2 Within and Apart: Re/Positioning the Education of Teenage Parents in Aotearoa New Zealand

ABSTRACT
Given the significance that is accorded to the education of the teenage mother in the future wellbeing of her child, this chapter focuses on educational provision for pregnant and parenting students in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. The chapter is empirical, narrative and autobiographical: it draws on published research, a small-scale survey, memoir, and textual analysis of documentary in which the author, then aged sixteen, was interviewed at the beginning of her journey as a student-parent. The chapter adopts a critical perspective to read across the grain of the dominant policy discourse in Aotearoa New Zealand considering the extent to which specialist educational support for teenage parents has the potential to nurture, incubate and isolate.

Introduction

In 2017 as I write this chapter, young people in New Zealand who become parents before completing their second-level school qualifications and who wish to progress with their studies have three pathways available to them: Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu – the Correspondence School (Te Kura), one of the twenty-three Teenage Parents Units (TPU) attached to mainstream schools, or to continue at a mainstream school. In my own case – as a teenage parent forty-one years ago – the only option my family and I identified was Te Kura and that was the path I took to complete my secondary school education. At that time, Teen Parents Units did not exist and it never occurred to me, or to my family, that I might remain at my ‘normal’ college. I cannot say how they would have responded to such a situation: we never gave them the opportunity to respond.
In the chapter I am taking something of a journey through time to explore the educational provision for young people in Aotearoa who are combining parenting and formal education. I draw on a number of data sources: published research, non-fiction memoir, a small-scale survey and documentary analysis, including a documentary extract which screened in New Zealand on the 28 June 1976 during the current affairs programme, *Today at One*. In a segment entitled *School Girl Pregnancies* I meet myself, my then nearly four-month-old daughter, and my own mother who I had made a grandmother at age thirty-six.

Ultimately, I reach back to the work of Nancy Fraser (1989) to consider the means by which neoliberal discourses concerning education and parenting might be taken apart and reassembled in more productive ways. In this, the chapter adopts an embodied, critical perspective in considering the limits and possibilities of the various forms of educational provision for teenage parents who, by compulsion or desire, are engaged with formal structures of education in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand.

A 1970s’ narrative

I was fifteen when I became pregnant; sixteen when my baby daughter was born. My baby’s father was my first boyfriend; he was one year older than me and we had originally met, at secondary school, when I was only thirteen. Our relationship would sustain until I was nineteen and he twenty by which time we were engaged to be married in the magnificent building that is Old St Paul’s (once Wellington’s Anglican cathedral and the venue of my parents’ own marriage some twenty years earlier). However, our wedding day didn’t eventuate: we had been together all our teenage years; we had been parents for three years; we had never lived together and, we came to

1 Children in New Zealand aged six to sixteen years old must be enrolled in school; education and training is funded for young people up to and including nineteen years old (<https://education.govt.nz/>).
believe, we didn’t really know ourselves as individuals. At some point – a point I can no longer recall – we deferred our marriage, and ultimately our relationship as a couple ended.

The words in the prior paragraph cannot do justice to the experience we shared in our teenage years of confronting and navigating an unplanned pregnancy, and in moving into parenthood. The experience of unplanned pregnancy for someone as naïve as we were at age fifteen is difficult to convey. Angela Patrick, in her 2012 book *The Baby Laundry for Unmarried Mothers* captures some of my own feelings when I missed one period, and then another, before finally confirming my pregnancy (at an anonymous clinic in Wellington city, with both me and my baby’s father in school uniform). Patrick writes, in the moment of handing her baby over for adoption, ‘I felt as I had during the latter stages of my pregnancy: unable to focus on the reality of what was happening, and drifting off and creating ridiculous scenarios in which my fate would be different’ (Patrick 2012: 121). I recall that same inability to focus on the reality of what was happening, what would of necessity eventually happen. I do recall the doctor who confirmed my pregnancy mentioning termination; I also recall being unable to comprehend a decision. This was not related to any moral objection to termination, I had no opinion at that time in my life. It was to do with an inability to grasp the situation. So we went home – him to his parents’ house, and me to mine – as if by saying nothing and doing nothing, my pregnancy would not be real. It was not until three months later, when my mother returned from a visit to her own family in England, that I told her of my pregnancy and she, in turn, told my father. I am tall, so my pregnancy didn’t show, but by the time I told my parents I was already ‘halfway down a road I had no choice but to go down now’ (Patrick 2012: 28).

As I write these words, I cannot help but be struck by the enormity of that moment in my life. I had no choice to go down the road towards the birth of a child; my family had no choice but to go down that road with me: my parents, my sisters, my baby’s father and his family, our respective extended families and friends. However, on another level our families *did* have a choice – as did the families of girls I knew who became pregnant around that time. In some of the cases of which I became aware, the girl did not remain at home. While earlier generations may have been sent to
homes such as St Mary’s Home for Unwed Mothers, young women of my generation often went to one of seven Bethany homes. Originally set up by the Salvation Army as ‘rescue homes for girls’, over time Bethany became associated with meeting the needs of single pregnant women and those with newborn babies. Most babies were adopted; the mother would leave Bethany within two weeks of the birth. In other cases, young women remained at home, on the understanding that the baby would be adopted. For me, after taking those agonizing steps of overcoming my fear and getting the words out that I was pregnant, very pregnant, the response of my parents was that ‘we will get through this together’. Throughout my pregnancy – hidden from friends and teachers under a school jersey with a very loose selvage my mother procured for me, until I had completed my end-of-year examinations – the unarticulated default was that my baby, too, would be adopted. But, after her birth – me being sent home within hours, leaving her behind to be cared for by nurses – I could not reconcile myself to the questions, so similar to those articulated by Angela Patrick (2012: 122): a ‘desperate’ need to be reassured about who would parent this tiny baby: ‘what would [the mother] look like? Would she be gentle? Would she be warm and responsive?’ Despite all my naivety – my utter lack of comprehension of parenthood – I eventually found myself confronted with a conviction that the only way to assure my daughter’s future comfort and safety was to attend to it myself, with the support of my family. And in that moment, I was not only a daughter, sister, student and mother, I also became a teenage parent.

St Mary’s hospital was run by the Anglican Church. Its 1904 dedication describes its aim to achieve ‘national purity’ through ‘fallen women’ being put to work (Shadwell 2016). The women were forced to labour, suffered abuse, and often were not allowed to see their children after childbirth. In 2005, the Anglican Church apologised to the women who had suffered at St Mary’s; the hospital was closed in 1972.

I feel compelled to note that Andrea Patrick’s confinement was in the care of ‘The Crusade of Rescue and Homes for Destitute Catholic Children’. As she notes, the name of the home ‘said it all, really’ (Patrick 2012: 120).
Re/Assembling the teenage parent as student

(Opening image of Annelies, kneeling on the floor in her parent’s lounge in Wellington, New Zealand. She is smiling and baby-talking as she changes her four-month-old daughter’s nappy.)

Narrator: Annelies was one of several hundred fifteen-year-old school girls who became pregnant last year.

Annelies: When I first found out um I was shocked of course and I was horrified and I thought, oh gosh, it’s the end of the world and I don’t know what I am going to do and actually um the baby’s father and I, we even considered we were going to run away to Australia and the whole lot, you know (laughs).

Annelies found out she was pregnant the day before her mother was to leave on a three month trip overseas. She didn’t have the heart to spoil her mother’s trip so she and her boyfriend kept the news to themselves until she was six months pregnant.

I didn’t tell any of my friends (pause). It is really horrible, you know, you don’t know what to do. It’s just, you just panic, you think, you know, you just can’t cope with it at first. You think everything is wrong, you know. But when I finally came to terms with it I thought, well, you know, I would tell Mum when she gets back and I knew Mum and Dad would accept it because they are really super.

When Annelies finally told her parents, they were wonderfully supportive. Annelies made the difficult decision to keep her baby girl and to continue her education by correspondence.

(Images of the Correspondence School) The Correspondence School has enrolled pregnant school girls for many years but until recently the number was small. Now the number averages between 350 and 400 pregnant school girls a year. This is around a quarter of the school’s full-time secondary school

4 What follows is the transcript of Today at One (n.d. 1976)
enrolments. The Correspondence School has carried out several surveys on pregnant school girls, one of which recently appeared in the New Zealand Medical Journal. This report expressed concern at the number of pregnant schoolgirls who don’t continue full time education. The report says that for every girl who enrols, there must be seven to eight who drop out of the school system. A significant proportion of these are under fifteen.

(Principal) I think it is a pity. One of the reasons for the survey, or one of the reasons why we distributed the survey widely was to let people know what’s available. And when I say people, I mean people who are interested in this problem: school principals, the guidance officers, doctors, social workers were given a copy of the survey so they could at the right time advise girls what they ought to be doing with their education.

One of the important things to come out of the survey is that most of the girls do very well, some of them extraordinarily well, sometimes much better than they did at school. Just what are the advantages of Correspondence School over ordinary schools?

(Principal) I think there are very real advantages. In the first place, I don’t think in the sort of climate of opinion you could have a pregnant school-girl remaining full-term anyway at school. There must be a time when it will be embarrassing for her and for her family to remain there and there are medical reasons as well too of course: they would have to have rests and doctor’s appointments. I don’t think they could go for full-term. And there are advantages of being, I think, of working in a one-to-one relationship with an absent teacher, somehow they do form a close bond and they do seem I think willing and able to express themselves much more readily to a person who is not actually physically present all the time with them.

(Cut back to Annelies, filmed at home) When I first thought of doing correspondence, I thought oh gosh you know it is just going to be a whole load of papers and they’re going to come through the post and I will do all this work and then I will send them back. But it is not anything like that. You know, each work I get back there is a letter in it from my teacher saying you know how I am doing and that and they always put a personal remark in you know about the baby or about how things are going. It is really super. They don’t care for just your work, they mark it and that and they also care about how you are managing in your mind.

[...]

(Cut to my mother, filmed at home) Well, I feel when a girl finds herself in this situation her first thought is to give up. Well she just doesn’t want to continue; she
doesn’t know what to do. When it was put to us that she could do this course by correspondence we were thrilled because Annelies is quite a bright girl and we felt she should be given the opportunity. She has worked tremendously well under correspondence, she finds she enjoys it herself because she hasn’t got the distractions of the school classroom. We’re finding her marks are excellent and she is really enjoying it. And she is able to look after her babe too which is a thing she wanted to do and continue her education so that when she does finally decide to go back to work when she is older then she has the qualifications to do that.

(Cut to Mrs Barton, my teacher, who is asked how ‘typical’ I am as a teenage parent)

Well that is rather hard to say. I feel she is probably typical of a particular group. She is a motivated girl. She is keen to get on. She is very sensitive to her situation. Ah, she belongs to the group who elect to keep their babies. I am sure she thought about this very long and hard and she has made her decision and I think that she is very happy that she has made the decision the way that she has.

[…]  

(Principal) I think the most important thing is that these girls do very well in their education. They are slightly better if you take examination results, slightly better than the average. Also, I think that it is quite revealing how they adjust afterwards, and I think the education that we offer them and the chance they have of proving themselves, is an important thing perhaps in their self-esteem and perhaps in their ability to readjust to life.

This narrative betrays the context of its time. In the present time, the ‘climate of opinion’ that would not allow a full-term pregnant body to be present at ‘normal’ school has shifted to some degree. The medical discourse – the discourse surrounding management of the pregnant body and its need to have rests – has also changed. However, other aspects of this narrative have not changed; they remain highly relevant now and seem, to me, quite visionary in the context of their time. In this forty-year-old transcript, the posture of the teachers at Te Kura – one of interest and concern for both my baby and for how I was ‘managing in my mind’ – is noteworthy. The suggestion of the Principal that having a trusted, but slightly distant, confidant has been noted in other research with teenage parents (Alldred and David 2010). Equally noteworthy is the focus on fostering discussions with young women during their pregnancy concerning the future form their education ought to now take. This use of the word ‘ought’ implies a rightness, a lack of questioning that education of some
form would occur, and would contribute not only to future work but as a mechanism to ‘readjust to life’.

As the protagonist in this particular narrative, I am reminded of myself as a school student. I am not dissimilar to others whose narratives appear in this collection. I am not from a family that had an expectation of higher education. In the transcript, my mother references my ongoing education as necessary for going ‘back to work’. While I had been a successful student at primary school, I did not gain the same sense of belonging in secondary school. However, if not for my pregnancy, I would have remained at school, unlike others whose school lives seem full of pain (Alldred and David 2010). Yet my move to Te Kura was highly effective. Not only did I thrive studying alone, the experience also prepared me with the discipline to complete my initial degree by distance education over a period of eleven years. In short, I was provided access to education that fit both my needs, and the needs of my baby who – regardless of whether she ‘should’ be a part of my life at this time – was a part of my life. In fact, she was the very centre of my life.

The advent of Teenage Parents Unit

In New Zealand, for young women who did not accept that pregnancy would curtail their education, the option to enrol in the Teen Parent Units became available in 1994. At that time, the first school for teenage parents was opened in Porirua, in the province of Wellington, just fourteen kilometres from where I had lived as a teenage parent nearly twenty years earlier. Porirua is ranked in the highest band of the index of deprivation in New Zealand5 (University of Otago 2013); in keeping with trends elsewhere, a high proportion of teenage parents came from impoverished backgrounds and experienced ‘ongoing challenges connected to family violence, drugs, alcohol’ (Education Review Office 2013). Porirua College had faced this

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5 The index of deprivation gives a weighted score for a Statistics NZ defined boundary. The score is based on nine indicators taken from the 2013 New Zealand Census.
reality ‘head-on’ and was committed to meeting the needs of teenage parents in the community (Baragwanath n.d.). The founder of the school, Susan Baragwanath, had been the recipient of a New Zealand Eisenhower Fellowship and spent three months in the US researching what could be done to meet the ongoing educational needs of young parents. In keeping with the deficit discourse of teenage parenting, these first schools were funded by the Ministry of Justice as part of a drive for crime prevention.

Two years later, Baragwanath undertook research on the possibilities for teenage parents aged sixteen or under to continue their education across Aotearoa New Zealand. This latter research (Baragwanath 1996) confirmed that schools in the lowest socio-economic areas had 86 per cent of teenage mothers enrolled. Only 9 per cent of the mothers aged under sixteen had return to their home school after their baby was born. For the schools that responded (ninety-nine in total), there was no consensus as to who was responsible for the ongoing education of young people who were parents and who were legally entitled to access free, quality education. The results suggested that childcare was available for only 17 per cent of the schools, with only 10 per cent offering on-site childcare; only two of ninety-nine schools had a written policy regarding how the school would respond to the needs of teenage parents.

In 2017, there are twenty-three TPU across Aotearoa New Zealand. It is apposite to provide a brief synopsis of the findings of a 2013 evaluation of the Units, undertaken by New Zealand’s Education Review Office – Te Tari Arotake Matauranga. At the time of the review, there were twenty-one TPU. Education Review Office reviewers visited each TPU, observed classes, reviewed documents and spoke with a range of stakeholders including young parents, teachers, school leaders and Board Trustees (Education Review Office 2013). Five questions focused the evaluation: first, how effective were TPU in promoting and supporting positive outcomes for students? Second, how well did processes for induction, individual planning, support and transition promote student engagement and success at TPU? Third, what was the quality of teaching and learning at TPU? Fourth, how well did TPU work with their educational and community contexts to promote student outcomes? Finally, how effective was the leadership, management and organization of the TPU?
The evaluation report indicates that fifteen TPU were performing ‘well’, their programmes were leading to ‘better educational, social and health outcomes for students’. The evaluation report suggests, in keeping with the findings reported in other chapters of this collection, that many of the young parents had previously been disengaged in/from mainstream education and would not have returned to their home school following the birth of their children. Five TPU were rated as ‘innovative and cohesive’, featuring ‘coordinated systems, teaching and support. They responded well to student needs and aspirations’ (Education Review Office 2013: 1–2). These features of innovation and cohesion were also evident in the ten rated as ‘mostly effective’. However, here room for improvement was identified. Of the six units that were not rated as performing well, areas of concern were their less engaging teaching and learning programmes. Three TPU were identified as causing concern on a range of dimensions. Here, young parents were not significantly improving their educational, social and health outcomes. With the exception of these three units, the reviewers spoke with students who had ‘transformed from being relatively unsuccessful students to having good or very good school-leaving qualifications’ (Education Review Office 2013: 2). Students also benefited from ‘easy access’ for them, and their children, to a range of health professionals (Education Review Office 2013: 5).

For all TPU, even the most successful, attendance was an issue – success in education, wherever the education occurs, depends on sustained engagement; at the same time, small staff numbers in the Units that were apart from their host schools made it difficult to offer broad, engaging curriculum for all students. The culture of the fifteen TPU that were most effective was

orientated towards values of respect, care and acceptance. Leaders, teachers and students interacted positively, in an adult-to-adult way that was caring and mutually trusting. [...] the strong relationships staff had with students made these units

6 See Hindin-Miller in this collection for an overview of the holistic model of one of the most effective TPU.
a safe place for students to find support and solve problems associated with living independently as a teenage parent. (Education Review Office 2013: 6)

In earlier research, undertaken in Australia, I have attempted to portray the impact that a place of belonging, an educational place of belonging, can have on forging the relationship of a young parent to education, a relationship that is capable of sustaining an educational journey:

I invite you to imagine a scene: it is 11.30am on a sunny Tuesday morning in the first Term of the 2005 school year at a secondary school in Corio, one of the ‘problem’ neighbourhoods in the northern suburbs of Geelong. Behind a closed door in the hall that opens into the gymnasium two young women relax in a small common room that is packed full of ‘things-that-might-come-in-useful-one-day’. The young women, both aged seventeen, are doing what senior students do with their free periods: one sits on the desk, leaning back against the window to enjoy the sun beating on her back. She is swinging her legs and sipping from a water bottle. The other relaxes in an armchair, studiously working her way through a pack of crisps as they chat about the events of the morning. It is only when you cast your eyes down a little that you notice, curled in the arm of the second young woman, a newborn infant. Nicholas is a mere nine days old and is already at his community school; his mother is an enrolled student completing her senior school certificate. She is on leave from classes at present as Nicholas can’t go into the on-site childcare centre until he is six weeks old. However you are struck by the wonderful realisation that his mum, a young woman who walked away from her first experience of secondary school years ago, now chooses to be at school even when she doesn’t have to be. (Kamp 2006: 124)

The context of this narrative was the Young Parents’ Access Project (YPAP) that was established from 2002 within the grounds of a senior secondary school in the northern suburbs of Geelong (see Angwin, Harrison et al. 2004, Harrison, Angwin et al. 2010, Harrison and Shacklock 2007, Kamp 2014, Shacklock, Harrison et al. 2006). At the YPAP, the project included a modified curriculum and timeline for attainment of a senior school certificate (either the Victorian Certificate of Education or the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning), a Parent Support Worker, and

7 Pseudonym.
8 A school that only offers Years 11 and 12 – the two senior years of second-level school in Victoria.
the provision of a purpose-build, licenced childcare centre in the grounds of the school for the children of students. The provision of the childcare centre was central to a shift beyond conceptual support to provide an holistic educational context that acknowledged and responded to the needs of young people who are not only grappling with the acknowledged pressures of completing their senior school qualifications, but also wish to actively parent their baby and are coping with early parenting and the logistics of that, in and of itself. The evaluation by the ERO reported a similar example:

One student told ERO how she had become pregnant at fifteen and had hidden her condition from her parents right up until she was going into labour. She started at the TPU a few weeks after the birth of her child. Her regular routine involves walking to the station each morning with her child and catching a train just before 6.30. They then catch a bus a walk to the TPU. At the end of the day this journey is reversed to get back home. The staff report that she is never late or absent and is seen as a student leader at the unit. At the time of the review the student was on track to complete NCEA® Level 3 in 2013 and begin a tertiary training course in 2014. (Education Review Office 2013: 2–3)

Literature from the contexts referenced in the two prior quotes – the YPAP and TPU as a group – highlights the importance of an education context that is designed to acknowledged and flex with the complexity that inheres in the student-parent assemblage and the ways this, in turn, coheres with teaching that allows ‘maximum potential and connection to the [pedagogic] situation (Mulcahy 2012: 24). My own continued study to achieve what was then School Certificate by way of Te Kura did not require me to disturb a baby and then travel on a bus early in the morning before commencing a full day of study; my trajectory allowed me to be with my baby at home and to study at a pace that acknowledged both my own, and my familial needs. There was no issue of attendance, or small staff numbers, in the school that was the dining room in Newlands Road. Meanwhile, for those students whose trajectory is to remain in, or return to, ‘normal’

9 National Certificate of Education Achievement: Level 3 being the highest level of New Zealand’s second-level school qualification.
school the expectation will, for now, be that they, as individuals, resolve the ‘dilemma of difference’ (Kelly 2000).10

Within, apart and beyond: Extending the fields of education

To expand on my own perceptions and observations on current approaches to identifying and responding to the needs of teenage parents in Aotearoa New Zealand a survey of eight schools was undertaken. The survey of fifteen questions was approved by the Education Research Ethics Committee of the University of Canterbury; the survey was activated using the Qualtrix online survey platform. The respondents were based in diverse school settings: five mainstream schools (one single sex boys, one single sex girls and three co-educational colleges) and three TPU, all of which accept enrolments from teenage mothers and teenage fathers who meet the eligibility criteria (although most enrolments are from teenage mothers). Three schools were located in the South Island, five were located in the North Island (with the provinces of Canterbury and Auckland both having two respondents).

Enrolment of parent students ranged from those with none enrolled (two schools) to more than fifteen enrolled (three TPU). Respondents indicated that most of the young parents they worked with were young women; none indicated that the respondents they worked with were couples and two respondents weren’t sure (I have taken this to be indicative of them not currently having parenting students enrolled at the school). Only two respondents had a formal, documented process for identifying the needs of teenage parents when they begin, or returned to, their studies after childbirth. For one school, this involved a structured enrolment interview that was

10 The Ministry of Education is currently completing a report on their pilot support for teenage parents in mainstream schools.
informal and chatty and designed to put potential students and accompanying parents or partners at ease. It gives them a chance to ask questions, have a look around and get feel (sic) for the environment. An (sic) more detailed academic interview takes place after the student formally enrols and begins to study.

For the other school

We have an induction process that identifies the gaps if any in their education and discusses how she will proceed. She also meets with the careers teacher. She is assigned to a hapu\(^{11}\) group and two teachers who deal with her Hauora (wellbeing) she is able to meet with a nurse at any time and has access to a social worker. Enrolling her child/ren into childcare is at her discretion but she is encouraged by teachers and students to become familiar with the centre which is situated thirty metres from our classrooms.

For those schools that did not have a formal, documented process one respondent indicated that the school had a social worker on staff and a visiting Plunket\(^{12}\) nurse both of whom channelled information on any student needs; this respondent indicated a commitment to strong relationships with students which would allow students to articulate any needs. A second respondent indicated that tutors, school Deans, or other school staff would ensure the student could talk to a school counsellor. Two respondents indicated they would contact a TPU, or a mainstream school with broad experience in meeting the needs of parenting students, for guidance as well as just listening to the student.

Respondents indicated a range of staff were involved in identifying the needs of teenage parents: TPU head teachers, school nurse, social workers (including specialist new parent social workers connected to the birth hospital), teachers, Plunket nurses, pastoral staff, counsellors. No respondent indicated involvement of non-professionals, such as family members despite families being central to decision-making and support in pregnancy and parenting (Macvarish and Billings 2010). Two schools indicated that the initial identification of needs would be revisited at a

\(^{11}\) In Maori, a familial community.

\(^{12}\) Plunket is a long-standing New Zealand institution and the country’s largest provider of support services for the development, health and wellbeing of children under five.
scheduled later date: one indicated this was ‘regular’; the other indicated that this occurred on a fortnightly basis.

Respondents were given a list of options as to the areas that a school should consider in identifying the needs of parenting students, regardless of the school’s ability to meet the needs they identified. The most common needs were personalized curriculum, health care, contraception, career advice and mentoring, involvement in decision-making, work experience, parenting skills, critical thinking, whanau support and early-childhood education for their children (75 per cent of respondents). The second most common needs were part-time enrolment, advocacy, subsidized learning resources, free childcare onsite, involvement in mainstream school activities, breast-feeding facilities (62 per cent of respondents). Provision of uniforms, or exemption of the requirement to wear a uniform was identified as a need by 50 per cent of respondents while social events were identified as a need by 37 per cent of respondents. The areas of need that respondents were uncertain of were part-time enrolment, advocacy, free childcare, involvement in mainstream school activities, the wearing of uniforms, provision of breastfeeding facilities and social events. Of the needs identified, only three schools reported their current provision was closely aligned with what they believed the needs might be. Two respondents added to the list, noting the need for financial support, free medical care for parents, transport and appropriate housing, ‘the only homes they can afford are often a low standard’.

While it is notable that only two respondents had a formal approach to identifying the needs of teenage parents at the point that they reconnect with education, the extracts are positive in the ethics of care (Gilligan 1982) that informs them: in extract one, this initial contact is one of ‘ease’; in extract two, the initial contact includes ‘wellbeing’ and the self-defined needs of both the parent and the child. The position of TPU as expert advisors to other schools has potential, but only if all TPU reach the level of ‘innovative and cohesive’ as witnessed by the ERO in 2013. The range of responses on the identification of needs indicates ‘thick’ interpretations that

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13 Children under thirteen can access zero-fees medical care in New Zealand.
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recognize the complexity of the parent-student assemblage. At the same
time, the responses indicate uncertainty, particularly in regard to those
options that cross the boundaries and trouble the signifier ‘student’: part-
time enrolment, being involved in (and potentially troubling) the broader
life of the school, having flexibility in regard to wearing school uniforms.
On another level, there is an acknowledgement of the distance to be trav-
elled, even when there is in-principle support of thickly interpreted needs.
Finally, the addition by respondents of social welfare provisions illustrates
a broader policy concern, to which I now turn.

Constructing particular policy problems

In 2017, as this chapter took form the New Zealand parliament debated
a motion to remove abortion from the Crimes Act 1961. The Hon Paula
Bennett – Acting Prime Minister at the time and Deputy Leader of the con-
servative National Party – was asked by Jan Logie, a Member of Parliament
for the Green Party, whether the Prime Minister has asked the Minister
for Women whether it was time women and their doctors were trusted to
make the right decision about unplanned pregnancies. In response, the
Acting Prime Minister said:

I have spoken with the Minister for Women on issues around this. One thing that
she has spoken about is how pleased she is about both the reduction in teen births
to teenagers and, actually, abortions as well. [...]. The other great news though, more
importantly, I think, is that we have got 57 per cent fewer teen mums on welfare, and
I think that they and their children will be doing much better. (Parliament 2017)

This statement reflects a long policy narrative around teenage pregnancy
and parenting in New Zealand. In 2017, with a General Election sched-
uled for later this year, ACT continues its campaign against those who
do not accord with their perception of the ‘correct’ time to parent. Beth
Houlbrooke – ACT’s new Deputy Leader – is reported as saying ‘The
fact is, parents who cannot afford to have children should not be having
Within and Apart

them. ACT believes in personal responsibility, meaning we stand with the majority of parents who wait and save before having children’. Her comments were in response to the Labour Party’s election manifesto proposal to introduce a NZD 60-a-week Best Start payment for each child in the first year after Paid Parental Leave ends, and for low to middle income families up to age three (Labour 2017). For Houlbrooke, and others in ACT, ‘Labour’s baby bonus could extend the misery of child poverty and even child abuse’ as ‘paying people to have babies encourages them to grow their families when they’re not properly mature or financially prepared’.

As Georg Menz (2006) illustrates in his overview of New Zealand’s welfare responses to teenage pregnancy, paradoxes abound. Rates of teenage pregnancy decline, but policy concern about them increases; out-of-wedlock births increase across all age-groups, yet for teenage parents this is taken as evidence of their ‘irresponsible behaviour’; teenage pregnancy is correlated strongly to poverty, but this does not result in the provision of welfare or the protection of employment that offers a living wage but, rather, to the stigmatization of poor people. This situation sits in sharp contrast to former eras: prior to the 1980s New Zealand’s expanding welfare state generated living standards that were among the highest in the world. The advent of neoliberalism implemented waves of reform to the welfare state; in this teenage pregnancy is reconceptualized as a policy problem to the extent that it impedes labour market participation. Whereas once the management of the pregnant teenager focused on concerns manifest in agendas such as St Mary’s achievement of ‘national purity’ through ‘fallen women’ being made to do unpaid, domestic labour, now the focus is on ‘employability’. Thus, early motherhood is now socially constructed as deviant economic behaviour (Alldred and David 2010, Cherrington and Breheny 2005):

The rhetorical attacks against teenage mothers ‘sponging off’ the welfare state closely resembled the mythical Cadillac driving US welfare queen, an image designed with no verifiable empirical basis by the Reagan government, and bore close resemblance to the campaign against single mothers by the Conservative governments of the 1980s in the UK. This line of reasoning is still regularly deployed by associates of the ultra neoliberal far-right Association of Consumers and Taxpayers (ACT) Party, who argue that the [Domestic Purposes Benefit] has created a persistent welfare dependent underclass. (New Zealand Herald cited in Menz 2006: 55–6)
Ten years later, ACT’s position clearly remains: while they argue for individualism that keeps government out of the private realm and ‘private’ problems, they retain the right to interfere in the most personal of decisions concerning the right time and financial circumstance in which to become a parent. As Menz notes, welfare support is portrayed in such arguments as creating a ‘moral hazard that previously did not exist’ (Menz 2006: 57). The risks to the life journey of the teenage parent, and her child, are presented as beginning at the moment of welfare being provided; in this ‘mythical’ world there is no risk from prior life circumstances, whatever those circumstances and experiences might be. As in the UK, individuals and their families now meet needs that were previously ‘framed by the Left as societal or community responsibilities’ (Alldred and David 2010: 25). For the current government, the ‘important’ news is ‘fewer teen mums on welfare’ (Parliament 2017).

For feminist theorist Nancy Fraser (1989: 163) social policy debates begin with the definition of the needs of a particular group: ‘needs claims have a relational structure; implicitly or explicitly, they have the form ‘A needs x in order to y’. As I have argued previously (Kamp 2014) provision for the parent–student assemblage can quickly become impoverished at the same time as doing all that is required of it within the dominant policy discourse. Needs can be interpreted ‘thinly’ (not being on welfare) or ‘thickly’; thickly interpreted needs result in fuller policy recommendations or, in Fraser’s language, in ‘elaborated chains of in-order-to relations’. For Fraser, ‘thin’ interpretations stop needs ‘leaking’, overflowing the accepted boundaries in ways that would, for instance, force a critical debate about the legitimate needs of teenage parents as students, needs that are ‘contoured by their status as parents’ (Alldred and David 2010: 40). In New Zealand, the major welfare reform of 1998 which speedily introduced ‘employability’ as the prime intent of welfare through a discourse of ‘workfarism’ did so without any form of critical debate, without any public hearings or even any scrutiny by Parliamentary Select Committee (Menz 2006).

It speaks to me that, in 1976 when I was interviewed, teenage pregnancy and parenting was identified as a policy problem. However, the problem identification was not premised on the ‘moral hazards’ of welfare, or on whether the rates of teenage parents were going up or down. The problem
was ‘the number of pregnant school girls who don’t continue full-time education’ (n.d. 1976). That one quarter of the students enrolled in Te Kura at that time were related to teenage pregnancy signals, for me, a recognition of the policy problem that TPU would seek to respond to in a far more visible manner some twenty years later. Yet, the position of TPU within, but apart from, their host schools remains a work in progress. Yes, many students had disengaged from ‘normal’ school. Accordingly, TPU’s separation might, in some way, appeal. Yet the price to be paid in terms of access to the full range of experience and expertise that resides within ‘normal’ must be weighed. While the evaluation of TPU (Education Review Office 2013) reported high levels of ‘communication and collaboration’ between Units and host schools and access to ‘resources such as the careers adviser, the school nurse and guidance counsellor’ this is a ‘thin version’ of the richness of what is on offer within schools, particularly for those TPU with low levels of staffing and lacking professional support. The report noted that one host school would not celebrate the successes of students at the TPU as this could be ‘misinterpreted as condoning their circumstances’; students from one Unit also reported ‘host school students were not so welcoming’. The report also called for a national policy framework on teen pregnancy and guidelines for ‘effective TPU practice’ (Education Review Office 2013); the national policy framework remains elusive and, while the guidelines for TPU did eventuate in 2016, they focus on operational issues and give little (no) guidance on the embodied concerns surveyed in this chapter (Ministry of Education 2016). In this, being within, but apart, evidences both opportunities and obstacles in sustaining meaningful educational opportunities for teenage parents.

Concluding thoughts

Education does not float in a void: this chapter illustrates the clear leaning in the current context of Aotearoa New Zealand for particular, stubborn discourses that translate the legal right to education in particular ways.
As a teenage parent, I remain struck by the persistence of the connection between abortion, provision for teenage parents in Aotearoa New Zealand and anticipated criminality. This occurs not only through particular forms of research (see SmithBattle in this collection) but also through legislature. In Aotearoa New Zealand, provision of abortion is legislated by way of the Crimes Act 1961;14 at the same time, initial provision for teenage parents as students was funded by way of initiatives aim to decrease criminality (see Hindin-Miller in this collection). As I write this chapter, and survey other chapters, this assemblage of teenage parent–child of teenage parent–criminal–intervention feels much like that other ‘feeling’, that of being ‘a problem’ (Luttrell 2003). I recognize and celebrate that funding, of some kind, has been made available from respective governments to ensure the young people who also happen to be parents can access educational provision that acknowledges their particular needs. All students are entitled to this recognition of and accommodation of their particular needs – be they gifted, living with a disability, parenting, or something else again. Yet teenage parents, as Pillow (2015) notes, remain ‘caught’ between discursive demands: to be a good parent and bond with their child, to be a good student with sustained attendance and to perform results, to be a productive consumer whilst completing their education, to be a good citizen and pay their own way, to be a good member of their community, notwithstanding that its norms around childbearing and rearing may be hopelessly in tension with current policy discourses.

In this chapter I have touched – and felt – a number of educational contexts which have been touched – felt by – me in the course of my own educational journey. Te Kura – the Correspondence School – and its teachers: my experience with Mrs Barton’s letters tucked inside my sets of work

14 That the forty-year-old abortion law remains within the Crimes Act is intensely problematic for many New Zealand citizens. Yet it is one that then Conservative Prime Minister – Hon Bill English – had ‘no interest in rectifying’. Given this, the complex stories of the more than 13,000 women per year who terminate pregnancies are often ‘hidden’. For example, the story of A Mother (<https://thespinoff.co.nz/parenting/13-03-2017/to-the-staff-of-wellington-hospitals-te-mahoe-clinic-this-is-what-you-did-for-me-when-you-gave-me-an-abortion/>).
Within and Apart

exemplified the stance called for by Luttrell (2003: 176) – a stance of interest and curiosity rather than discipline and punishment in regard to the education, health and well-being of both me and of my infant daughter. Many years later, as I commenced my doctoral journey, the opportunity to engage with the Young Parents Access Project in Corio was something of an encounter with myself, a finding of myself in the literature concerning the apparently inevitable trajectories of teenage parents, a witnessing of schools that would not accept the inevitability of that narrative (Kamp and Kelly 2014). More recently, in visiting Karanga Mai – the Teen Parents Unit just north of Christchurch15 – I talk with young parents who are beginning their own journeys of learning. My host introduces me to the students, ‘this is Annelies; she is a teenage parent too’. We talk about their aspirations, for themselves, for their study and their children. We visit the children, playing in the childcare centre that is co-located with the TPU. I imagine what it might have been like if I had completed my education in such company rather than alone at my parents’ dining room table. I don’t know that it would have been better for me; for me, solitude within the care of my family worked. And yet, the ‘how’ of continuing one’s education really doesn’t matter; what matters is that a trajectory of learning is taken, one that allows access to high-quality, supportive education that meets the changing needs of a given student-parent-child multiplicity as they journey through life.

Bibliography


15 The story of the genesis of Karanga Mai is the focus of Chapter 11 of this collection.


