Young Families Connect: Supporting Pregnant and Parenting Young Women to Complete their Schooling

School of Education and School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work

The University of Queensland

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Acknowledgement of Country

We would like to acknowledge the traditional owners Yuggera, Ugarapul and Jagera people of this land that we meet upon today, and pay our respect to the elders past, present and emerging as they hold the memories, traditions and hopes of all Aboriginal people.

Project Acknowledgements

Research Team

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1 Introduction

Young Families Connect (YFC) is a Program of Excellence at Ipswich State High School that commenced in May 2016. The program seeks to remove the barriers faced by pregnant and parenting young people through flexible curriculum delivery, within a supportive and non-judgemental environment. Through the program, students access a range of resources and support services to enable them to complete their formal schooling. The program is funded by Mission Australia as part of the Communities for Children (CfC). This initiative of the Federal Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) focuses on early intervention and prevention approaches to improve children's and young people's health and well-being. The YFC program has the capacity to enroll up to 20 young women. At the time of the research 15 young mothers were enrolled in the program; however 4 young women were on Maternity Leave and were therefore unable to be interviewed.

Working in partnership with a range of government organisations such as Queensland Health, the Aboriginal Community Controlled health service KAMBU Health and other external agencies, the program aims to provide comprehensive, wrap-around support for young parents. Simultaneously focussing on academic and parenting education, the program provides on-site child care and play groups, flexible learning options and links with external organisations to addresses barriers to school completion. Through advocacy and support of young parents in relation to a wide range of factors, including social and economic disadvantage, the program aims to build capacities of young parents, so they can maximise their opportunities for future meaningful employment.

Through collaboration between The University of Queensland and the YFC program, together with Ipswich State High school, research was undertaken to develop a clear image of YFC operating within the school and wider community. The objective of the project was to find ways to enhance the program within the local school and community contexts. These data may also be used to inform similar programs in different communities.

1.1 The school context

Ipswich State High School (ISHS) is situated within the Darling Downs and West Moreton Primary Health Network (PHN) area (See Figure 1). This area has the sixth highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Australia; almost on par with Northern Queensland, which has the fifth highest rate (See Figure 2), and is above the average for all regional PHN areas. The YFC program was developed as a Program of Excellence to allow young mothers outside Ipswich State High School's geographical catchment area to enrol.

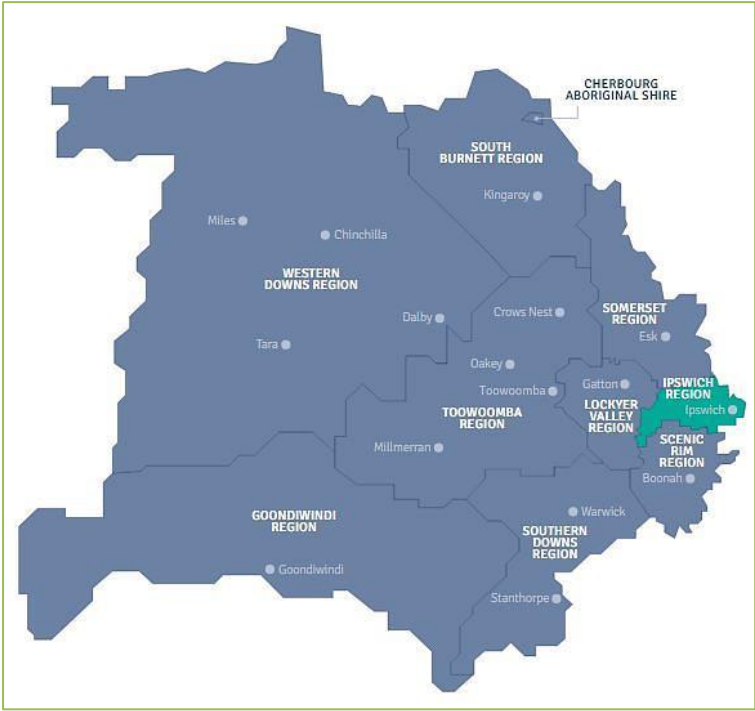**Figure 1. Position of Ipswich within the Darling Downs and West Moreton Primary Health Network area (Darling Downs and West Moreton Primary Health Network, 2019)**

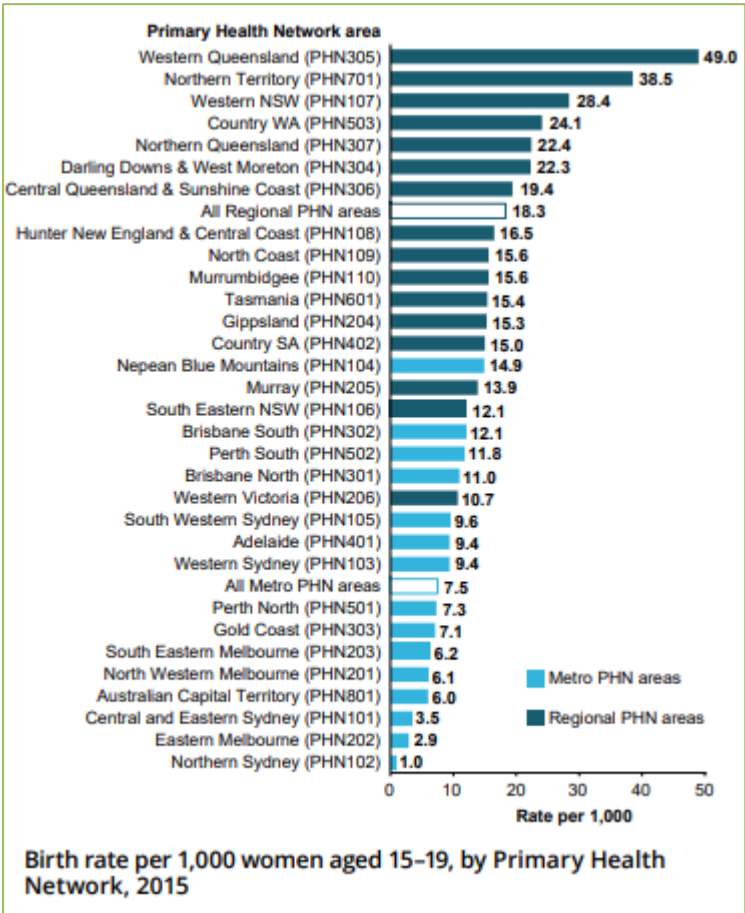Birth rate per 1,000 women aged 15–19, by Primary Health Network, 2015

Figure 2. Birth rate per 1,000 women aged 15-19 by Primary Health Network, 2015 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018, p. 6)

In 2017 ISHS had an enrolment of 1682 students; with 16% of students identifying as Indigenous, and 14% having English as a second language.   The school's ICSEA value of 921 is below the national average of 1000, with 83% of students situated in the bottom and bottom middle quartiles of socio-educational advantage (See Figure 3). Based on this, students attending the school may experience hardships associated with low SES.
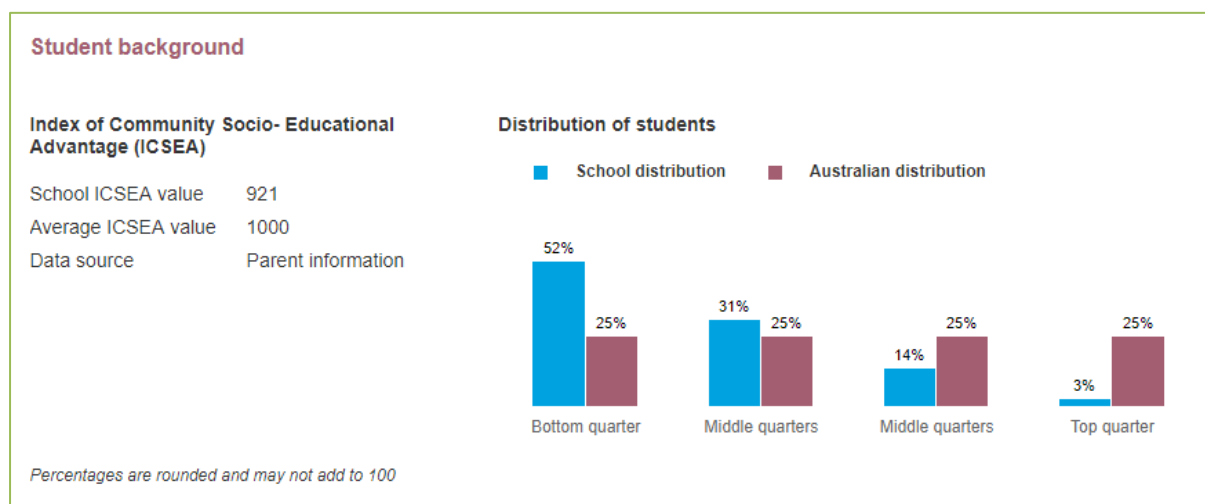
Figure 3. Ipswich State High School ICSEA value and student distribution (ACARA, 2018)

In Queensland, the Department of Education acknowledges the vital role schools play in improving the life chances of young parents and their babies by supporting them in staying connected to education. The Department's website therefore highlights the legislative responsibility of principals to provide equitable access to education for students who are pregnant and/or parenting; two attributes which are covered by the Anti-Discrimination Act (Queensland) 1991 (Queensland Department of Education, 2018). To assist principals, the Department has provided guidelines to retain and support pregnant and parenting young people in education (DOC, 422KB) and suggests that, in consultation with students, principals may establish coordinated links with other government and external agencies to support them. Within these guidelines three key strategies are outlined, which are accompanied by a range of suggested actions which are not exhaustive, but nevertheless helpful in assisting schools to support pregnant and parenting students to continue their education. These strategies are to:

1. Track and maintain contact with pregnant and parenting young people

2. Promote awareness of the range of educational pathways available to pregnant and parenting young people

3. Establish a network of support services for pregnant and parenting young people (Queensland Department of Education, 2018, p. 1).

2   Review of research

This review of the current research discusses the challenges and opportunities encountered by young mothers seeking to complete their schooling. It begins by highlighting some of the experiences and consequences of young motherhood, and then examines the ways in which barriers are addressed in some educational contexts. Finally, it explores how these young women achieve educational and career goals.

2.1   Experiences, issues and consequences of young parenting

The literature reveals a complex interplay of factors that young mothers face when seeking to complete their schooling. Research suggests that teenage mothers typically complete fewer years of schooling than their peers (Mills & McGregor, 2014). Teenage pregnancy and motherhood is well recognised within the literature and Australian government reports as associated with socioeconomic disadvantage (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018; SmithBattle, 2007).   In addition, young mothers have been reported to be at risk of social stigma, which potentially affects social determinants of their health, such as access to education, employment and social support services (McArthur & Barry, 2013).

Family responsibilities and child care demands have also been identified as substantial barriers to completing schooling, as the lack of reliable child care may interfere with school-aged mothers' progress (SmithBattle, 2007).   SmithBattle also identifies lack of access to adequate transport as an inhibiting factor, because '… waiting for buses and negotiating several transfers with a baby, book bag, diaper bag, and a stroller [particularly in] inclement weather [is] a daunting task (p. 360).

Research has long demonstrated that social support networks are particularly important to the health and wellbeing of young mothers (Colletta, 1983; McGregor, Mills, Baroutsis, & Hayes, 2017; Mills & McGregor, 2014). School policies and practices may create additional barriers that undermine young mothers' goal to complete their schooling and hinder their learning outcomes.   This may include enrolment processes, attendance policies, lack of flexible schooling options and bureaucracy (SmithBattle, 2007). This is supported by other research suggesting that despite support structures that are designed to keep such young women in education (See for example Dawson, Hosie, Meadows, Selman, & Speak, 2005; Queensland Department of Education, 2018a), many young women who become pregnant are encouraged to leave their school and may face being expelled from school. In their UK research, Mills and McGregor (2014) relayed stories of students who were excluded from school after falling pregnant: 'I was pregnant and wasn't allowed to return to … College because . . . I was going into grade 12 and they said that I'd start a fad for the younger children to all come to school pregnant!' (p. 129). This is supported by SmithBattle (2007), who notes that once young mothers return to school after giving birth, 'their complex needs [are] rarely addressed by their schools' (p. 362).

2.2   Addressing barriers: A way forward

The literature suggests that schools can make a significant difference in the lives of young mothers when they focus on young mothers' determination to complete their schooling (SmithBattle, 2007). This is elaborated on by Clarke (2015), who suggests that there is '…

considerable room for professionals to capitalise on the process of developing empowering working relationships with pregnant [and parenting] teenagers' (p. 481). They suggest a co-ordinated, multi-agency approach to support their efforts to finish school. In addition, a more flexible approach by schools can support young mothers in their parenting role. For example, an on-site crèche, other practical supports as well as supportive relationships with teachers and support staff can enable ongoing engagement with education (Clarke, 2015; Mills & McGregor, 2014).

Alternative education can offer a 'second chance' to young people experiencing complex life issues, including young mothers, who have left mainstream schools prior to completion or who have been expelled. However Te Riele (2007) prefers the term 'learning choices' to reflect the valid educational choice that such schools represent. Considerations of the relationship between academic achievement and students' life opportunities also require an exploration of issues beyond completion, to include the concept of meaningful learning, which must extend beyond school learning to a rewarding career pathway.

2.3   Opportunity rather than catastrophe?[1]

Historically, young mothers' low educational achievement and consequent adverse outcomes for mother and child has been simplistically attributed to teenage pregnancy (Scott-Jones, 1991). However, research findings are challenging this association, with studies finding that many young women who become pregnant reconsider their goals and strengthen their resolve to complete their schooling (Clarke, 2015; Duncan, Edwards, & Alexander, 2010; SmithBattle, 2007). Further, some pregnant students were motivated to consider further education and a career; often for the first time (Duncan et al., 2010; Graham & McDermott, 2005; SmithBattle, 2007).   Despite this, SmithBattle (2007) notes that young mothers' renewed commitment to education is 'often thwarted by competing work demands, family responsibilities, and school policies and practices' (p. 348). These findings are supported by other research which suggests that many young mothers attempt to stay in school, but find it increasingly difficult to continue, with some describing the importance of being role models for their children (Clarke, 2015). This led Clarke to conclude that 'it is not the early pregnancy that is an adverse occurrence but rather the response to the pregnancy' (p. 483).

3   Rationale/Justification

Current research suggests that it is the response to teenage pregnancy that may enable young mothers to remain connected to schooling, and thus maximise positive outcomes for them and their children.

This research sought to explore: a) the perspectives and experiences of students and staff involved in the program; b) how the YFC program operates to address barriers faced by

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[1]Duncan, 2007.

young parents; c) the challenges faced by the YFC program to support young mothers who are attempting to complete their schooling.

The study therefore sought to answer the following questions:

1. What barriers do young mothers face in completing their formal schooling?

2. How does YFC facilitate and support young mothers to complete their schooling?

3. What are the challenges faced by the YFC program?

4 Research Design

The research was conducted as a case study to explore one program (YFC) that supports young mothers to complete their schooling. In order to build rapport to facilitate the interviews with the staff and students, the research team visited the centre several times in the lead up to the research.

A creative process was developed to enable informal conversation and thus build rapport between the young women in the project and the research team. Each student participant was invited to create their unique life story in a past/present/future timeline format, using a range of art materials provided by the research team. The artwork was not a part of the research data, but something significant that they kept for themselves and their children.

The case study consisted of interviews ranging from 30 – 60 minutes, conducted with nine young mothers, two of whom had previously completed the program; one of these was interviewed together with her partner. Eleven adults, including key personnel in the YFC program, the school Principal, other relevant school staff and external partners were also interviewed. The interview questions were open-ended, thus providing opportunities for each participant to describe their own unique perspectives. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the transcripts were initially analysed thematically by the team as a whole, to identify broad themes and patterns within the data. The further identification and refinement of emerging themes was an organic and iterative process, with these themes cross-checked and further refined through a process of constant comparative analysis by all team members (Merriam, 1998).

Ethical clearance to conduct this research was obtained from The University of Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee B; Approval Number: 2017001543.

5 Findings

5.1 The Young Families Connect (YFC) program

Well, you see on the news "teen mums, they bludge" … it just kind of annoys me because there's a lot of us that are trying to do this [coming back to school] (YFC Student 3).

Societal perceptions of 'teen mums' as idle and a burden on the system is reflected in the comment of this young woman who participated in the research. She contrasted this perception with her own and others' efforts to complete their formal education. This aligns with research which suggests many school-aged pregnant and parenting young women wish to complete their schooling (Clarke, 2015; Duncan et al., 2010; SmithBattle, 2007).

The young women involved in the research discussed their experiences of discrimination, with one young mother explaining that 'I was probably, like, 10/12 weeks' pregnant at that time … I wanted to go back to school … I contacted my local school …. they were, like, iffy on even letting me in (Student 8). She also expressed her concern that 'I would be ridiculed because I was pregnant … "Oh, she's pregnant. Oh, my God, she's a slut," that sort of stuff. That's what I was worried about'. Another student described a similar experience: 'I tried to get into mainstream school … and they said "no" because I wouldn't have enough time to focus on school with a kid' (Student 3). The program manager noted that as a result, these young women were internalising messages such as, 'you don't want me at your school; I'm not good enough; … [or] I would bring shame upon the school'.

During the course of the interviews, several students described negative experiences of mainstream schooling. For example, one young mother related that 'when I found out I was pregnant, I told the principal; and the principal told all the teachers; and the teachers told the students … so I stopped going and I came here' (Student 1). These young mothers described the way 'a lot people see us as outsiders; but we are a part of the school' (Student 3), and 'the other school I was at, I had a terrible time there. And then when this opened, I was like - there was no going back to mainstream. I was happy coming here' (Student 7).

One young mother described her experiences and the difference that the YFC program had made to her situation:

> You get stuck in a rut … "what am I going to do?" … Because students who have gotten pregnant feel like, "That's it. We can't go back. We're done. How am I supposed to go back to school?" … It is just so difficult; they just give up on it … If this program wasn't here, I don't know where I would be. I definitely wouldn't have been achieving as much as I have been (Student 8).

The YFC Program Manager explained the rationale for the program: 'We realised that the girls were dropping out of school and they weren't re-engaging after they had bub; and they needed their own space; they needed a lot more understanding; they needed flexible learning'. One example of this flexibility was given by the YFC teacher:

> We had a girl that was a young mum and she was doing hospitality. They wanted her to do all these night meetings/functions. So we re-organised it; and she could do some of her hours in the school canteen instead … it just needs to be tweaked a little bit.

The Program Manager also articulated that principals of many mainstream schools did not understand the issues faced by young parents such as having to wear the school uniform and to participate in a full timetable between the hours of 9:00am and 3:00pm. The

Program Manager described the Queensland Department of Education (DoE) policy that mandates the need for flexibility in curriculum and school attendance, as well as leniency in relation to uniform regulations for young mothers. However, she was aware that this had not been the experience of the young parents in the program, who had been advised that they 'would be "better off" in distance education or taking a year off and coming back in a year's time'. However, she also acknowledged the difficulties schools face in trying to support young mothers, as 'there is not much expertise on the ground … if schools want to do the right thing, often they just don't know how … [or] how to begin'.

These young mothers had heard about YFC through friends who had also been through the program: 'my best friend has been coming here for about a year or two; and she told me about how good they are and stuff … I have been here for about three days … I am actually doing stuff that I want to do' (Student 1). Another student told us that one of her friends, who had graduated in the previous year, had let her know about the program.   Further, the Program Manager similarly explained how these young mothers had been referred into the YFC program:

> We do capture some of those girls that are being asked to leave their own school … a lot of our girls have been disengaged from their original school for quite some time … they will self-refer, through word of mouth … the hospital is a really good source to us of referral.

Describing herself as 'the squeaky wheel', the Program Manager discussed her advocacy for the special needs of young mothers, which she saw as 'not that different to other students with special needs' and expressed frustration at the system in which these students are not receiving equitable access to quality education.   She emphasised that 'we are working with students that are entitled to an education, that want to be educated'.

The YFC program, which is part of Ipswich State High School, is funded by Mission Australia, 'without which we wouldn't have a program' (Principal). The Deputy Principal articulated that as a part of the school, Young Families Connect can access any of the services provided by Ipswich State High School as needed. These services include youth support, student welfare, Health Nurse, work placement officer, guidance officers, transitions officer, an EAL/D teacher and a Polynesian liaison officer. He also referred to having 'a very good connection with our young people; whether it be administration or student welfare or any of the support services. So we very, very quickly become aware of pregnancies … we are very good at communicating with our parents'.

The Principal was described by the Community Education Counsellor (CEC) as:

> the best support any of us could ever ask for … he comes and sees me … then we talk to the students … we come on down to the Program Manager … that's the only way it's ever going to work … without that, I don't think we could go anywhere.

A student commented, 'he sometimes comes and … sees where we are up to and stuff. He really supports this program … and doesn't discriminate against us young parents. Like, he involves us young parents … he doesn't leave us out' (Student 5).

5.2 'Bending' barriers: Holistic, integrated, 'wrap-around' approach

'It works because those barriers [to school completion] are bent' (Teacher)

The Deputy Principal described the approach of the program: 'rather than going "there's nothing else that we can do", we will say "we have done this much" and [the Principal's] question will be "what else can we do?"' The uniqueness of the YFC program was identified by the Communities for Children (CfC) Program Manager who commented, 'what is good or unique about it – it's sitting within the school environment … they are so proactive'. The Deputy Principal explained, 'when one thing hasn't worked, we changed, and changed, and changed, until we found the right things'. The CfC Manager emphasised 'it's an existing platform that then can be layered with a range of other supports and integrated holistically, to create that circle around the young person, their baby or themselves if they are pregnant'.

The provision of child care was a key theme. One student commented, 'It is really good, like … I can still spend time with bub and stuff. Like, when I was feeding her, I can just go in there whenever I wanted, really, and feed her … I love it here … And the play area for the kids, where they play was real safe … I would trust my two kids being in the other room' (Student 5). Another student remarked, 'We have a day care thing on the other side; and we don't have to be sitting with our child the whole time and worrying what's wrong with them and you are trying to do your work. It's very hard to do that' (Student 8). This was emphasised: 'you can bring them and know that they are going to be safe, even though you are in the next room doing your schoolwork (Student 9).

The range of supports described included various health services, education/parenting services, and life skills groups, family and child support services, as well as employment and training pathways. The Deputy Principal also noted that the program was connected to a range of different services, such as Child and Youth Mental Health Service (CYMHS), Queensland Health, BRAVE, Communities for Children (CfC), Ipswich Hospital, Ipswich and West Moreton Health Service, the Queensland Police Service (QPS), Centrelink, Ipswich Community Youth Service and the Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women. This was supported by the Principal who explained that 'one of our deputy principals was out at Child Safety yesterday afternoon for about an hour, meeting with a heap of stakeholders'. A student additionally identified the Ipswich Community Youth Service (ICYS):

> they do housing; they can help budget… she helped me see if I could do hours in my logbook for my driving. They actually have some people that volunteer their time, so I can do some hours in a car; and they provide you a car, to do some driving (Student 8).

One Aboriginal student added, 'Because I identify as "Aboriginal", I got help for uniforms. In Grade 12, they paid for some of my uniforms and my Beauty course ... So I was lucky to have multiple supports throughout school' (Student 2).

One student explained that at the end of the previous year, it was difficult for her to attend the program due to a range of issues. However she explained that the Program Manager and YFC Teacher 'know a lot about Child Safety and they are able to write maybe a letter to the Child Safety if there's an issue, they are more than willing to help you' (Student 8). This was supported by the Deputy Principal: 'if we have to do a "child notification", which we do if we get a disclosure of domestic violence, then that's part of our reporting framework ... And we are very good at following up on that as well; and making sure that the young person is okay and if they need any support'.

The Program Manager spoke about the challenge of encouraging the young mothers to leave their children in the nursery:

> They don't trust anybody. They have terrible separation anxiety. A lot of these girls have experienced a sexual assault themselves, or domestic violence. So their trust circle is very, very small. And that takes a long time to build up.

The Deputy Principal gave examples of students' partners or family members making threats to come onto site, and that they had responded by making contact with QPS. The Program Manager articulated the importance of communication between the students and program staff: 'That is the only request that we have of them; just as long as we know they are safe, their babies are safe and that - you know, if there's anything that we can do to help'. She explained that such support sometimes involved home visits by the Child Health Nurse. One student reported:

> Well, at the moment, [YFC Program Manager] is helping with a lot like, she's trying to help me to find like, she's given me a name of someone and I have just got to do the rest; like, see a psychologist and stuff, to talk about because I have had a lot that's happened in the last two years (Student 7).

In order to maintain communication, the Program Manager explained,

> In all the years I have been in this job, communication has always been one of my biggest struggles … So thank God for Facebook. We were successful in getting our own Facebook page. It's a closed Facebook page which, if you are a government employee, you understand it's a very difficult thing to do.

The students also valued Facebook as a means of communicating: '... if you really need something, or to talk to someone, you just message; instead of just keeping it inside' (Student 1) and 'It's just to get some notifications of some events that are coming up and stuff, which is good; if there is events. They will even text you if you don't have Facebook, which is good' (Student 5). The Program Manager elaborated, 'the beauty of even our Facebook page is … because if we know they are struggling, we know they are having a hard time, chances are they are going to put it on their Facebook wall … we can reach out to them'.

Supporting young mothers' independence was identified as an important aspect of the program. This could involve assistance from Centrelink and securing accommodation when needed. The Deputy Principal also said, 'if any of the students have got any mental health

issues, we support them in that respect and make sure that they are directed to the right people'. He described the wraparound approach where students could be connected with a Youth Support Coordinator and/or relevant external agencies. At times, this involved providing young mothers and their children with shelter before they were able to secure long-term accommodation. The Chaplain assisted: 'I could come in and say, "Actually, that's available for you. And there's an organisation that will help you with this/that"'. Two students described the crucial role of the child health nurse: '[She] put a report out and they did that for me; which was good, because I had no idea what to do' (Student 5); 'She is always full of new things. She's good; she knows a lot' (Student 6).

5.2.1   Transport: An ongoing issue

We know that if we had transport, more [young mothers] would be here. (Teacher)

Transport emerged as a significant issue in relation to the young women's access to the program. One student explained, 'I get up each day at 5 o'clock and get my son ready and stuff and we go; we leave at 6; and we get here by 8.30' (Student 8). Another student described difficulties in getting to the YFC: 'I have to catch the bus - like, I leave my house at 7.30 … transport is a bit hard, but I should get a car soon, so it will be better (Student 5). Another student described her transport situation: 'It is just two buses and stuff. But I think the bus ride altogether is like an hour or something; but it is the waiting …'(Student 6).

The Program Manager discussed transport as a key issue:

> Transport is probably the biggest issue … most of our young mums are not old enough to drive. And even if they could, they couldn't afford it … the cost involved with public transport; … Ipswich High is not on a train line; so, it is a train and a bus … or at least two buses; and if you are juggling that with a pram, that can be really challenging.

She identified other issues associated with public transport: 'sometimes bus drivers won't even allow girls to get on a bus. I mean, I have dealt with bus companies because bus drivers have stopped someone from getting on a bus with a pram'. The issue of safe transport was discussed by the CEC, who noted 'these kids are getting on buses by themselves with the pram and no car seat, because you are on public transport'. The Business Manager noted that the school does have a mini bus, however it is not equipped with baby seats, creating a logistical problem. This was also raised by the Program Manager who discussed the lack of funding to purchase a new mini bus for the program, fitted out with baby seats;

> we are looking at different ways at the moment of getting a bus; which I feel for a lot of our girls will be a blessing, to have a bus; because they do want to be here but just getting here - especially, some girls have got two children. Getting on a bus with a brand new baby and a toddler …

A student recounted that her car had broken down that morning:

> it just makes me wish that there was a school bus; some sort of - like, that we could all be picked up and we would all come to school. There's a lot of girls that … work from home because they just can't get here (Student 3).

The Program Manager also identified another barrier: 'If you are on the bus and someone's giving you a gobful about being a young parent, "Oh, I'm not catching that bus again" … it doesn't take much to deter a young parent'. Despite these barriers, one student acknowledged that 'transport is a bit of an issue', however described that 'I will make the effort, kind of thing. Like, if I want to come, I will just make the effort' (Student 5).

5.3   Support in a safe, 'judgment-free zone'

One young mother and her partner referred to YFC as 'a judgment free zone'. The following interaction ensued:

> Young mother: He can cry.

> Young father: And "no judgment". It [YFC] is a non-judgment zone. Everyone who is in that room is going through what you are going through. They're going to understand it … to have someone watching you … and make sure you are doing okay. Because if you are not going to do okay, bub's not going to do okay.

This was supported by another student who described the YFC staff as 'very supportive and not judgy. So no matter what you did, they never judged you for anything; which is lovely' (Student 2). The YFC teacher also commented on the importance of creating a safe space for young mothers to learn: 'You do need to be really non-judgmental ... they can feel it. You can't just pretend … they can read you incredibly well; and they know, if you are on their side or not'. The Program Manager also noted that

> it's really important that the girls feel valued in the community; not only in their school community but the wider community; and getting staff and community members to understand … people come with judgment around young parents, but it's just "sit down, have a five minute conversation with them" and then it's all of a sudden, "Oh, I never thought of it like that"

One student commented 'It feels like here I am in mainstream and you get a jersey and you can wear a uniform thing … because I was always disappointed in myself because I knew I wouldn't graduate Grade 12; and I reckon this has made me feel better about myself' (Student 1). Another student said, 'if you come here, you are still able to get a senior jersey and still able to go to formal and go to graduation' (Student 8). Not having to 'deal with the mainstream stuff' while finishing school and being able to bring their baby (Student 7) was also described by students as a strength of the program. The YFC teacher explained that all

teachers at the school 'need to come to the party' in regards to pregnant and parenting students who 'are kind of a big deal here'. This was supported by one of the young mothers: 'they are very understanding and if any student in the mainstream school was to say something, you let the teacher know and they can sort it out' (Student 8).

5.4 Learning and Teaching: A focus on alternate pathways

'It's not about attendance, it's about engagement' (YFC Program Manager)

Flexible delivery of the program emerged as a core theme in relation to learning and teaching. The rationale for flexibility was described by the Program Manager:

> a lot of our girls live independently, and they have no-one, and they really do struggle. They want to be here but it's difficult to get here with a new baby. They don't want to be at home; they are very lonely/isolated. So that's why we are so flexible; because if they want to get out of house today and really need some support, this is where they are going to come. You know, if they have had a rough night's sleep or bubby's sick, they can't get to school, they know their place is not in jeopardy. We are not going to expel them for not attending.

This flexibility extended beyond the classroom:

> if they don't want to come to class, I can meet them after class on-site here, or at a public place … I can post workbooks out; I can talk to them on the phone … we are usually on Messenger. They will send me a photo of a workbook page and say, "I am having trouble with question 5," and I can either phone them and talk them through it or I can send them a message explaining it (Teacher).

A student supported this, saying 'I'm not expected to come every single day and stuff. Because when you are on OP, you have to be there every single day, no matter. But with the program, you can just come on selected days; so it's pretty good' (Student 6).

This flexible approach attracted the attention of administrative staff, as 'some administration leaders will say to me, "You have got all those staff down there and you have got no-one there" … I keep banging on all the time, "It's not about attendance; it's about engagement". We now have "OneSchool" … we can show that "they are engaged but, no, they are not here today" (YFC Program Manager).

One of the key strengths of the program was a curriculum comprised of education and life skills, as noted by the CfC Program Manager. Various staff and students described the incorporation of parenting programs, as well as self-esteem and respectful relationships programs. The teacher described her role in this context as 'very different to any other … we could be halfway through work for the day and somebody asks a question about a teething baby because they haven't slept for three weeks'.   She articulated her focus on engagement:

as long as they are working … it doesn't matter to me if that workbook takes them a week or … six weeks. If I can see that they are working, that's fine … they might be really, really quick on the English workbooks and really slow on the Maths ones. Or the other way around … we really don't work on, "You must do this by this date." It's all engagement.

She expanded on her role as a teacher: 'So my role is as a teacher, but also as a trainer and assessor because all of our girls work on self-paced learning. So they are all doing Vocational Education Training … they are all doing certificate courses'. A student commented: 'I do Certificates … there's heaps of opportunity … different booklets/courses' (Student 5). Another student appreciated this flexibility:

> they don't, like, make you rush your work. It is just at your own pace … more enjoyable … they actually have booklets and booklets. Like, you are going up and up … Not waiting for everyone to catch up (Student 1).

She also valued being able to take the booklets home to complete them: 'That's how I get it done, fast … I reckon if I didn't come here, I wouldn't still finish Grade 12; I wouldn't get a jersey or something like that; and I would still feel disappointed in myself' (Student 1). The teacher expressed a wish 'to be able to provide the girls with a laptop to be able to take home' (Teacher).

Another student discussed using these Certificate courses to complete Year 12: 'not only do you come out with your QCE; you come out with ten other certificates that you have done here already, to get your 20 points (Student 8). However, she also reflected that much of the content in 'a lot of the booklets … is pretty simple'.

The teacher emphasised that her pedagogical approach was responsive to the needs of the students: 'my role sometimes is more a one-on-one; other times, we do whole-class type things, depending on what they are working on at the time'. For example, in relation to the curriculum, she said, 'one of our girls thought that a "loan" and "finance" were completely different things … we now teach a Certificate 1 in Financial Services'. In another example, she noted that many of the young women had missed a great deal of schooling, which needed to be addressed: 'last year, we had a group of students who had never been taught how to tell the time on a clock. So we did that as a group, "Let's all do it together"'.   One student described the 'option of going up there [Mainstream school] … like, the ones that give us certificates … like the hairdressing or the beauty or hospitality and stuff … if we want to do that, we can go and do that; but not many of us do that' (Student 7). Another student explained that 'when every new student starts, they have a choice to do extra things like the hairdressing course they have here or if you want to be in a Maths class out there, they can give you a tour of it' (Student 3). This was reiterated by the School Principal, who noted that 'a couple of them go off to mainstream classes, occasionally'.

The Program Manager referred to the teacher's qualifications: 'Because we are a training organisation … she's qualified to teach many certificate courses … If the girls are interested in something, she will learn that herself and get qualified, so that she can deliver that course … she has a Masters degree in special education'. One of the students described the

teacher's approach: 'most of it is self-explained within the booklet, if we don't understand, we will ask a question … She will come and talk to us; and explain to me; even show me videos on YouTube. She's very, very good with that (Student 8). Another student felt that:

> [She] is a good teacher and she will help us when we need it, but, like, I feel like maybe once a week, we need a teacher led class … Because doing the books, like, we are not exactly learning. We're just completing it and handing it in. Whereas I feel like because we finished school so early, at 16/15, we have still got a lot to learn about everything; not just kids … it would be good if we were all on one topic for a day, maybe, just to help us work together … a lot of the books are just booklet work. It just gets boring; so boring; no stimulation in the classroom; which is why I think a lot of the girls just talk rather than work, which is a big struggle we're having at the moment (Student 3).

The importance of social networking was also highlighted by the Teacher. She described many of the students as socially isolated 'because they have lost a lot of the friends they used to have'. As a result, she emphasised that 'we do try and keep them as focussed as we can, but we also know that social angle and that chatter and the friendship building is really, really important. So if we had a silent classroom where nobody spoke, we wouldn't get that; they wouldn't be able to build that social network'.

One student described her experience of trying to complete her schooling as a young parent: '…she [child] is awake all night; so then I won't actually get sleep; so makes it hard to come to school. They just take her and then you can sleep; and then whenever you wake up, they will just give them back to you and stuff. That's helpful' (Student 6). She added, 'in the program, I can concentrate on work and her. But even then, I can get someone to hold her, if needed'.

Emotional support was also described by students:

> They [YFC Program Manager & Teacher] both have links to people that they know of, that they can help you with and they are good to talk to. I have told them a lot of stuff about me, that I probably haven't told my mum; just because they're there and they are easy to talk to… I know that they are mandatory reporters and they've already said to me if they have got an issue with anything, they will come to me and have a conversation around that before they make any other decisions (Student 8).

> And then other stuff that happens outside, like, family wise, it does affect how I work… [YFC program manager] is good with that stuff. Like, she will sit and talk with us about it; like, if we are struggling and stuff, she will sit there … we can talk with her whenever (Student 7).

5.5   Motivation, aspiration and modelling

The young mothers described setting a good example for their children as a motivation to attend the YFC program, despite the difficulties they faced. The Deputy Principal described these students as 'quite focussed, on-task and there's no issue. They have got a different

purpose. You know, they are bettering themselves for the lives of their young person that they have got in their care'.

This was evident in the student interviews:

> I come every day, pretty much; even when my car breaks down, I come … I find a way … I have two kids ... I started coming to school because I really needed to do something for the kids (Student 3).

> I just wanted to do it [YFC] and try and find a job; so I'm not sitting around all the time doing nothing with my life. Just want to set a good example for my girls (Student 5).

Table 1 depicts a summary of the students' post-school aspirations. As this table demonstrates, half of the students interviewed intended to pursue university education. Most of these students had decided on a career direction.

Table 1. Students' post-school aspirations

Post-school aspiration	University	University (maybe)	TAFE	Undecided
Number of Students	4	2	2	1
Course	Bachelor of Nursing Bachelor of Nursing/ Midwifery Bachelor of Medicine Bachelor of Human Services	Considering the possibility of attending university; course undecided	Certificate III in Disability Support Hospitality (Diploma or Certificate level not specified)	Focused on attaining QCE at present

The students who wanted to continue their studies at university were aware that in order to achieve this, they would need to complete a Tertiary Pathway Program (TPP) course through TAFE:

> Because I never got an OP score, I do this other course called TPP, "Tertiary Pathway Program" ... after that course is done, I get to do an undergraduate course at uni; which I am going to be studying a Bachelor of Nursing (Student 2).

> I have applied for a TPP course … it will help me to get into university ... probably studying midwifery and nursing (Student 3).

One student, who aspired to be a doctor, knew that in order to achieve this goal, she had to plan her pathway:

> I am 16. I wanted to be a doctor. Like, that's what I wanted to do. I was going to graduate and do a doctor's thing, and be a surgeon … I still want to do it but I'm not sure; it might take a while … when she gets into day care, that's when I was going to start university; because I graduate in two years; like, this year and next year and then I am in Grade 12 (Student 6).

Nursing was described by the YFC Program Manager as 'a very popular thing that the girls want to do, when they leave here. I think if they have had a good experience giving birth, and they were part of that process'. For example, one student articulated her clear goal to 'get into university by the end of this year … probably studying midwifery and nursing' (Student 3).

Some students' career aspirations had changed: 'I used to be interested in the beauty side but I have gone on a different path of my career now. I want to do a degree in the Bachelor of Human Services' (Student 7). Another student described that 'I wanted to become a mechanic but I am second-guessing it now … It's something that I can still decide at a later date. Like, I'm not that young to go to university; so I can still have that chance, if I wanted to' (Student 9).

TAFE courses were considered by a few students. For example, one young mother explained that

> I want to go to TAFE to do a Cert 3 in Support Disability. You can do the course online but I might do it … I see a lot of people, like, always just be rude towards them; but I think it would be a good thing to help them make them feel, like, comfortable and normal … I want to do aged care support as well (Student 1).

Other students were unsure of their future direction: 'I was probably going to head off to that area [early childhood teaching] and build my way up, I think; or just become a hospitality person or something, because I love cooking' (Student 5).

The adults in the program actively supported the students' aspirations. For example, one student noted that the teacher 'asks [all the students], "What are your plans after school?" and encourages them to follow their plans' (Student 9). The Deputy Principal described this as supporting students to 'follow their passion' and helping them to achieve that:

> if we have got a student that wants to university … go into TAFE or has got some work lined up, or even hasn't got any work lined up but has a got a real passion/interest and is studying in that realm, then we work with different people to make that happen.

Some examples of this are the BRAVE foundation, which were potentially able to help one student 'get me my scholarship to get into TAFE and stuff like that' (Student 8). Another student described her opportunity to undertake a traineeship with Mission Australia: 'I was doing administration and stuff. They're pretty cool' (Student 6).

The School Principal described one past student's successful outcome:

> A year and a half ago, Kate Jones who was Minister then, came around and had a look at [the program]. She was walking around with these kids, "what are you doing?" "I am doing TPP". She goes, "why? Why are you doing TPP?" "Because I am going to uni next year" and that kid went to uni next year. And we have got some of the girls here, who will be getting a TPP.

Past students valued ongoing contact with the YFC program: 'they never stop checking in on you, which is good. So two years later, I am still invited to things ... I guess they don't think "just because you graduate, you're done"' (Student 2).

> I even talked to [YFC Program Manager and the Teacher] and said, "It's going to be really upsetting when I have to leave because I have enjoyed coming here." And they said, "You know, you can still come back and do playgroup. Not be enrolled but come back as a visitor and do playgroup and see the students here and stuff" (Student 9).

Facebook was used a means of communicating with past students.

5.6   Looking Forward: Financial sustainability of the program

Every three years, we have our hearts in our mouths, if it's still going to continue again (School Principal)

Many of the staff, such as the Principal, Business Manager and the Program Manager discussed concerns regarding the financial sustainability of the program. For example, the Principal noted that 'I am not getting any money from the region from the Department; I'm not getting any staffing [for the YFC program]'. This was also discussed by the YFC Program Manager who said that while the Department viewed the program favourably, this had not been followed up with funding to support the program.

  The Business Manager also raised the question of financial sustainability:

> How are we going to sustain it? Because the deal was - originally, when we set up, we will get the model up and running. We'll fund it under our Department of Education money; and then within three years, someone else will be able to share the model and then someone else will take it over with us. But to date, that hasn't really happened.

While the program receives some funding from Mission Australia, the Principal emphasised the reallocation of funding from the mainstream school to keep the YFC program running:

> the Gonski money, we call it I4S, Investment for Succeeding; we could use that money on anything in the school but we have chosen … a quarter of it, to go in those facilities; and that could have gone to the mainstream for student learning and teacher aides.

The YFC Program Manager expressed concern that;

unless we can keep the wheels moving … we are never going to get anywhere bigger, better, have better understanding about the complex needs of this cohort and how best to address them. Because programs keep folding and starting again; folding and starting again … when programs fold, you lose all that knowledge; and you lose all of that information.

She also expressed concern that such a tight budget meant that they could not afford adequate transport to improve the accessibility of the program: 'we have been fighting very hard since we opened, to get our own transport' (Refer to section 5.2.1 Transport: An ongoing issue).

The students contributed suggestions for improvements to the program, including the provision of a mini-bus fitted with car seats 'to go to the park one day or something, and take the babies and toddlers' (Student 5), toilets in the building for toddlers and adults as students need to use the mainstream school toilets in another building, and a lounge so that students have somewhere to rest if they or their children are unwell.

6   Discussion and Conclusion

The YFC program is situated within the Darling Downs and West Moreton region, which according to the Primary Health Network (PNH) has the sixth highest birth rate in the 15-19 year age group in Australia. Located within Ipswich State High School, where the below average ICSEA value suggests that many students experience disadvantage, the program seeks to remove the barriers faced by pregnant and parenting young women to enable them to complete their schooling.

The program is supported by Ipswich State High School within the broader context of the Queensland Department of Education mandate that 'schools retain and support pregnant and parenting young people in education'(Queensland Department of Education, 2018). Despite this mandate, schools experience difficulties in retaining and attempting to support young mothers, due to social stigma as well as a lack of knowledge and experience. The interviews with the young women in this study suggest that young mothers' experiences of mainstream schooling were very negative, with some being excluded from school, despite the Department's mandate. This aligns with research that suggests despite support structures, young mothers are at risk of school exclusion (McArthur & Barry, 2013).

The YFC program was developed in response to the need for these young women to have equitable access to education. Students typically accessed the program through informal contact with other young women who were in or had completed the program, as well as the hospital or other professional contacts. The YFC program created opportunities for the students to access any of the wider network of services provided by the school, which related to education, health and well-being, as well as cultural and linguistic support. The inclusive approach of the school was highly evident in the interviews, with students specifically referring to the non-judgemental approach and active support of the leadership team.

'Bending barriers' through an integrated, wrap-around approach characterised the program. Bending one of these barriers involved the provision of on-site child care. Research demonstrates that the lack of adequate child care presents a substantial barrier to school-aged mothers' academic progress (SmithBattle, 2007). The YFC program also provided access to multiple support services to address some students' very difficult circumstances, such as such as domestic violence, substance abuse by other family members, homelessness, and child protection issues. Such services were provided within, and external to, the program and included child and family support, mental health services, child protection, housing as well as employment and training pathways. The approach was intended to support young mothers to further develop their independence, life skills and career aspirations. Despite the success of the wrap-around approach, a lack of adequate transport emerged as an ongoing issue, which affected students' access to the program. Another concern raised was young mothers' experiences of social stigma while on public transport or waiting for connecting buses. SmithBattle (2007) identifies a lack of access to adequate transport as an inhibiting factor to young mothers' attendance and engagement with schooling.

The YFC program offered a safe, 'judgement-free' learning space in which young mothers experienced a sense of belonging and acceptance. Within this context, the focus of learning and teaching was the flexible delivery of the curriculum, together with parenting programs, with some young mothers choosing to work at home at times, while coming to the centre at other times. Research suggests that a flexible approach such as this can support young mothers in their roles as parents and students (Clarke, 2015) and supportive relationships with teachers and support staff have also been shown to be important for young mothers' continued engagement in schooling (Mills & McGregor, 2014). Effective communication through various means, such as Facebook Messenger, was critical to the flexible delivery of the YFC program. Staff did not equate engagement with attendance at the centre, but rather with progression through the various Certificate I and II course booklets. The curriculum and pedagogy were strongly focussed on vocational education through the completion of these booklets, so that students could accrue the 20 points needed to attain their QCE. The focus on OP pathways was less evident. While some of the young mothers found that the booklets for the Certificate courses adequately met their needs and allowed them to work at their own pace, others reported that they were working below capacity and felt that they were not being challenged.

The teacher reported that her approach was responsive to the needs of the students, and that this typically involved one-on-one tutoring, however some whole-class lessons were conducted. In order to meet these demands, she continually engaged in professional learning to teach the various certificate courses. A significant component of the learning environment was providing students with opportunities to build friendships and social networks, as many of the young mothers were socially isolated. Research has demonstrated that social support networks are particularly important to the health and wellbeing of young mothers (McGregor et al., 2017; Mills & McGregor, 2014).

The young mothers interviewed in this research were focussed and highly motivated to achieve their QCE to provide better lives for themselves and their children. Other research has found that many young women who become pregnant strengthen their resolve to complete their schooling (Clarke, 2015; Duncan et al., 2010; SmithBattle, 2007) and some are motivated to consider further education, sometimes for the first time (Duncan et al., 2010; Graham & McDermott, 2005; SmithBattle, 2007). It was notable in our study that half of the students interviewed expressed their intention to pursue further study at university and had clear plans for achieving their goals. This included studying medicine, nursing, midwifery and human services. Others were considering completing TAFE courses to achieve their goals. These students' aspirations were actively supported by the program and the wider school as well as external agencies. There was clear evidence that past students of the YFC program had achieved their goals, and wished to have ongoing contact and to continue to support the program.

Financial sustainability of the program emerged as a significant issue, with the leadership team expressing concerns in regards to the future of the program, as they did not receive funding from the Queensland Department of Education. A 'tight budget' meant that the program could not be improved and developed to its full potential and increase access to other young women in the area.

7   Concluding Summary

The current findings align closely with other research that suggests young mothers are motivated to complete their formal schooling and are seeking meaningful career pathways. Clarke (2015) has noted, 'it is not the early pregnancy that is an adverse occurrence but rather the response to the pregnancy' (p. 483). This point resonates in our analysis of the ways in which YFC responds to the needs of young mothers, with its integrated approach of wrap-around support and flexible curriculum delivery. The question that emerges is how programs such as YFC can offer flexible and challenging learning opportunities for young mothers who may wish to pursue an OP pathway.

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