Teenage Pregnancy and Economic Self-Sufficiency for Girls: A Sex-Equity Challenge for Schools

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The United States has the highest rate of teen childbearing in the Western industrialized world. Five hundred thousand babies are born to teenagers in America, with junior high school girls experiencing 125,000 pregnancies each year. Many of these girls never return to complete high school, and three-fourths of single mothers under 25 live in poverty.

Researchers offer several reasons for higher teenage pregnancy rates in the U.S. than in European countries. European educational policy more commonly favors sex education, and health facilities and clinics offering contraceptive information are more accessible to teenagers. Most U.S. schools, on the other hand, see teenage pregnancy prevention as a relatively untried area of responsibility and one in which norms and values of constituent groups are likely to clash.

Several researchers, prominently Joy Dryfoos (1984), argue that school involvement is critical if young girls are to develop responsibility for their own sexual behavior and the motivation to postpone childbirth. Karen Pittman (1986) of the Children's Defense Fund argues that girls need to learn that early pregnancy will block personal and career goals and decrease their income and status.

Pittman argues that the motivation to avoid pregnancy is weakened by academic failure in school. "Students with serious basic skills deficiencies often have encountered failure so frequently that their self-esteem development in nonacademic areas . . . generally lags behind that of their more fortunate peers." Pittman cites research data that document the "strong relationship between poor basic skills and limited life options."

Pregnancy is the most frequent reason girls cite for dropping out of school, and for unemployed adolescents who have left school, pregnancy and early motherhood are even more common. They quickly learn that diminished education leads to diminished economic status. Sixty percent of women heading households receiving welfare first received assistance as teenage mothers.

Most schools today do not actively discriminate against pregnant girls. These students are no longer expelled, denied further education, or segregated in special programs. The discrimination tends to be passive, rooted in the implicit acceptance that motherhood ends the need for employment preparation. As one junior high school principal observed, "A diploma will make no difference to these girls" (Dunkle 1985).

New programs and new collaborations are beginning to help redress this subtle problem. Prevention programs are involving more schools in curriculum development, life planning, decision making skills, and collaborations with health, social service, and youth-serving agencies. These are leading to comprehensive school-based clinics, day care centers, and programs offering service referral and academic assistance to teen mothers.

No less than boys, girls need encouragement to prepare for economically self-sufficient futures and to develop the academic competencies and social skills that success requires. If schools fail short in preparing girls for self-sufficiency, they will fail to provide an equitable education.

References


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