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# “I Think I Got the Right”

## *A Look at the Issues of Literacy with Three Parenting Teens*

**S**ince 1987, Action for Boston Community Development Learning Centre, an adult learning centre in downtown Boston, has been running a program especially aimed at pregnant and parenting teens. Its goal is to educate, to counsel, and ultimately to bring teenage parents into the workforce. Operating under the mandate of a grant provided by the Department of Public Welfare, the program also acts as a liaison between the teens and such governmental agencies as Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), General Relief (GR), a family daycare centre, the Boston City Hospital, and Saludi's Banking Training Program.

But a year old, the program has already undergone modification. Originally planned for 25 students, it now serves a maximum of 15; originally of six months duration, its exit is now open-ended. Students must be between 16 and 21, and have at least grade 3 reading and math skills. They spend half a day at ABCD Learning Centre working toward a G.E.D. and half a day in health and parenting workshops conducted by a child development specialist. Later they enter an employment or vocational training program. According to the terms of the grant, the counselling aspect of the program is intended to develop “self-worth, physical and mental health and social competence.” The education provided “must be accessible, relevant and related to [the participant's] life experiences, positively oriented, based in recognizing students' skills and competencies, flexible and demanding.” The workshops are provided to develop parenting skills.

All this looks great on paper: one year, maybe two, and the

students can attain a G.E.D., a certificate of training and practical knowledge of health and childcare. But from the outside looking in, the place of education in the priorities of pregnant and parenting teens is hard to discern. It struggles for attention among such other pressing concerns as the housing search (with Boston apartments starting at \$700-\$800 a month), work, daycare, courts, welfare, boyfriends, counselors, parents, families, friends, violence, hope, determination and constant change. Regular attendance at school seems impossible.

I sat down one day and spoke with three women from this program. All three desperately desire education, knowing it is their ticket out of dependency and into a good job; all three also admit that their immediate needs, of necessity, take precedence. When I asked them about their school experience, they responded with stories of hanging out, doing nothing, going nowhere except home at the end of the day for something to eat. However, all say that they see the adult learning centre as something “different.”

All three women have grown up very quickly, forced to become women when barely out of the 8th, 9th, or 10th grade. Each has a unique story, but none is atypical. Surviving violence and even attempted suicide, they are, if nothing else, extremely clear and articulate about the massive confusion which they entered, very much of their own free will. None regret their situation, nor do they blame others. They all like mothering, are glad to have their children while young, believe they are caring for them well.

Lucia is 19 years old. When she got pregnant at 15, in the

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summer after 8th grade, her parents threw her out of the house. Even now, almost 5 years later, her mother will meet her occasionally, but only outside the house. After a few attempts to live with friends and sisters, she went to stay at her boyfriend's parents' house, but the arrangement soon fell apart. Jealous of her, her boyfriend's brother turned the family against her. If she was watching TV, they would shut it off, as if she was invisible. Her mother-in-law would not permit her to use the washing machines because she contributed to rent but not to electricity. When she smiled, she was accused of lying to herself. When she didn't, she was called rude.

So, at the age of 16, with her 3-month old baby in the next room she took pills, lots of pills, enough to make her blind and deaf to the situation. Discovered, she was taken to the hospital and pumped out.

*When I took it I couldn't hear anything, I couldn't see anything. They took me to this hospital, pump me out. My brother came in and I didn't know who I were talking to. He said "I came to see if you're not going home with us, are you going home to your boyfriend's? And the counselor said, "We'll get you a nice place and you can stay, you and your daughter, and you can go back to school." But I love my boyfriend! And if I go back home, my father doesn't talk to me, my brother doesn't talk to me. I won't be able to go nowhere. It's going to be worse. And I said, "I'll go back to my boyfriend's."*

*And when I went back my mother-in-law is yelling at him saying I'm no good and I end up lying in bed for one week. And my mother-in-law's sending me up something to eat, she's asking "how're you doing?" and she's looking at the baby.*

*We ended up finding rat poison and the City of Boston was coming in and checking with me and talking with me and taking the case to court. I ended up being thrown out of there and all my stuff's in the basement. So I got no place to go. I went down to Housing to see if they'd help me out down there. I went to my sister's, but she's overcrowded. So I went down to Welfare, see if they could help me, but they said they could do nothing. And I'm trying to go to school, get an education, go to*

*training. I got two kids to take care of and trying to get an apartment.<sup>2</sup>*

One child is 3 years old, the other, 9 months. She has been with her boyfriend for 5 years. During her second pregnancy, she considered an abortion. Lying about her age, she managed to get the money, tests, counselling and to arrive at the appointment. But at the last minute, she changed her mind and walked out. She freely admits the love she has for both her children; the elder has severe problems. A confused child at 15, three years later Lucia has struggled into adulthood.

Lourdes, also 19, with a 20-month old son, is looking for permanent housing. Currently she lives in a shelter. She loves being a mother, and though she assumed she would finish high school and get a job, she knew, when she fell in love, it was time to "wake up and smell the coffee." The boy's father is long gone, and she does not miss him. Since her son was 3 1/2 months old, she been involved with another man, one who is "there when I need diapers in the middle of the night, when I have to run to the hospital, when I have a headache. He's the one who helps me to provide for my son."

Born to a wealthy family on the tiny island of Cape Verde, Lourdes came to the United States when she was 10. Now she is the child of two cultures, one inherited from the tightly-knit Cape Verdean community in Boston, the other from the larger Black American community of which she is also a member. She went to a post-bussing Black American school; she believes that America is a free country where the government leaves people alone and where you can get what you want. And she is outspoken:

*The lady that works [in the shelter] where I'm staying at, she's always complaining how us Cape Verdeans should stick with Cape Verdeans and I cuss her out 'cause she says to me that I'm beginning to have black people's attitudes. I think I have the right to cuss her out so I cussed her out and she gave me a written warning. And told her "I'm going to sign this warning because you's supposed to be a counselor, and if you want to be a counselor your have to know how to communicate, know how to deal with people, know how to talk. You gotta work here*

*with a bunch of us, and if we wasn't homeless you wouldn't be sitting at this desk trying to run our life. And she's always complaining how we should take better care of our kids and we should watch our kids and I told her, I said, "Look, I'm tired of you talking to me like this, because I'm doing it. If you want to talk to me you're going to sit down like a lady and talk to me. I might be young but I'm not stupid. Talk to me like I'm human and I'll talk to you like you're human." And then she got mad because I turned around and said, "Look, you're so much worrying about how we take care of our kids. You leave your son with someone all day from 7 to 2 and then you work from 3 to 11. Do you ever see your kids? How do you ever give your kids love? You might be out there trying to make a dollar but you're not worrying about your kids."*

*I told her "You can talk about me all you want but don't get off the line with me telling me how to run my kids. Don't tell me who to hang around with cause you're just as black as anybody I know."*

Lourdes' mother brought all her 11 children here from Cape Verde: first one half, while the others stayed back with the maid, and then the rest. In Boston, she set up shop. The children all got schooling and jobs. Lourdes was an A and B student at school; her reading and class level are both 9th grade. Now Lourdes puts her child first; she makes sure that he is settled before all else. By joining the program, she is trying to do two things at once, but she puts housing first, and education second. She has a daily agenda as long as her arm, and she uses the structure the P.P.T. provides in order to get done what needs doing. She rarely manages the full 12 hours attendance required a week, but she does use the childcare, transportation, health and counselling services, education and training the program provides.

Pam is 20 and her daughter is 18 months. Recently she has found an apartment and is beginning to catch up with her bills, but before there were months and months of moving from shelter to shelter, hostel to hostel. She has been through a lot. When she was two, her 17 year-old brother was killed by the police in a case of mistaken identity. When she was 13, her mother died of cancer.

Pam was 18 and her baby's father was 38 when they became involved. Until then she had known him in passing as a father figure to her friends at school. They became friends, then lovers and had 10 months together before she became pregnant. When her baby was 2 weeks old, he was stabbed to death trying to get some junkies out of a hallway. It was two days before Christmas.

Pam has always been mature for her age, taking her grief, taking her time, moving on. But now when she recalls her lover, one sees she has begun to open up a bit, to take more risks, to be more playful. For example, she recollects the night when she and her friend Alee went over to his house, where he was still living with his other girlfriend. Pam wanted a ride home:

*It was a night to remember. I was 3 months pregnant. She let me in the house but she said, "He's asleep." But I know he wasn't asleep 'cause I seen him drive up. He would not wake up for beans. I said, "I know you're not asleep and I'm not playing." So he got up.*

But as they were parading downstairs, the mother of the woman he was living with was coming up the stairs. A scene ensues:

*"It's either you or the truck," I said, and I went down stairs to bust his car. I went around the building and I found this log. I went back to the car and started to bust in his windshield. And I was laughing while I was doing it.*

*He looked out the window and he was pissed. I just did it to let him know that I wasn't playing. Don't really mean anything, just something I'd always wanted to do. Let them know I did it.*

*He came downstairs and my friend Alee said, "You'd better run."*

*"I ain't going to run from him."*

*I started running, backing up, then I'd talk to him, then I'd run some more. Last time I turned around he was running behind so I yelled, "Go Alee, go!" I never knew in all my days I could run so fast. I couldn't do it now if had to. When I turned around, he ain't behind me no more. I know he's there, in the bushes, to grab me. I walked out on the street and I saw him and my friend fighting. He's trying to hit her. I don't*

*know why. By the time I got there it had stopped.*

*"Why you jump on Alee?"*

*"She needs to mind her business. You're going to need to pay for this windshield."*

*"I ain't paying for nothing."*

*And we left it at that. Took him a long time to pay it, too. Wasn't even his truck.*

And all the while Pam is laughing and there is light in her eyes. It was only a truck, a piece of property, replaceable,

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and nothing compared to the spunk and freedom that was growing in her.

Pam loves being the mother of his child, feels that she has a part of him, even if she does not have him. She thinks about him every day, thinks of their time together, sees him in her daughter, in her fighting spirit and her old soul.

When we filter the requirements stated in the Pregnant and Parenting proposal through our participants, the requirements of "relevant education" and "social competence" assume new meaning. Do we bump the women from the support services if their attendance is sporadic? Do we respond to their needs when their needs are not to be in class, but to be out looking for work or for an apartment? When the morning comes, and the grief hangs heavy on the heart, do we say,

"Skip class and come over. Let's talk." Do we become less demanding in the classroom when they are distracted because of complications in their own lives? Finally, when is competency achieved? By whose standards?

It has been three weeks since the interviews took place, and three weeks remain till the end of the vocational training program. Lucia is the only one currently attending classes. "I'm getting a job soon," she says, as she moves away from the life patterns of her friends and into her own. She shows that perfect attendance is possible, whether or not she understands the teacher, falls asleep in class, or hates the material. She comes, she tries to find something she can understand, use, take with her, even if it is only how to shake hands, use the proper pronoun, or ask questions in an interview.

As a teacher, it is not always easy to make physics or metaphors relevant when a student is concerned with housing, or chicken pox. How will the denominators of fractions help them kick welfare in the back, or pay for the clothes that vocational training requires? They won't do the laundry, or feed the baby, not yet, anyway, not this week. And if the teacher moves too far to relevancy, does she presume to rob students of the pleasure derived from thinking about matters totally outside their immediate concerns? Physics can help make thunderstorms and electricity less frightening; metaphors can provide a way to express what is difficult to say; math can help to put the concepts of money and numbers into our hands. Every test they pass means they will never have to go back to the same place in the same way again. Education does help people to negotiate the world gracefully, forcefully, and confidently.

<sup>1</sup> "Pregnancy and Parenting Teens," Proposal to the Department of Public Welfare of Massachusetts. Written by John Jay Grymes and Neela P. Joshey, MD, MPH/DCH, Boston Mass., 1986, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> In transcribing the material from the interview 6/9/88, I edited slightly for coherence and punctuated where necessary. Otherwise I have retained the women's own words.