

YOUNG SINGLE MOTHERS AND WELFARE REFORM

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ABSTRACT: In March of 1999, the Ontario government announced a new policy aimed at teen mothers. The \$25 million Learning, Earning, and Parenting program (LEAP) requires 16- and 17-year-old welfare mothers to attend school and take parenting courses. The stated goal of the program is to break the cycle of welfare that traps many young women. In June 2000, the first 23 "graduates" completed the program in Sudbury. To conduct a preliminary evaluation of the program, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 participants of the LEAP program. The results showed how LEAP, a bureaucratic program, which the recipients might have experienced as something quite oppressive, became something more positive and enabling, due to the collaboration of the social workers, the teachers and the students themselves.

Key words: teenage parents, workfare, program evaluation, child and youth care work

In March of 1999, the Ontario government announced a new program aimed at teen mothers. LEAP or Learning, Earning, and Parenting, requires 16- and 17-year-old parents receiving social assistance to attend school and take parenting courses. In June of 2001, I conducted an evaluation of LEAP at a test site in Sudbury, Ontario, as the subject of my Master's thesis. The purpose of my study was to conduct a preliminary evaluation based on the experiences of the participants.

The stated goal of the \$25 million program, which became fully operational on February 1, 2000, is to "break the cycle of welfare dependency" that traps many young parents. Parents unwilling to participate in the program are not eligible to receive benefits under Ontario Works (Government of Ontario, 1999). LEAP participants are to have full access to a range of supports available under Ontario Works so they can successfully participate in school and parenting and earning activities. These supports may include transportation costs, funding for school supplies, school clothing, educational trips, and counseling. Childcare subsidies are to be available to all participants. Communities are expected to build upon existing resources and develop links with other programs and services (Government of Ontario, 1999).

LEAP: In Sudbury

Children First-Opportunities for Parents, as the LEAP program is called in Sudbury, provides support and assistance to young parents in receipt of Ontario Works, wishing to complete their secondary school education. The program is cost shared 80/20 between the Ministry of

Community and Social Services (MCSS) and the City of Greater Sudbury.¹ The City's portion of the monies, \$120,000, is to be paid out of the National Child Benefit Reinvestment Fund (Region of Sudbury, 1999).

As much as possible, the participants are integrated into the regular stream. They study three of a possible four disciplines, allowing them one free period and lunch to be with their child. For those requiring additional educational assistance, a resource period is available to them. Should students find it too difficult to cope in a regular classroom setting, the school will provide them with one or more Personal Learning Activities Toward Opportunity (PLATO) periods. In PLATO, students work independently on computer-based courses under the guidance of qualified staff. Independent study (in course books) in a resource classroom can be arranged if necessary. The program provides on-site childcare. Our Children, Our Future will provide supports and services such as the Collective Kitchen Program, pre and post-natal nutrition support workshops, resources and equipment to assist parents in caring for their children and themselves (Region of Sudbury, 1999).

Sudbury: Background

Sudbury, with a regional population of 158,935, is located in north-eastern Ontario, approximately 400 km north of Toronto. It has traditionally been characterized as a one-industry town based on mining. In recent years, the economy has diversified to include government services, education, health care, and tourism. With respect to language, Sudbury is 78% Anglophone and 18% Francophone with 3% listing other as their primary language (Statistics Canada, 1996). Immigrants comprise 8% of the population and 3% are First Nations people (Statistics Canada, 1996). The pregnancy rate for teens in Sudbury is on par with the provincial average of 47.1 per 1000 women (15-19 yrs). Notable is the rate of live births, 26.9% for Sudbury compared with 22.1% for the rest of the province (Kauppi & Picard, 1999). This statistic indicates a lower rate of abortion in the Sudbury region. On average from 1992 to 1995, there were 170 teen births per year in the Sudbury region (Kauppi & Picard, 1999). As of September 22, 1999, approximately 30 parents, ages 16 and 17 years, and 180 parents aged 18 to 21 years were recipients of Ontario Works in the Region (Region of Sudbury, 1999).

Methods: Overall Approach

The overall approach I used in this study was a qualitative formative program evaluation involving face-to-face, semi-structured, individual interviews with participants in the program. My three broad questions included: 1) Does LEAP help women effectively balance their roles and identities as workers and carers? 2) Does the LEAP program recognize the particular and unique contexts within which the participants are caring,

¹ Prior to January 2001, the City of Greater Sudbury governance structure was known as the Region of Sudbury.

taking into consideration the support they are receiving from kin, extended networks, community resources, and local child care? 3) What is the perspective of the participants in terms of the effectiveness of the LEAP program? It was hoped that the study would provide useful feedback to the program managers that could be used to improve the program and better serve the needs of the clients.

Recruitment of Participants

The participants in the study were drawn from those clients who are participating in the LEAP Program in Sudbury, including those who graduated at the end of the winter term (June 2001). My sample size was determined by the response rate coming from the LEAP program. Out of a possible 65 clients, I was given a list of 21 individuals who had consented to be contacted. I narrowed the list down to 14 men and women who resided within the city boundaries prior to amalgamation. I chose to limit the sample to those living in Sudbury proper as I suspected the issues of the rural participants might be quite different.

Characteristics of Participants

The participants ranged in age from 17 to 22 years with the average age of the participants being 18 years. Only three participants were under 18 and were obliged to participate in the LEAP program as a condition of receiving benefits. Of the total of 14 participants I interviewed, there were 2 males and 12 females. In the study sample, twelve families had one child while two families had two children. There were 9 boys and 7 girls and the age ranged from 2 to 42 months with the average age being 14.3 months. English was the predominate language with 12 of the 14 participants indicating it was the language spoken in the home, while the remaining spoke French. The length of time in the program varied from less than one month to 24 months with the largest group (4) having attended one school semester (five months). The average income for the participants not living with a parent is about \$1,000 per month. Those living with a parent received approximately \$200 per month. One participant lives with her sister and receives \$650.

Ethics Procedures

Participants were told that discussing their experiences with the LEAP program might stir up strong negative feeling. As a former social assistance recipient, I understood their reluctance to speak out or go public. There is the concern on the part of the recipients that this is another person coming in to "snoop." These parents already have a number of individuals exerting control over their lives, including child protection workers, welfare workers, school administrators, and public health nurses, to name a few. Finally, this population is made up of young, sometimes very vulnerable individuals who are rarely if ever encouraged to speak out about the services they receive. They were informed that their

participation in the study was voluntary and if they wished to withdraw or terminate the interview at any time, services to them or their families would not be affected. Arrangements were made through Social Services prior to commencing the study that a counselor would be made available to all participants. The study was approved by my university's ethics review committee. I also signed a legal document with the City of Greater Sudbury obliging me to abide by the regulations outlined in the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

Interview Structure and Process

The study involved semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted with participants of the LEAP program in Sudbury in their own homes. With input from Sudbury's social services staff and following a careful review of the literature, my three questions translated into an instrument involving 53 open-ended and close-ended questions.

Each interview took approximately one hour to complete. I chose not to tape record the interview as a way of encouraging the participants to speak openly about the program and its impact on their lives. It allowed the participants to tell me things "off the record." I chose to record the responses of the participants directly onto the interview guide and I offered to share with the participants what I had written allowing them to retain some control over the interview process.

Data Analysis

Because of the small sample, I chose not to code the responses. Instead, I reviewed the completed questionnaires by myself and identified major themes emerging from the responses of the participants to each of the questions.

Limitations of the Study

As with all studies, this study has its limitations. I believe that the main limitation of the study is the small size of the sample and the low response rate. Although the social worker assigned to the program felt that I received an excellent response rate, the majority of the program participants chose not to participate in the study. Because of the obvious sample bias, it may well be that the participants in the study differed from those who chose not to reply. Perhaps I only surveyed the more motivated students. I must, therefore, accept the possibility that the participants in my study report a more favorable view of the LEAP program than those who chose not to participate. A larger sample size and a better response rate would have helped me to be more sure of my conclusions.

Having completed the analysis, I realized that there were a number of areas that could have been explored more thoroughly. One area that could have been addressed was the school history of the participants in the study. It was an error on my part to assume that students would be working at grade level. Since attending school is an expectation of the

program, I should have explored whether the participants were weak or strong students, whether they have learning difficulties in specific areas, and whether they perform better in one-on-one or in classroom settings.

Additionally, the literature points out that an important theme in the lives of young women on social assistance is violence (Statistics Canada, 1993). Since I did not feel that I had the means to deal adequately with this area, I avoided dealing with this topic altogether. With more training and with the back up of mental health professionals, I would have dealt with violence more thoroughly.

Results

The study explored five main themes including: Family Support, Child Care, Program Participation, Parenting Classes, and Future Plans. In this section, I will present the results for each of these themes.

Family Support

Family members figure prominently in the lives of the participants. In fact, of the parents I interviewed, there were only three who did not have family present during the actual interview. In at least half the cases, the family members actively participated in the interview. Thirteen of the fourteen participants reported having one or both parents living in Sudbury. Two reported that their partner's family lived nearby and seven indicated extended family in town (siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents). Twelve indicated they had daily contact with their family either by phone or personal visits and two indicated it was biweekly. Overwhelmingly, it was their mother whom they called. Many of the participants specifically identified their mother as being their main source of support.

"She's a friend, not only a mother. She was seventeen when she had me and she knows what I am going through."

The LEAP program pays little attention to the role and responsibility of fathers. In my study, fathers were not involved in half of the cases.

Child Care

The participants who attend the site schools and have their children placed in the on site childcare program are generally happy with the service.

"I love child care in the same building. They could pull me out of class to check on the baby."

The childcare programs at the site schools appeared to be of high quality. To the credit of the childcare staff, most parents stated that they were amazed at how much their children were learning. Those not able to use in school childcare do not fare as well. If the child is not on site, mothers are not able to breastfeed, and the childcare is also much less reliable. One participant in the study was forced to use three different caregivers within the same school year. When asked if participants received any assistance in finding a childcare provider, 9 of the 14 participants indicated that they did not receive any formal assistance.

Program Participation

A number of parents seemed unclear about the services offered and what they were entitled to receive. At the same time, a couple of the parents found that the amount of information was overwhelming. One stated that it was difficult to absorb the quantity of information only a couple of months after delivering her child.

"They should treat everybody equally. My friend doesn't get nothin'. I don't think it's fair"

"You have to ask or you don't get it. But, I won't call my new one (worker) 'cause I don't know her."

One of the questions raised in the interview was why participants chose certain schools over others. The most common reason for choosing a certain school was the extent of services offered by the site schools. Location was also an important factor as many of the parents live close to the schools they chose. Transportation was an issue for a number of parents. Students at one of the site schools were appreciative of the door-to-door bus service provided for themselves and their children.

When asked which services they used, the participants stated they used the full range of services provided by the site schools. A number of the participants commented that having everything available in one location was very important. Transportation is difficult with young children - such as trying to get to the welfare office, school, childcare centre, food banks, grocery store, etc. School is a familiar environment for the parents and they see it as a "safe place".

"Everything was provided. It made it so easy. It would be so hard to do it any other way. It made me want to go to school."

Of all of the participants, only the participant attending the non-site school stated that she did not find the school staff supportive. The rest found the school staff to be supportive. In general, the participants stated that the staff goes out of their way to help. Furthermore, in addition to the support of the staff, most of the participants appreciated the support of a peer group.

"One teacher brought my work home to me for two weeks after the baby was born."

"The teachers would give money to people who didn't have any."

"One teacher brought me gifts when my baby was born."

"The guidance counsellor and a teacher helped me get welfare."

Parenting Classes

With respect to parenting classes, one participant stated that she dropped out after two days noting that, while she found the information useful, she did not have the time to attend. Most of the participants were overwhelmed with being new parents and all the related stresses. One participant found that the parenting class was an additional burden.

On a positive note, the parenting classes did provide a source of support. A number of the participants gave the following reasons as to why the parenting classes were helpful,

"I would go even if they were not mandatory"

"We give each other a lot of support."

"It was helpful being able to open up to them (the staff)."

"The handouts were really helpful. I took them home and read them over and over."

Future Plans

The study also explores the theme of future plans. The experience of one mother showed that childcare continues to be a barrier to pursuing future plans. As a recent graduate, she hopes to find part-time work over the summer. However, since she no longer will attend the site school, she will need to make new child care arrangements. On the positive side, the City of Greater Sudbury subsidizes care up to a maximum of \$3.00 per hour. Nevertheless, in September, when she attends college and her son begins kindergarten, she will be potentially looking at a third childcare arrangement.

Almost without exception, the participants spoke very positively of the support they receive from LEAP. For the young parents in my study what matters is that, based on what is available to them right now, LEAP provides much more than what is normally available from social assistance.

Discussion

Each of the themes covered in the results section will again be reviewed in the discussion section beginning with family support.

Family Support

LEAP tends to focus on the individual parent as opposed to family networks or neighbourhoods. The program is oriented to making clients the target of activity. However, three of the participants live with a parent. This situation has advantages and disadvantages. Being so closely involved with family also has the potential to create stress. In one case, in addition to taking care of her young children, the participant was also caring for a dying mother. In fact, a call came from an aunt informing the woman I was interviewing that her mother had been admitted to the hospital. We terminated the interview early so I could drive the participant to the hospital. She had told me that her relationship with her mother had improved greatly over the past year, and now she was losing her main source of support. She also expressed concern over how her younger siblings were coping with the mother's illness.

Even if the individual parent is the target of activity, there is an assumption that the parent has the support of an extended family. I was reminded on a couple of occasions of just how young the "grandmothers" were. I tended to forget that many of the grandmothers were in their late thirties or early forties. They were holding down jobs, raising young children of their own, trying to establish new relationships, and generally were very busy.

Child Care

The LEAP program is geared toward providing care based on a school schedule, 6 hours a day five days a week. However, program staff are not available 24 hours/seven days per week. As a result, clients were placed in the position of seeking support outside the program, turning to family or friends to fill the gap, a network that may not be in a position to help. Unfortunately, the current funding formula for childcare does not factor in time for homework, appointments or other errands. Most of the participants felt overwhelmed by their responsibilities and all could benefit from respite care on a regular basis. Unless a grandparent or friend is available to take over from time to time, participants are unable to get a badly needed break. There is also a need for short-term emergency childcare. A few of the mothers stated that their child became ill on a more frequent basis during the first few months in a new child care setting. If the children are sick then mothers cannot attend school. Even under the best of conditions, most mothers are under stress from trying to balance school demands and caring for children without the added burden of dealing with illness. The co-location of services including in-school childcare is clearly a valuable component of the program. If participants are able to attend school and check in regularly on their children, the overall stress is greatly reduced.

Program Participation

As stated in the Government of Ontario documents, participation for 16- and 17- year old parents is mandatory. But what if parents are unable to comply? Will their assistance be cut-off? The decision to deny social assistance to a parent for non-compliance has serious implications. Up to the time of my study, no parent has had their benefits cut, but staff admit that, in a couple of cases, they have come close to denying benefits. Keeping parents motivated to participate is a constant struggle.

I believe that the "one-stop shop" approach to service provision (Region of Sudbury, 2000) is vital to the success of the program. However, there was a problem with the manner in which the information about the LEAP program was disseminated. Many of the participants stated that they were not aware of the services being offered or that they were overwhelmed by the amount of information presented. The method and timing of the delivery of information needs to be reviewed.

Future Plans

The section on future plans revealed some important gaps in the LEAP program. In spite of the importance of linking school to work, very little was provided in terms of helping participants make the transition to work. Also lacking were the supports needed for participants wishing to continue on to college or a university. With respect to pursuing a university education, most participants felt that the obstacles were too great and that this was not an option. In Ontario, students with children can no longer receive social assistance while attending a post-secondary institution. Their only option is to rely on OSAP (Ontario Students Assistance

Program). This normally involves taking on a considerable amount of debt.

In conclusion, it is important to return to my three broad questions introduced in the beginning of this paper. First, does LEAP help women effectively balance their roles and identities as workers and carers? Second, does the LEAP program recognize the particular and unique contexts within which the participants are caring, taking into consideration the support they are receiving from kin, extended networks, community resources, and local child care? Finally, what is the perspective of the participants in terms of the effectiveness of the LEAP program? I will now address each of these three questions:

1) Does LEAP help women effectively balance their roles and identities as workers and carers? The answer to this question is a definitive "no". The LEAP program highlights the competing demands of work and family with work clearly dominating. LEAP, a program of Ontario Works, requires women to assume primary responsibility for the care of their children and home and to actively engage in educational activities to increase their marketability in the workplace. The participants in the study are carrying out this work while still very young, most without the support of a partner, and while living in a situation of extreme poverty. As a single parent, they have to assume the dual role of both the mother and father.

Only a longitudinal follow-up study could answer, "Does the program help young parents escape poverty and reach their potential?" The little information coming out of the literature (Quinn, 1999), suggests that participants do manage to get off welfare but remain trapped in low wage, part-time or contract jobs that do not help them to escape poverty. Whether the state could or should do more for these young parents remains an ideological question.

2) Does the LEAP program recognize the particular and unique contexts within which the participants are caring, taking into consideration the support they are receiving from kin, extended networks, community resources, and local child care? The answer to this question would be a qualified "yes." It is the role of the regional governments to take the provincial directives and implement them in their own communities. As required, the Region of Sudbury has participated in extensive discussions with community partners and has attempted to put into place an extensive array of supports for the LEAP parents and their children. The infusion of money from the provincial government has meant that the Region is able to provide a host of supports and services that would otherwise not be available. As a result of the LEAP program, many young parents are given an opportunity to at least finish high school.

In spite of this assistance, the LEAP program in Sudbury as a matter of provincial policy focuses solely on the school schedule, that is 9 to 3, Monday to Friday. What resources does a young parent have after hours for respite care, to do groceries, complete homework or simply to get a break from children? What happens if children are sick and are up all night? Who does a mother turn to if extended family members aren't

available? For the program to be more effective, the LEAP program should include a thorough assessment of the needs of the young parent.

3) What is the perspective of the participants in terms of the effectiveness of the LEAP program? Here again, the answer is a qualified "yes." Based on the perception of the participants in my study, the program in Sudbury has many positive aspects that need to be recognized. The collocation of services in the site schools has proven to be very effective. In addition the dedication and commitment of the staff at the site school has helped many participants make substantial progress in their education and, in the process, improve their self-image. I am convinced that the City of Greater Sudbury has turned what is basically a negative, coercive provincial program into something positive that has made a difference in the lives of the majority of the participants in the study.

To end on a very positive note, in April 2002, the General Manager of Health and Social Services of the City of Greater Sudbury, wrote a letter to me in response to my study to state that two important recommendations were being addressed. In response to the recommendation that clients were not aware of the services being offered, the City prepared a brochure clearly outlining all the services available to clients. To address the second recommendation that looked at childcare needs after hours, the City has begun developing policy for the provision of childcare during homework and study times.

I would like to give the last word to a couple of the participants that express how I generally felt about the program.

"They covered every base. They paid for my prom ticket and my date's ticket and my dress."

"You can't get any better. They need more publicity on how good it is."

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