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Mary-Beth Muskin
Creighton University

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The Need for a Comprehensive Competency-Based Career Guidance Curriculum for Teen Mothers

Mary-Beth Muskin

Introduction

Teen parenting has significant implications for teens and their success in school. As school guidance and counseling departments focus on the development of comprehensive competency-based guidance curriculum within their school systems, the needs of teen parents are often overlooked. The development of a comprehensive competency-based curriculum that augments the curriculum for teen parents regarding self-esteem, academic achievement, school attendance, school completion, and future goals provides the opportunity to address the issues that are paramount to meet the needs of this population. This article describes a comprehensive curriculum which was developed in an effort to increase self-esteem among teen parents and support their ability to complete their high school education and plan for the future.

Background

Although the pregnancy rate for teens has decreased over the past ten years, the United States has a higher teen pregnancy rate than any other industrialized nation.¹ Stereotypes continue to reinforce the societal perception of reasons teenagers become parents. Kiselica and Pfaller state that unmarried teenage mothers are viewed as violating a cultural norm and that work with teen mothers should focus on prevention and intervention.² Other research indicates a different understanding of the teen parent's perception of childbearing. Myrick argues that in our culture adolescent childbearing is viewed by some adolescents as a career choice.³ It is important then to look at the implications of childbearing as a career choice, and the role schools have when working with teen mothers. The work of Kiselica and Kessler suggests that school counselors view both teen mothers and fathers as needing a host of psychosocial services.⁴ In addition, teen mothers generally need assistance in providing for the physical well-being of their children. To that end, this article focuses on the development of a comprehensive competency-based career counseling curriculum to meet the needs of teen mothers.

Curriculum Development

Guiden writes that prevention efforts make a significant difference.⁵ Additionally, Johnson-Moore's research documents that increased

knowledge, enhanced interpersonal relationships, and augmented parenting skills made a difference in the teen mothers' approach to parenting.⁶ While parenting might have been an initial career goal, there is a need to support teen mothers as they realize that they can set future goals. Teen mothers typically have more complex issues to deal with than the average teen as they try to raise a child, stay in school, and balance financial needs. Farrell notes that poverty and lack of vocational training make it virtually impossible for most teenagers to independently support their children.⁷

Teenage parenthood is viewed as a social problem requiring a collaborative approach to envision lasting, positive outcomes. Kiselica and Pfaller argue that teenage parents are an at-risk group with a multitude of needs and that the most effective interventions will include counseling professionals from a variety of disciplines working alone and together.⁸ School counselors are in a pivotal position within the schools to offer this kind of support. Comparing traditional counseling programs to student needs clarifies the variety of guidance methods, techniques, and resources available. Gysbers notes that student needs coupled with the increased expectations of policymakers and consumers indicate that a new structure for guidance programs in the schools is needed to meet the needs of the total school population.⁹ Neuberg and Barr recommend comprehensive competency-based guidance and counseling programs for all students from kindergarten through high school.¹⁰ School counselors need to be proactive in their approach to working with students in their personal, social, academic and career development. School counselors can reach these goals through the implementation of comprehensive competency-based guidance programs.

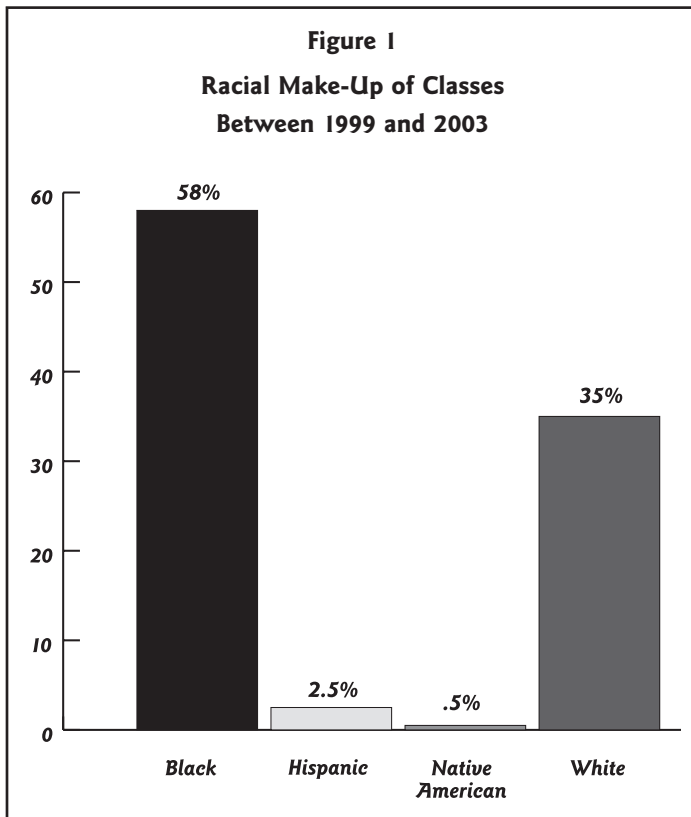
A comprehensive competency-based guidance curriculum addressing the specific issues of teen mothers can only be established through the strong support of the counseling department, staff, and school administration. An already established comprehensive competency-based counseling program within the school or district greatly enhances the chances of successful implementation of an adjunct curriculum adapted to meet the special needs of teen mothers. Comprehensive competency-based counseling provides an opportunity for early identification of teen parents and an adapted curriculum to meet the specific needs of teen mothers through individual, small group, and large group counseling. When adolescent childbearing is viewed as a career choice, it can have direct implications for the counseling curriculum. The research supports the development of a strong career-focused comprehensive curriculum that reinforces parenting skills and supports students in the completion of high school and in the planning of a career beyond high school.

The American School Counselor Association has published national standards to assist with the development of counseling curriculum that complements school curriculum.¹¹ The national standards provide direction to directors of counseling programs as counselors make the transition from traditional programs to comprehensive counseling programs. Myrick defines the counseling curriculum as a planned effort to provide each student with a set of skills and experiences that help enhance all learning.¹² A review of the literature indicates that we can learn from the literature on general curriculum development, and much has been written about the need for comprehensive competency-based guidance. However, little has been specifically written about the criteria for the development and evaluation of a counseling curriculum that focuses on the needs of teen mothers.

Mary-Beth Muskin is Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at Creighton University.

Background Information for Curriculum Development

The public school selected for this study is a math/computer/technology magnet school located in a city of approximately 400,000 population. Students from all parts of the district attend this high school. There are more than 1,700 students in grades 9-12. The school is racially and culturally mixed. (See Figure 1 for a breakdown of the racial make-up for the 1999-2003 school years.)



The first step in the development of a Career Guidance Curriculum focused on meeting the special needs of the target population which in this case was, teen mothers. Since competencies need to be comprehensive, it was important that an inclusive approach be taken in their development. Approaches used for gathering information on the specific needs of teen mothers to be addressed through the competencies included;

1. A review of national trends as reported in professional journals;
2. A needs assessment that addresses staff concerns, student concerns, and parent concerns;
3. Informal teen parent meetings;
4. Completion of a learning styles inventory.

A review of the literature helped to reinforce the issues raised by teen mothers and staff concerns as well as uncover areas that might have been inadvertently omitted. Caution was taken when reviewing the literature so that national trends were evaluated for district, school, and classroom relevancy.

Through the development of a needs assessment, input from the target group was procured. Utilization of a needs assessment enhanced the process by facilitating the acquisition of consistent information on what teen mothers, their teachers, and parents felt was important.

Informal meetings with teen mothers uncovered additional valuable data, reinforcing that teen mothers often viewed becoming a parent as an intentional decision and motherhood as a career. The teen mothers often didn't know the magnitude of their decision until they were discussing all the issues informally and brainstorming issues and solutions as a small group.

Identified competencies needed to be perceived as relevant in meeting the needs of the teen mothers and then developed as comprehensive. Understanding the importance of competency development to the overall success of the curriculum reinforced the importance of the needs assessment and informal groups in gaining necessary information for their development. The student and staff responses assisted in the adaptation and identification of relevant competencies for curriculum development giving an understanding of what the population thinks is important. Staff, school, and community needs were also considered.

An informal assessment of needs was administered to students and staff through a school-sponsored parenting class offered as a credit course for teen parents prior to the initial development of the targeted curriculum. Each teen mother enrolled in the teen parent class was individually interviewed. Thirty-eight interviews were completed over a four year period. Twenty-seven students were enrolled in the parenting class for one year; ten students were enrolled in the class for two years, and one student for three years. Interviews were completed upon the student's entrance to the class. Through the interview students discussed their pregnancy, relationship with the father of their baby, medical care, legal issues, academic issues, career aspirations, support systems, and frustrations. Additionally, informal discussions were held with the classroom teacher, school nurse, and school and district administrators to assist in the identification of teen mother needs.

Results of the assessment indicated that general student concerns centered around taking care of the babies' medical and emotional needs, getting a job, finding sources of help, and managing time so that they could stay in school and continue with career and future planning. Staff concerns centered around school completion and career planning. Administrative concerns focused on the need for an enhanced curriculum that would specifically address these needs.

The C.I.T.E. Learning Styles Inventory was administered to 16 students.¹³ The Learning Styles Inventory is divided into three main areas: Information gathering/receiving; social work conditions; and an expressive preference. Results of the C.I.T.E. Learning Styles Inventory indicated that a majority of students (n=8) preferred to learn using the Auditory/Visual Kinesthetic style. Learners preferring this style learn best through experience and involvement. It is helpful if the learner can handle, touch, and work with what they are learning. There was no assessed non-preferred style for nine students. One student had non-preferred styles with no clear preferred style, and one student had no preferred or non-preferred style. See Table 1 for results of the C.I.T.E. Learning Styles Inventory. Results of the learning styles inventory were considered as individual lessons were developed to meet the competencies.

Teen Mother Comprehensive Competency-Based Career Curriculum

The school system used as a site for curriculum development and implementation has a comprehensive competency-based counseling program in place. The teen parent competencies were developed in conjunction with information gained from the literature review, needs

Table 1

C.I.T.E. Learning Styles Instrument Results

Student (n=16)	Visual Language	Visual Numerical	Auditory Language	Auditory Numerical	Auditory/ Visual Kinesthetic	Social Individual	Social Group	Expressive Oral	Expressive Written
Student A				+					
Student B	-		+		+			+	
Student C						-	+		
Student D	+	+							
Student E					+				
Student F	-							-	
Student G	+	+	+		+				
Student H		+	+						
Student I			+		+				
Student J			-		-	+	-		
Student K								+	
Student L		+	-		+				-
Student M									
Student N		+			+			+	
Student O	+	+	+		+	+			
Student P					+		-		-

assessment and the already existing counseling competencies developed by the district as well as the teen parent program curriculum. Additionally, there was a review of already existing district career services. Competencies were developed to provide the foundation for the goals of the teen parent counseling curriculum. The competencies provided the foundation for curriculum design, driving all curriculum development and providing the foundation for curriculum assessment.

Students and staff identified four areas of importance for inclusion in the teen parent guidance curriculum. These areas included: (1) services available within the community; (2) information about pre/postnatal care and early childhood; (3) medical issues; and (4) career planning and job experience. A four-pronged approach was used in the development of a comprehensive curriculum to address these needs. Curriculum components include community service, speaker's bureau, career and future planning, and service-learning. (See Figure 2.)

The community services component provides students with the opportunity to learn about necessary services available to them within the community. Students, under the direction of the counselor and the classroom teacher, discuss the issues that are most immediate to their lives. Examples include insurance, childcare, and community resources. Speakers are scheduled during class time to address the most important issues. Students choosing to take this class learn about social services available to assist with support (e.g., WIC and state insurance funds), common medical issues, and child development expectations. Students learn how to select necessary services to best meet their needs and the needs of their child.

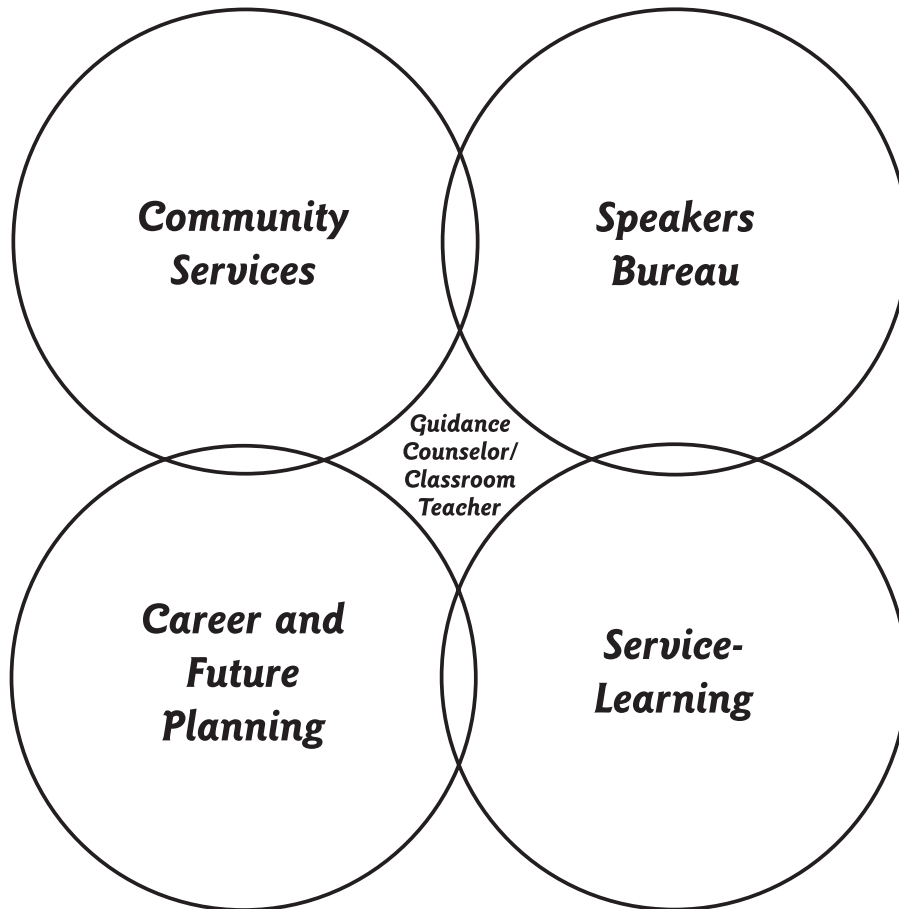
The second component is a speaker's bureau. The speaker's bureau taps into speakers from the local medical center and the community at large. Speakers are invited to work with students and speak about medical and parenting issues. Through a tailored curriculum, teen

parents learn about their baby's needs, normal infant and toddler development, and childhood diseases.

The third component focuses on decision-making and planning for the future. Students, through academic, aptitude, and interest inventories, start to define what their interests are and to develop realistic goals and plans for the future. A focus on career counseling in the teen parenting class over the past four years has provided this class of students with the opportunity to realize that they can set and reach long-term career goals. A career guidance unit, focusing on decision-making skills, problem solving, and resume writing, was designed and piloted. The specific curriculum was designed in conjunction with the school systems comprehensive competency-based guidance program. Seniors additionally focus on setting realistic post high school goals. Students choosing to continue their education after high school graduation work on completion of applications, scholarship forms, and entrance exams in keeping with their future plans. Over the past four years, each group of students choosing to continue their education has been successful in receiving numerous scholarships to assist with expenses and, in many cases, cover tuition and living costs. Students choosing to work decide on their areas of interest and evaluate their resumes and interviewing skills in preparation for finding an appropriate job after graduation. Every teen mother develops a post graduation plan and spends the year working toward the implementation of that plan.

The fourth component of the curriculum focuses on service-learning. Students serve required volunteer hours at a daycare centers providing 14 hours of support to the center. In return, students see positive role modeling and receive direction in working with their children. Additional volunteer experiences are available for teen mothers to participate in so that they can gain the necessary experience needed

Figure 2
Four-Pronged Approach to Teen Mother Comprehensive Competency-Based Guidance Model



to compete for positions in today's society. They are learning to become good citizens. It is through volunteering that students can gain insight into good parenting and other skills while feeling good about giving back to the community.

The comprehensive competency-based career guidance curriculum was piloted over the course of a year. Curriculum continues to be adjusted after the initial pilot based on student responses and the results of the learning styles inventory.

Conclusion

The creation and implementation of a comprehensive competency-based guidance curriculum that specifically meets the needs of teen mothers requires district and school support. Curriculum development can be developed and implemented through careful planning in the initial stages. Open communication with and inclusion of students, teachers, administrators and community members in the initial stages help to build a commitment to the curriculum and add to its relevancy. It is of paramount importance that time be taken in the initial and final stages to glean input from all who have a vested interest in guidance and counseling. Successful implementation is dependent on enthusiastic commitment by teen mothers, teachers, counselors, administrators and community members.

Endnotes

- ¹ Mary Guiden, "Teenage Pregnancy and Prevention," *A Legislator's Guide* (Denver, Colorado: National Conference of State Legislatures, 1999), ED437353.
- ² Mark Kiselica and Joan Pfaller, "Helping Teenage Parents: The Independent and Collaborative Roles of Counselors Educators and School Counselors," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 72 (September/October 1993): 42-47.
- ³ Robert Myrick, *Developmental Guidance and Counseling: A Practical Approach* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Educational Media Corporation, 1987), 31-50.
- ⁴ Mark Kiselica and Dawn Murphy Kessler, "Developmental Career-Counseling with Teenage Parents," *The Career Development Quarterly* 42 (March 1994):238-243.
- ⁵ Guiden, *Teenage Pregnancy Prevention*.
- ⁶ Brenda Johnson-Moore, *Improving the Parenting Skills of Young Teen Mothers in Grades 9th-12th through Parenting Classes, Training, and Mentoring* (Ed.D. Practicum Report, Nova Southeastern University, 1998), ED429244.
- ⁷ Elizabeth Farrell, *Hanging In and Dropping Out: Voices of At-Risk High School Students* (New York: Teachers College Press,1990).

⁸ Mark Kiselica and Joan Pfaller, "Helping Teenage Parents: The Independent and Collaborative Roles of Counselors Educators and School Counselors," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 72 (September/October 1993): 42-47.

⁹ Norm Gysbers and Pat Henderson, "Comprehensive Programs That Work - II," *ERIC Counseling and Student Services Clearinghouse* (Greensboro, North Carolina: School of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1997), ED412434, 1-48, 283-293.

¹⁰ Edward S. Neukrug and Carol G. Barr, "Developmental Counseling and Guidance: A Model for Use in Your School," *School Counselor* 40 (May 1993): 356-363.

¹¹ American School Counselor Association. *Sharing the Vision: National Standards for School Counseling Programs* (Alexandria, Virginia: 1998).

¹² Robert Myrick, *Developmental Guidance and Counseling: A Practical Approach* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Educational Media Corporation, 1987), 31-50.

¹³ C.I.T.E. [Center for Innovative Teaching Experience] Learning Styles Inventory (Cleveland, Georgia: Piney Mountain Press, Inc., 1988), <http://www.pineymountain.com>.