

Coping strategies for adolescent birth-mothers who return to school following adoption

Linda Theron and Nadine Dunn

opwlct@puk.ac.za

In this article we report on a study on the effects of adoption on the school performance of birth-mothers (adolescent mothers who choose to have their babies adopted) who return to school following adoption. The study focused on the experience of five white adolescent birth-mothers. Factors impacting on school performance were identified in a literature study and correlated with information received from the birth-mothers using phenomenological interviews. The study aimed at providing an in-depth understanding of the factors that impacted negatively on the birth-mothers' school performance in order to ultimately develop guidelines for helping birth-mothers cope better when returning to school.

Introduction

Adolescent pregnancies are a reality. Some adolescent birth-mothers choose adoption as a solution to this reality. The term 'birth-mother' refers to a mother who relinquishes her baby for adoption. Synonyms are biological mother or natural mother of the adopted child. In this article, adolescent mothers who choose to have their babies adopted will be termed birth-mothers.

There is a dearth of literature focusing on coping strategies for birth-mothers who return to school. Quite the opposite is true with regard to abortion and coping strategies for learners who choose abortion. In this article we report on a study conducted to address the aforementioned void and will document what impacts negatively on the adolescent birth-mother's school performance and provide guidelines for supporting birth-mothers who return to school.

Adoption, adoption rates and the choice of adoption

Adoption, as defined by Human (2000:10), is the legal process through which the existing legal relationship between a child and his/her birth-parents is terminated and a new legal relationship created between the adoptive parents and the adoptive child.

Novick (2001) states that one in three adolescent mothers drop out of school in the USA due to pregnancy. Only 50% of girls who give birth before the age of 18 finish high school. Adoption rates in the United States have declined in recent decades as adoption has fallen out of favour with state governments and the social services establishment. In 1979 one in four babies born out of wedlock was adopted. In 1991, only one in 25 was adopted (Fagan, 1996:2).

In South Africa 30% of adolescents have given birth once by the age of 19 (Kaufman, De Wet & Stadler, 2000). Adoption rates in South Africa are difficult to document as little research has been conducted. Unconfirmed adoption rates obtained from adoption agencies indicate that only 36% of those who initially decide on adoption follow through with it. Less than 1% of adolescents who fall pregnant have their babies adopted (Child Trends, 1995).

Adoption is generally viewed quite favourably by young pregnant women (Daly, 1994: 346). Nevertheless, the decision to release a child for adoption is difficult and complicated (Martin, 1989). Teenage pregnancy is characterised by a complex emotional response: despair, joy, desperation, and disbelief are but a few of the convoluted emotions adolescent birth-mothers experience when they find out that they are pregnant and realize they cannot keep the

child for whatever reason (Mathewes-Green, 2004). This intricate emotional maelstrom contributes to an adolescent's decision to choose adoption.

Fiscal motivation and a set of intertwined circumstances, experiences, relationships and attitudes which affect the social world of the adolescent mother may also prompt adoption: adolescent childbearing is heavily concentrated among poor and low-income teenagers, most of whom are unmarried. Low-income youths may not intend to have a baby, but may not be sufficiently motivated to avoid pregnancy. Without future incentives — a good job, financial independence and marriage — low-income youth may have little motivation to delay childbearing (Christensen & Rosen, 1996:2). Adoption therefore allows their offspring a future different from theirs.

It must be noted that relatively little research has been conducted to date on factors that influence adolescents to resolve pregnancies through adoption (Donnelly & Voydanoff, 1991). Even less research considers the impact of adoption on the birth-mother's school performance.

Factors impacting negatively on school performance

A plethora of factors are potentially negative for school performance. These include:

- **Health and nutrition.** Food intake or lack thereof influences cognitive development and can thus impact negatively on school performance (Donald, Lazurus & Lolwana, 2002: 206; 286). Poor health influences decision making, planning, goal setting, communication and stress management. If learners have poor health, they are also more likely to be absent and miss work, essential to the curriculum (Marx, Wooley & Northrop, 1998:40).
- **Attention deficit.** Attention deficit disorder is recognized in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA, 2002:49). People with attention deficit disorder find it difficult to sustain attention on a task or activity (Barlow & Durand, 1999:440, Louw, 2005:59). At a school level, this leads to negative school performance since important tasks are sometimes not finished and important information is not taken in when spoken to.
- **Thinking, learning and remembering.** According to Piaget, people are actively engaged in an ongoing process of adaptation, a process of continuous organizing and reorganizing of information and experiences. Three continuously interacting processes, namely, assimilation, accommodation and equilibration help people to organize, understand and adapt (Donald *et al.*, 2002:63). When learners are not stimulated sufficiently, or are inactive or not exploratory, their cognitive development lags. In such cases, they lack experience in organizing and understanding their world and adapting their cognitive schemas to achieve equilibration. This influences their school performance negatively in the long run, when compared to learners who were stimulated sufficiently.
- **Motivation.** No learning can be effective without the motivation, or will, to take on the challenges of learning (Donald *et al.*, 2002:122). Motivational states result from the multiple interactions of a large number of variables, including the adolescent's physical needs, need for safety, social needs, need for appreciation and ultimately self-actualizing needs (Maslow as quoted by Donald *et al.*, 2002:122; Reber & Reber, 2001:447). When these basic needs are unmet, the motivation to learn is stymied.
- **Lack of support from parents.** Well-functioning, supportive families and social support within communities contribute to a learner's success. If learners feel that their parents do not support their education and do not attend meetings when called to school, they are less

likely to perform well. Learners may feel that parental apathy is proof of their lack of worth and/or scholastic inability and may thus continue to perform poorly (Carlyon, Carlyon & McCarthy, 1998:67).

- **Adolescent pregnancies.** According to Blum and Goldhagen (in Louw, Van Ede & Louw, 1998:415), adolescents bearing children may be associated with a syndrome of failure: failure to fulfil the functions of adolescence, failure to remain in school, failure to limit family size, failure to establish a vocation and become self-supporting and failure to have children who reach their potential in life. Adolescent pregnancies are especially disruptive when it comes to school attendance. Many leave school early in the pregnancy. Some never return to school and most of them are unemployed six months after giving birth (Phoenix, 1991:218).
- **Socioeconomic status and poverty.** Inadequate medical care and deficient nutrition are related to poverty. Unsatisfactory medical care can cause or contribute to learning difficulties and absenteeism. Inadequate nutrition sabotages effective learning. Poverty limits the range of experience learners bring to learning, thereby curbing success in school activities (Demie, Butler & Taplin, 2002).

Furthermore, low socioeconomic status is often associated with feeble support for learners' education. Even if parents want their children to have an education, from a young age poor children often need to contribute to family responsibilities. They work relatively long hours to contribute to the family income during adolescence, reducing the time available for them to study and succeed in school (Bissell, 2004; Mizala, Romaguera & Reinaga, 2000).

- **Educator impact.** In spite of being highly qualified and experienced, some educators have low morale and poor commitment (Hall, Altman, Nkomo, Peltzer & Zuma, 2005). Learner performance is enhanced by constructive homework assignments and quality interaction with motivated educators. When educators do not provide this, learners' school performance suffers (Psachropoulos in Mizala *et al.*, 2000). Educator absenteeism is also associated with poorer performance (Avellar-Flemin in Mizala *et al.*, 2000). Rising educator absenteeism and demotivation is associated with the HIV/AIDS pandemic (Theron, 2005).
- **Length of time spent in school.** The longer learners stay at one school, the better their performance (Lambeth Education, 2001). If a learner moves regularly from one school to another, it impacts negatively on school performance.
- **Psychological problems.** When a learner experiences psychological problems, a breakdown in cognitive, emotional or behavioural functioning can ensue. In such instances optimal functioning is stymied and this also influences school work negatively (Barlow & Durand, 1999:2; Lerner, 2003:554).
- **Self-concept.** The self-concept refers to what people believe or think about themselves (Donald *et al.*, 2002:223) and forms the central determinant of an individual's relationships with her life world (Gouws & Kruger, 1996:91). A positive self-concept empowers learners to feel good about themselves and to engage actively and positively with other people and school work (Cotton, 1993). The opposite is also true — negative self-concept can impact negatively on school performance (Lerner, 2003:554).
- **Background and home.** A learner's background affects school performance (MacBeath & Sammons, 1998; Lerner, 2003:115). If a learner's background and home culture are

incongruent with the school's culture, the learner's chances of success at school decrease. Because the school environment and the home environment differ, the learner does not fit in readily and may therefore struggle to engage in the learning process.

Rationale for research being reported on

In daily interactions with adolescent birth-mothers who returned to school, the researchers became aware that these learners showed altered school performance. Because no explanation for this phenomenon could be found in current literature, a phenomenological study was undertaken.

The aim of the research was to indicate what influence giving a child up for adoption has on the adolescent birth-mother's holistic school performance. The secondary aim was to write guidelines for Life Orientation Educators to support birth-mothers who returned to school following adoption.

Research design

A qualitative research design was followed: phenomenological interviews were conducted to gain as much insight as possible into the perceptions and experiences of birth-mothers who returned to school and the impact of the adoption on their schooling.

The research group

For phenomenological studies, sample size is less crucial than ensuring that participants are selected according to their direct experience of the phenomenon being studied (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996:201). Typical sample size ranges from 5 to 25 individuals, all of whom have direct experience of the phenomenon (Creswell in Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:139). For the purposes of this research, a minimum of five case studies was decided on. For practical reasons, finding five participants was quite a task. Many participants who agreed to participate withdrew because of anticipated emotional discomfort. Given ethical constraints, agencies (through which learners work to have their babies adopted) could not provide names of adolescent birth-mothers.

The selection of the research group was purposive, meaning that only adolescent learners who had relinquished their babies for adoption and returned to school were eligible to participate in the interviews. Purposive sampling was necessary as only birth-mothers who had returned to school could clarify the phenomenon being studied. Five Gauteng birth-mothers were interviewed. All the participants were white, with four being Afrikaans-speaking and one English-speaking.

Data collection

The birth-mothers were interviewed using an in-depth, semi-structured interview. The interviews focused on how the birth-mothers viewed themselves before, during, and after the adoption of the baby. Information gained included their perception of their life-world, pregnancy, support received, and the impact of the adoption on their schooling.

Cumulative school records (i.e. report cards) were obtained from the learners' schools. These records were used to provide comparative data of the birthmother's school performance before and after the adoption. Such records were used to verify the perceptions of the birth-mothers concerning their academic achievement prior to and following adoption.

Data analysis

The data obtained from the interviews were content-analysed and responses were grouped in terms of common and divergent themes, biases and patterns, in order to determine how adoption impacts on an adolescent birth-mother's scholastic performance. Currently documented factors which impact on school performance in general were compared with the responses of the birth-mothers and similarities and discrepancies noted.

Findings of the study

When the scholastic profiles of the adolescent birth-mothers were examined, deterioration in scholastic performance following adoption of offspring was noted. The deterioration ranged from slight (1.7%) to noticeable (17.6%). To determine what influenced the deterioration in school performance, in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the birth-mothers.

The phenomenological interviews corroborated the role of the following already documented factors which have the potential to impact negatively on schooling:

- Given their pregnancies, a change in the birth-mothers' health impacted on school attendance and consequently school performance.
- All the birth-mothers reported grieving for the babies that they had lost. The grieving took different forms but they generally reported crying copiously. Grief interferes with concentration and clarity of thought and could therefore account for scholastic degeneration.
- The birth-mothers generally reported a poor self-concept. Poor self-concept and poor school performance are positively correlated.

The findings of this study did not support the following documented factors generally viewed as instrumental in altered school performance:

- The birth-mothers indicated the presence of parental support pre- and post-pregnancy, as well as once they had returned to school. A lack of support could therefore not justify scholastic decline.
- Four of the five birth-mothers returned to the same school, therefore a change in schools could not account for deterioration in scholastic performance.
- Four of the five learners' backgrounds and homes remained constant prior to and following the adoption, therefore poorness of fit between background and school could not substantiate deterioration in scholastic performance following the adoption.
- In terms of educator impact, all the birth-mothers reported that they felt supported by their teachers to varying degrees after the adoption. All birth-mothers reported being motivated by teacher-interaction when they returned to school — despite this, their performance declined.
- Socio-economic status remained constant prior to and following the adoption, which meant that it could not really be counted as a factor contributing to the scholastic decline. However, it must be noted that 4 of the 5 respondents chose adoption for fiscal reasons.
- The birth-mothers viewed themselves as emotionally mature, suggesting that their perception of their psychological functioning following the adoption was positive and could not explain the decline in scholastic performance.

Several new factors impacting negatively on the scholastic performance of birth-mothers who return to school emerged from the interviews. The factors were as follows:

Inconsistent support

The birth-mothers who showed the least deterioration in school performance, appeared to have

received the most consistent support. The birth-mothers who showed the greatest decline experienced erratic support from parents, family, and friends.

Inability to articulate exactly what support was needed

All birth-mothers reported receiving support from their educators, but the birth-mothers who showed the greatest scholastic regression indicated that they had not always received the kind of support they needed. This could not be attributed to the educators as the birth-mothers referred to personal inability to convey the exact nature of their support needs.

Painful reflections about the adoption

The birth-mothers who showed less scholastic deterioration evinced that they had generally come to terms with the adoption. The birth-mothers who showed the most deterioration reported that they were preoccupied with regret and guilt. Therefore it would appear that more positive reflections made it easier for the birth-mothers in this sample to cope scholastically, whereas negative reflections stymied school performance.

Related to such painful reflections is inadequate meaning-making of the adoption in terms of the advantage that adoption held for the birth-mothers personally and for their families. The birth-mothers, whose school performance weakened most, could not articulate any such benefits. The opposite was true of the birth-mothers whose school functioning was less affected, suggesting that they made personal meaning of the adoption and could rationalize their decision in terms of benefits. This probably decreased the amount of guilt experienced.

Recurrent thoughts, emptiness, and guilt about the relinquished child

Fixation on guilt and personal emptiness as a result of the adoption were noted. The birth-mothers reported fearing that the adoption would hold emotional disadvantages for the child. The most common concern in this regard was that the child would one day not know his biological parents.

The birth-mothers also thought recurrently about their personal loss. The dominant themes included that they would not be able to be part of the child's life, would not see the child grow up and the resultant thoughts that they would have to live with these for the rest of their lives.

Such fixations implied an inability to move on, which must have impacted negatively on school performance.

Negative future expectations

The majority of the birth-mothers held negative future expectations. They expected the future to be a continuation of bleakness. Such negative anticipation cannot fuel motivation and must therefore have impacted negatively on school performance.

Continued grieving and emotional isolation

The grieving process is an integral part of the healing process and all birth-mothers referred to grieving. In this sample, the deterioration in school performance and the way in which the mothers grieved were positively correlated: most deterioration was noted in birth-mothers whose grief continued unabated and who saw grief as a permanent. In some instances grief caused emotional isolation. In such instances grief led not only to impaired concentration, but to disrupted functioning and remoteness, which would diminish the ability to receive and to ask for support.

A lack of something or someone to live for

The birth-mothers reported struggling to find something or someone to live for following the adoption and this made it difficult to move on. In the end the birth-mothers indicated that they would have preferred another person rather than a hobby or a pet to live for. This suggested the need to connect with other human beings. The greatest deterioration in school performance was noted when birth-mothers felt there was nothing to live for. The resultant lack of impetus was reflected in their schoolwork.

Disrespect for personal belief systems

The birth-mother, whose school performance deteriorated the most, would have preferred abortion. Her belief that abortion was preferable to adoption was ignored. The inference can be made that when free choice is not respected in terms of adoption and a belief system is challenged, it is hard to come to terms with the experience. This impacted negatively on her being able to continue meaningfully with life, including school performance.

Discussion of the findings

From the findings of this study, it is clear that some factors (i.e. health, inadequate concentration, and poor self-concept) which impact on school performance generally also impact on birth-mothers who continue with their schooling. It is further clear that most factors impacting on the school performance of birth-mothers following adoption are endemic to this specific population and not common to learners generally. For this reason, birth-mothers who return to school following an adoption require special understanding and focused support.

In order to offer such support, it is important to realise that many of the inimical factors arising from the adoption are interrelated. Until birth-mothers who choose adoption make meaning out of the adoptive experience, they will be beset with painful reflections and recurrent thoughts, emptiness, and guilt about the relinquished child. An inability to make meaning of the adoption and consequent loss will prolong grieving and fuel emotional isolation. This in turn will negate positive future expectations. When these birth-mothers fail to give meaning to the adoptive experience, they cannot move on and find a new life focus or something meaningful to live for. This merely strengthens a lack of positive future orientation.

An inability to articulate support needs can be linked to having experienced disrespect for personal value systems and to a poor self-concept. Having experienced erratic support could also have created a perception that personal needs are not consistently respected by others, thereby strengthening the sense of personal inadequacy. All of this promotes personal disempowerment.

The above suggests that Life Orientation educators need to be mindful of birth-mothers' grieving, their fixedness in the present, and their sense of disempowerment. To this end, the Life Orientation educator needs to ensure the following:

- Thorough guidance for birth-mothers prior to and following their decision to choose adoption. Such guidance should include awareness of the birth-mother's rights and the legal process surrounding teenage pregnancies and adoption.
- Counselling to empower the birth-mother to come to terms with the adoptive experience and its emotional legacy in order that she can move beyond the present.
- Assistance for the birth-mother with her grieving process, specifically with regard to unresolved grief. Such assistance needs to include closure exercises without unduly hastening the birth-mother towards resolution.

- Consistent, warm reaching-out to the birthmother who isolates herself following the adoption.
- Assertiveness training so that birth-mothers are empowered to stand up for themselves and to ask for necessary support.
- Encouragement to become an active part of the school community — in so doing the birth-mother will more easily find a new focus for living. A buddy system can be considered in this regard.
- Practical, curricular assistance to help the birth-mother catch up with all the work lost during the adoption process. Sensitive peer mentoring is recommended.

Conclusion

This study provided valuable insight into the factors which are inimical to the school performance of birth-mothers who return to school. It is acknowledged that the study sample was small, thereby limiting the potential for generalisation. For this reason further research is urged, so that the phenomenon may be explored using larger samples and more diverse populations. This study validates the need for such research — choosing to have a baby adopted and then returning to school is a process which appeared to be detrimental to consistent school performance. It certainly undermined the performance of the birth-mothers in the sample. Birth-mothers who return to school also have the right to quality education — to ensure this, further extensive research is critical, especially if the 'syndrome of failure' (Blum & Goldhagen in Louw, Van Ede & Louw, 1998:415) is to be replaced with a culture of resilience.

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Authors

Nadine Dunn is currently an Educator in the Mpumalanga Department of Education and has three years teaching experience. She completed an MEd in educational psychology in 2005.

Linda Theron is Senior Lecturer at the North-West University and a practising educational psychologist. Her research interests include resilience among youth (specifically township youth; learners with learning difficulties; learners with ADD; AIDS orphans), adolescent life skills, and all aspects of educators affected by the HIV and AIDS pandemic.