the conditions most conducive to academic success and student retention. •••••••••••



DIFFICULT CHOICES

There were many situations in which young mothers had to make difficult choices, the first being whether or not to bring the pregnancy to term. How and in what circumstances was this choice made?

THE CONTEXT

At the time they learned of their pregnancy, nearly half of the participants (21) were not using any means of contraception even though they were sexually active. Some of them were consuming large quantities of alcohol and drugs without any concern for the consequences. Others thought that they were infertile, and a few did not want their parents to know that they were having sexual relations.

Those who did use contraception (24 participants) were not using it properly. Either they were not taking their birth control pills regularly, because they were unaware of the factors that made them less effective, or they were using condoms only when ovulating. Some admitted that they were trying, more or less consciously, to get pregnant.

THE INITIAL CHOICE

Twenty-six of the 48 young women decided to bring their pregnancies to term. For them, abortion was not a viable solution, and some who had already had an abortion were afraid they might not be able to get pregnant again if they aborted a second time. Other young women (19 participants) hesitated initially and consulted their partners or parents before making the decision to keep their child. Finally, three of the young women planned and discussed their pregnancy with their partners.

THE PLACE OF OTHERS IN THE DECISION

The partner

When the couple's relationship was solid and the idea of having a child had already come up but was understood to be slated for sometime in the future, the pregnancy was generally well accepted by the partner. If not, the young woman often succeeded in rallying her partner to her desire to start a family earlier than expected. However, according to the participants, some young men were not forthcoming in expressing their opinion. They would really have preferred an abortion but didn't want to insist on it for fear that this might bring an end to the relationship. In other cases, the young man's position remained unchanged. He wanted nothing to do with the child and the relationship quickly came to an end. Finally, it was sometimes the partner who insisted on keeping the child, on the basis of his religious convictions; in that case, the young woman complied.

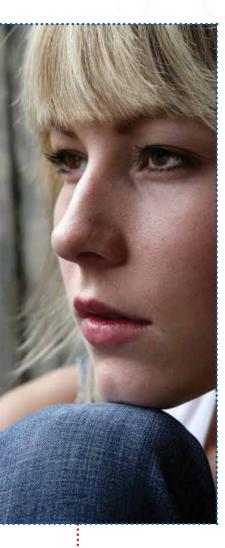


The parents

The young woman's mother was generally consulted, but her influence on the decision as to whether or not to terminate the pregnancy was not always obvious. Discussions often concerned financial implications, such as those associated with staying in school and the organization of daily life. Some mothers who had already had children at an early age warned their daughters about the extent of the difficulties involved, while those who had had an abortion spoke about the psychological difficulties that might ensue. It was possible to observe how regret on the mother's part played an important role in some young women's decision to carry the pregnancy through to term.

Professionals

The study found that professionals in the health and social services network were not consulted very often when young women were undecided about how to deal with their pregnancy. However, most of the young women who did consult a nurse or social worker felt accepted and supported in the choice they had to make. They were made aware of the fact that the outcome was ultimately their decision and not that of their parents or partner.



"Have you spoken to your partner or other people about the implications of having a child in your life?"

"I was bowled over to learn that I was pregnant. The baby was already big enough for me to hear his heartbeat through a stethoscope. I made my decision then and there: I was keeping the baby. . . alone or not."

Once the decision was made to bring the pregnancy to term, reconciling family responsibilities with the requirements of school life represented a complex task. The young women's behaviour was at this time contingent on several factors: their aptitude for and interest in school, work and family life; the compromises made to accommodate these different dimensions of their lives, the experiences they had, the support they received and their ability to negotiate with their partners, parents and stakeholders in the school and social communities.



PREGNANCY, Motherhood and school: Daily difficulties

MANAGING HURDLES

Despite their desire to stay in school as long as possible during their pregnancy, some young women had to deal with numerous hurdles: too many stairs to climb, crammed corridors, risks of being bumped and jostled, some very bothersome physical discomforts, clashes between follow-up medical appointments and class schedules, and teachers who were not always accommodating.

Once their children were born, the young women tried to develop various strategies to ensure a better reconciliation of school and family life. They strove for flexible class schedules so that they could spend as much time as possible with their children. Those who did not have access to a school daycare service found it very trying to make it to class on time and coordinate school life with the daycare they did have. They had to get up very early in the morning, drop their child off at the daycare and lose no time in catching the bus to school. The daycare's opening and closing hours did not always match their school's schedule. Some mothers managed to have teachers agree to let them arrive late in class, while others negotiated with their daycares for permission to bring their children in before the official starting time.

The fact that they had to provide a doctor's note to justify their absence from class represented an additional difficulty. The state of their own or their child's health did not always require a medical consultation and some mothers refused to spend long hours in waiting rooms to obtain the requisite piece of paper. As a result, young women who exceeded the number of allowable class absences often saw cuts made to the money they were receiving to help them pursue their education.

"What specific problems did you have to deal with in relation to your studies and the organization of your life in general?"

"I was extremely tired. When you have a baby who sleeps, everything's fine, but just try studying when you've got a colicky baby! It wasn't easy. You rock him while trying to read your textbook, or you listen to him cry, and so on and so on."

ORGANIZING OR ABANDONING ONE'S STUDIES

Uneven academic support

Depending on the levels and sectors of instruction, the possibilities open to young pregnant women and mothers to organize their studies and face up to their family responsibilities will vary. Staying in school will seem an easier prospect at the CEGEP or adult education levels than it will in the general education and vocational training sectors at the secondary level. In the first case, young women can register for part-time studies or take correspondence courses.

Moreover, it seems that secondary school and CEGEP administrators do not usually have general rules for helping young pregnant women to stay in school. Arrangements are made on a case-by-case basis with each teacher and the responsibility for negotiating such arrangements is up to the young women themselves. If they meet with refusals or a lack of understanding on the part of the teacher, some of them prefer to drop out of school rather than insisting on negotiating new arrangements.

Specialized schools and correspondence courses

The study also showed that transferring to a special school should not be the only option for helping young women stay in school. The distance from school, or the move that may be required to be closer to it, takes young women farther and farther away from their support networks. This option is rarely suitable and generally leads to an abrupt cessation of studies. Likewise, correspondence courses seem to be little appreciated by the young women who have tried them. This option keeps them in the relative isolation they have known since the beginning of their pregnancy. Furthermore, when nobody in their entourage helps them with their child, they are constantly interrupted, their work piles up and they cannot concentrate on the studies in the way they would like.

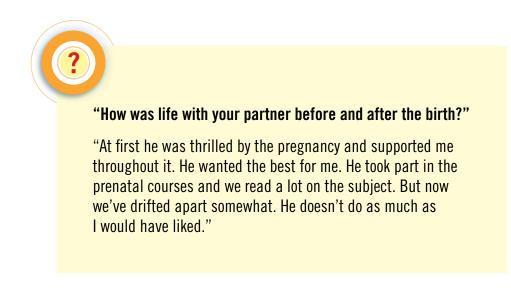
Home help

Depending on the case, the task of young women who live with their partners can be complicated if the latter take little interest in the organization of daily life or contribute little to the financial obligations of the family. In fact, some young women who live with their partners receive much less help than those who live with their parents.



Also, despite the support they receive

from their parents, some young women find it difficult to take care of their child by themselves and therefore do not take steps to go back to school or to enter the job market. And this heightens tensions and increases conflicts within the family.





ELEMENTS CONDUCIVE TO STUDENT RETENTION

The lives of young pregnant woman and mothers are often filled with obstacles. The problems they encounter, such as fatigue, lack of support, misunderstanding and lack of information can easily lead them to abandon their studies. So how do some manage to persist nonetheless? Their perseverance is due to certain factors:

WANTING TO BE FINANCIALLY INDEPENDENT

Young women's persistence in continuing their studies is strongly influenced by their desire to be financially independent, to be full stakeholders in their financial situation and that of their child. Often, it is the values communicated by their parents and their part- or full-time job experiences that make them aware of the need to obtain the credentials required to achieve this autonomy. They are familiar with the working conditions that accompany low-skilled jobs: reduced working hours, last-minute changes to schedules, layoffs that take place without warning. They therefore want to have jobs that give them a certain degree of stability and a good salary.

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"How do you explain the fact that, despite the difficulties you encountered, you always managed to keep focused on your life projects?"

"It's because of the help I received.... My teachers were very accommodating, so that I was able to complete my semester. In one of my courses I wasn't able to finish my exam, so my teacher gave me the mark I'd had before it. I also had to make an arrangement with my phys. ed. teacher."

"I began my courses two weeks after my child was born. My mother helped me enormously. At times when my workload was especially heavy, such as on weekends, she babysat, and sometimes she even took care of the baby for the night so that I could get the rest I needed to pass my courses. But when I started school again. . . I missed my baby so much."

SETTING REALISTIC GOALS

Young women's desire to acquire financial autonomy and embark on a career is not related to their academic capabilities. While some followed a regular path, others experienced more significant academic problems. Nevertheless, the fact of having defined a realistic education and career plan, one corresponding to their abilities, kept them in school.



"What did you need the most in the hardest periods of your life?"

"Sleep! Sometimes I was just so tired. And I needed encouragement and support. And a partner who could help me. That would have helped so much!"

REVIEWING THE IMPORTANCE ATTRIBUTED TO EDUCATION AND A CAREER

The importance that young women attribute to the various dimensions of their lives can sometimes change depending on their experience of maternity and their career or conjugal experience.

Some young women, who had very little interest in studying before their pregnancy, would subsequently become more fully involved in developing an educational and career plan. Some of them underwent a separation, which made them realize that they were the only ones prepared to take on the obligations associated with raising their child. Others rethought their aspirations because they understood that they were not cut out for staying home to look after their child. Those who wished to be financially independent from a partner or the state went through an orientation process to help them define an education and career plan. And those who had recently quit school quickly took steps to go back.



BEING SUPPORTED

Whether young mothers stay in school also depends on the support they are likely to receive from their parents and partners (where this applies), but also on the assigning they will receive from their school, health and social services organizations and community organizations.

Parental support

The parents of women who took part in the study generally reacted to the news of the pregnancy with surprise, worry and sometimes anger, and a number of them pressured their daughter to have an abortion. Faced with their daughter's determination to keep the child, they set out the responsibilities she would have to take on and placed limits on the extent of their own involvement. Others would propose their support in exchange for the continuation of studies and responsibilities associated with housework. Nonetheless, with time, many parents would finally provide their daughter with significant support, with most of them agreeing to have them live at home or come back home after they broke up with the child's father.

Help from the partner

Support and encouragement from the partner made it easier for young mothers to go back to school. They could count on their partner being there for the child when they themselves had to attend class, do schoolwork or study.

Help from the health and social services networks

Services offered by the local community services centre (CLSC) are automatically available from the outset to pregnant women under the age of 20, and can continue until the child has reached the age of five. This is a program of integrated perinatal and early childhood services for vulnerable families. Young women benefit from psychosocial and health monitoring that varies according to their needs.

At the time of the study, the majority of participants claimed that they were able to build a true relationship of trust with their counselors, who became resource people accompanying them in their role as mothers and in helping them resume their activities after the birth. Their counselor also seemed to be the person in the best position to begin discussions about the young women's future plans, providing them with information on programs of study, directing them toward a job-search organization or accompanying them in their endeavours. This form of accompaniment was particularly important for the youngest women, who were often shy and uneasy dealing with administrative procedures. Most of them did not have a command of bureaucratic language, which could have constituted a real impediment retarding their return to school.

Support for community organizations

Young pregnant women and young mothers appealed particularly to community organizations to access different material resources, but also to discuss matters with other young women. Many experienced a kind of isolation connected partly to their dropping out of school and to a significant reduction in their network of friends.

Support for schools

Young women who plan to have a career generally intend to pursue their studies as long as possible during their pregnancy. The willingness of school administrators and teaching personnel to accommodate them and the young women's capacity to negotiate their place in the school help them to continue with their studies.

Moreover, it seems that during the period following the break-up with the child's father, it is particularly important to offer young women the support they require to redefine their life plans, because they are driven by their desire to improve living conditions for themselves and their child. Indeed this is an opportunity for a number of them to evaluate their situation on the job market and to reconsider their involvement in their studies. The great majority of young women who had not managed to define an education and career plan before their pregnancy and who undergone an orientation process greatly appreciated it. Finally, having a daycare in their school greatly helped young women resume their studies after the arrival of their child. They could see their child during the day and be reassured about his or her well-being. They also spent less time on public transit and in managing scheduling conflicts between daycare services and their courses.

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"When you learned that you were pregnant, how did things go at school? Did you meet with professionals in your school to inform them about it?"

"At the beginning, only my friends knew. The teachers learned about it when I left the classroom because I was feeling ill. They were extremely kind to me. I had to make arrangements with each one. I also attended a self-assertiveness class and the group truly gave me their support."



FOUR PATHS ADOPTED BY YOUNG MOTHERS

Research has revealed four paths adopted by young mothers. These paths led to life plans that came together and developed differently. The women discussed how their experiences affected their choices in school, at work and in their family lives before and during the pregnancy and after the arrival of the child.

THOSE FOR WHOM MOTHERHOOD IS ONE MORE PROJECT

Although some young women may experience academic problems during pregnancy, they continue attending school. They plan for the future: they have an idea of the kind of career they would like to have, choose a program of study and also want to have children. They have been with the same partner for some time already. When they learn that they are pregnant, they try to get their lives in order and to determine the kind of support they will need from their parents and partner. In school, they are proactive and meet with their teachers and the principal to ensure that they can continue their studies for as long as possible. When the time comes to give birth, they take a break from their studies lasting somewhere between two weeks and six months. After the child's arrival, they adapt their career plan to their new situation. Some, who have gone through a separation, may change their education or career plans in accordance with their new responsibilities, while others choose a program of study that will keep them close to their family and provide them with support. Finally, others attempt to pick up the pace of their studies by taking more courses per term and studying over the summer. They continue to use the services of their local CLSC, but in a much more sporadic manner than before or just after their child's birth. Most of the young women in this group want to have other children, but they also want some stability in their job situation before doing so.



THOSE FOR WHOM MOTHERHOOD IS A NEW AND DESIRED FOR ANCHOR IN THEIR LIVES

These young women are not really interested in school, wish to become housewives and often have partners much older than themselves. Either they plan their pregnancies with their partners, or the latter readily accept the new state of affairs. When they find out they are pregnant, these young women drop out of school; or, if school is already behind them, they quit their jobs. After the child is born, those who have a good relationship with their partner do well, continue with their plans for their family, and think about having another child within a fairly short period. Caring for their child and creating a family environment become their main concerns, but some go from disappointment to disappointment because their partners either lose interest in the idea of starting a family or are unable to provide for it financially. Great strain is then placed upon the relationship, sometimes leading to a breakup before the child is born. Young women in such situations therefore find themselves alone in taking on the responsibilities associated with the child. Some get their lives in order, motherhood becoming a spur to change. For others, motherhood becomes an additional source of disorganization in their lives.

THOSE FOR WHOM MOTHERHOOD IS A SPUR TO CHANGE

These young women also have little interest in studying and have experienced problems in secondary school due, generally, to the abuse of alcohol and drugs. When they learn that they are pregnant, they are in a relationship that involves conflict. Most of them separate during the pregnancy, or soon after the arrival of the child. Motherhood marks a turning point in these women's lives, giving them meaning. As they must assume responsibility for providing for their child's needs, they come up with an educational and career plan. Thus those who had dropped out of school go back to studying. They no longer idealize motherhood and do not want to be housebound all of the time, looking after their child. Their work experiences have also made them realize how important it is to obtain the qualifications required to obtain a more stable and betterpaying job. For all of these reasons, they are more motivated to continue studying. The support provided by their parents often increases when they return to school and push forward with their educational plan.

THOSE FOR WHOM MOTHERHOOD IS AN ADDITIONAL SOURCE OF DISORGANIZATION

These young women are not motivated by their studies. They have dropped out of school repeatedly, have no set objectives and have not found a job that interests them. Some come from families that have been monitored by the youth protection agency (Direction de la protection de la jeunesse, or DPJ). Others have had significant mental health problems, have been taking medication and been monitored for problems of depression and attempted suicide. Most of them are not really in a couple relationship when they become pregnant. When they do get a job, their relationships with other employees and their boss are often oppositional. They stop work shortly after learning that they are pregnant. And after the child arrives, they seem overwhelmed. They find it difficult to look after a baby, lack autonomy and a number of them depend on the state or their mothers. This in turn leads to conflict and tension. They claim to have a negative view of daycare and want to look after their child for at least a year or two.

"How do you see your future now?"

"I tell myself that, no matter what happens, I want to have financial security, I want the things I need, I want to be independent and to be proud of myself. You know, if it comes to separation, I want to be able to bring a salary home, and I want to have the experience I need to find a job someplace else."



RESEARCHERS' SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION BY THE COMMUNITIES CONCERNED

IMPROVING CONDITIONS IN THE SCHOOLS

A member of the school's professional personnel (nurse, social worker or psychologist) can be responsible for choosing and implementing measures to help young pregnant women continue their studies and go back to school after giving birth. Some of these measures are already in place in certain schools and do not involve any additional costs:

- the option to leave the classroom if needed
- access to a locker in a quiet place
- the option to leave the classroom a bit earlier than others to avoid the crush of students and the risk of being jostled
- access to a room for resting
- access to an elevator
- the option to change the dates set for handing in work or doing exams
- priority in scheduling and course selection
- designating individuals to provide information on the resources available and the elements to be considered in the students' academic plan



MAKING AVAILABLE COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Provide better opportunities for networking and communication between the different levels of community intervention and health and social services, in order to improve services and the transmission of information intended for young mothers. It would seem advantageous to jointly create and regularly update a guide to resources available within their territory.

DISSEMINATING INFORMATION ON CONTRACEPTION

This study has shown that some young women had mistaken ideas about contraception and risks related to abortion. Some believed, for example, that the capacity to bring a pregnancy to term was greatly reduced after two or three abortions. Others believed that they were still protected for some time after they stopped taking birth control pills or Depo-Provera¹.

The availability of accurate information about the effect of abortion on women's reproductive health is essential if women are to fully understand the risks and myths associated with this form of intervention. Health professionals who work with adolescents should stress the risks associated with discontinuing the use of a contraceptive (even if this is temporary) without immediately finding another to replace it. It is also necessary to emphasize the circumstances that reduce the effectiveness of birth control pills, and the need to use condoms to prevent pregnancy. Young people need to be very well informed about the effects of certain medicines on the effectiveness of birth control pills and, generally, about their proper use.

INFORMING YOUNG FATHERS

Few young men seem to be aware of the responsibilities incumbent on them as fathers. This is why it is important to inform them of those provisions of the Civil Code that recognize the responsibilities of both biological parents with respect to the child (for example, through an advertising campaign). The use of condoms is a means that young men have at their disposal to prevent undesired pregnancies and the burdens associated with them.

^{1.} This is a long-acting contraceptive that contains progestin. It is typically used to regulate the menstrual cycle and to prevent conception when other means are not appropriate. For more information, go to: http://www.sexualityandu. ca/adults/contraception-2-3.aspx

CONCLUSION



Despite the problems they have encountered, some young women under the age of 20 who have decided to bring their pregnancy to term also want to continue their studies. They are aware of the importance of obtaining proper job qualifications so that they can find a decent job. Through their perseverance, these young women succeed in working out a realistic academic, career and family plan. In addition, those who enjoy a certain measure of autonomy and support from those close to them and from the various institutions involved in their lives, will tend to study longer during their pregnancy and, once the child is born, manage to go back to school and to reconcile their various activities more easily.

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