

## Socio demographic background information

This submission is presented to the Productivity Commission from Zoe Support Australia, a not-for-profit community based organisation in Mildura, a rural city 550km north-west of Melbourne. The Zoe Centre exists to support young mums to engage in education, while providing a positive early learning environment for their children and a social space for the development of life skills.

Mildura Rural City Part A (consisting of Mildura, Merbein and Irymple) has one of the highest teen birth rates in Victoria, at 28.1 per 1,000 women aged 15–19 years. In 2008 there was a total of 59 births to teenage mothers. By comparison, the national teen fertility rate was 17.3 per 1,000 women aged 15–19 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2006; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2008). The Indigenous profile in Mildura Rural City adds context and complexity, with a teen birth rate of 180.4 per 1,000 Indigenous females aged 15–19 years (Aboriginal Early Childhood Community Profile [AECCP], 2009). These figures remain consistent today.

In 2008, Mildura reported a population of 28,743, within the surrounding Local Government Area (LGA) of 53,122. Indigenous people make up a relatively high proportion of the population (5.39%) compared with Melbourne (0.4%) and Victoria (1.2%) (Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2010, p.4).

Mildura is a city with high socioeconomic indicators for risk. It has relatively high unemployment at 7.3% (2008) compared to the national rate of 5.4%. It is ranked 12 out of Victoria's 79 LGAs in the ABS Index of Relative Socio Economic Disadvantage (IRSED), where the ranking of '1' is the most disadvantaged area in terms of "low income, low educational attainment, high unemployment and the proportion of work force in relatively unskilled occupations" (DEECD, 2010 p. 3).

Mildura Senior College (MSC) reports school retention rates of 69.9% in 2007–08 (Northern Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network [NMLLEN], 2011), compared to 85.1% for Victoria. This means only two-thirds of young people attending MSC remain to complete year 12 (House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Education and Training, Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). MSC was selected as the focus school for this study as it is the only separate year 11 and 12 site in the region, and only one of three Victorian

Certificate of Education (VCE) colleges in the region. As an adult learning environment, MSC is ideally placed to support and manage the needs of teen mothers. Chaffey Secondary College provides flexible learning options and has a supportive wellbeing team, making continuation of education feasible for younger mothers under the age of 16 years.

Despite government focus on social inclusion and school retention for students who are 'at risk' of disengagement, and the delivery of multidimensional services for teen mothers at or in close proximity to senior colleges around Australia (such as Corio Bay Senior College, Geelong, Victoria; Mable Park High, Logan City, Queensland; Canberra College Cares, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory; and Balga Senior High, Balga, Perth, Western Australia), teen mothers in Mildura are still at high risk of disengaging with education. Zoe Support is the only service offering services for young mothers to access education in the Mildura region. An evaluation of existing models of secondary school child care and parenting centres with published data of student outcomes (Harden, Brunton, Fletcher, Oakley, Burchett & Backhans, 2006) justifies the work of Zoe Support for teen mothers in Mildura to improve education retention, with growth rates of engagement since the inception of the Centre, and the outcomes thus far, providing the evidence.

Social inclusion, according to the Australian Government, means “building a nation in which all Australians have the opportunity and support they need to participate fully in the nation’s economic and community life, develop their own potential and be treated with dignity and respect” (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2009 p. 5). This includes teen mothers.

### **Teen Mothers Choice and Agency**

'Choice', 'preference' and 'agency' are concepts embedded within the discourse of the 'work and family debate' (Moorehead & Soriano, 2005). The choice to study or not, where to live, how to travel, how to afford and manage child care, among other choices a teen mother might make, are constrained by issues other than age itself. Choice is limited and is framed by social, political and economic structures, as research illuminates. According to Moorehead and Soriano (2005), few teen mothers experience any sense of empowerment to choose their futures; life “happens to them” (p. 67). Rather than “good or bad choices”, social inequalities “...shape the range, quality, meaning of and conditions under which choices are made...” (Petchesky, 1984 cited in Luttrell, 2003 p. 29). The notion of "choice making" evokes a picture of autonomy which locates a teen mother as the “architect of (her) own life” (p. 29), which Luttrell decries. Instead, teen mothers wrestle with themselves as “victims of stereotypes and mistreatment, vulnerable to men's deceit, daughters who fear disappointment and loss and as decision makers who have not chosen the conditions under which they must take action” (Luttrell 2003, p. 116). This literature informs the practice and provision

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of Zoe Support by challenging the presumption that teen mothers make empowered choices to disengage from school.

In contrast to this concept of victimisation, the Australian study finds teen mothers use the word 'responsible' often to describe their reasons for continuing with the pregnancy. "They justified (it)... as proof of a 'worthy' side of their identity; they were acting in a responsible manner" (Moorehead & Soriano, 205 p. 67). Several recent studies cited in the Social Exclusion report identify young mothers returning to education with a "greater level of commitment to defy negative expectations of them" (Harden et al., 2006). As one teen said, "I'm making sure that I do my education and get a good job so that I can support her for the rest of her life" (p. 58). The sense of responsibility for better outcomes is reiterated in Luttrell's (2003) five-year ethnographic research. She reports pregnant and parenting students see their lives as having been "compromised...school had split their student self from their pregnant self, (which) limited their sense of possibility" (p. 175). Luttrell's work reveals much about the discourse of choice and agency, labelling the teen mother's choice a defence of the moral self. The participants in her study framed their pregnancy as an opportunity to better themselves, rather than as a problem. Moorehead and Soriano (2005) similarly find many teen mothers take the opportunity to change self-destructive habits, get healthy and focus on education. This literature challenges the notion of self-agency and portrays teen mothers as making choices in the context of circumstances beyond their control.

### **Child Care is crucial to success**

Previous research examines child care, education and outcomes for teen mothers, reporting that care needs to be quality, accessible, affordable and close to the teen mother.

Teen mothers have different preferences for childcare, with most relying on family, often a choice driven by financial constraints (Evans, 2003; Gibbin, 2003; Hall et al., 2003; Speak, 1995; Wiggins et al., 2005a, all cited in Harden et al, 2006). However, many mothers who are assisted by Zoe have little or no family support. The lack of childcare, coupled with anxiety over leaving children, makes returning to school difficult (Harden et al., 2006). A US longitudinal study presents the benefits of providing free educational day care for children of single teen mothers. Analysis of the data concludes that teen mothers are more likely to complete high school, go on to tertiary training and become self-supporting when they are supported with free developmental day care, onsite health care and dependable free transportation. The research concludes, "A good childcare program can make the difference between success and failure for single, teen mothers" (Campbell, Breitmayer & Ramey, 1986, p.67). This is why Zoe Support does what it does.

Some teen mothers find letting go of their role as parent to family or a child care worker difficult, and expressed a desire to have their children close to them, for example, in onsite child care (Harden et al., 2006). Australian research by Moorehead and Soriano (2005) also found that where incentives are offered, such as onsite childcare at schools, mothers do respond. "One focus group comprised teenage mothers who had returned to high school to complete their studies. The school environment was specifically structured to offer support to the mothers, and the on-site childcare centre was fully booked" (p. 71). According to Harden et al. (2006), programs for teen mothers that encourage return to school after birth and provide help with childcare successfully promote a quick return to education, at an increase of 213% (Harden et al., 2006). The UK report concurs, finding that young mothers engaged in school regarded "reliable, affordable and trustworthy childcare (essential) *before* they went back to education or employment" (italics mine) (p.67). Onsite childcare is popular with teens "who did not want to be far away from their children" (Hosie & Dawson, 2005, in Harden et al., 2006, p.59). Other research agrees that "acceptable, reliable child care made it easier for women to return to education" (Harden et al., 2006 p. 58). Conversely, when teen mothers do not have choice or access to childcare they are comfortable with, they value their children's wellbeing over their own education and defer returning to education (Harden et al., 2006).

According to research at CBSC Geelong (Shacklock, Harrison & Angwin, 2007), a multidimensional approach, including childcare, is essential for a successful teen parenting program. Assisting teen mothers, encouraging and supporting their sense of "educational competence and motivation" are critical ingredients for school success and completion (p. 155). A flourishing program is one that:

...provides child care; equity in treatment; health services, including contraception, prenatal care and nutrition; social support, including transport and case management; mentoring and counselling. It also fosters high aspirations and supports opportunities to graduate through negotiated, realistic, supportive academic programs (p.155). Zoe Support services assists young mothers in the Mildura region to achieve their goals by providing these programs.

## A Solution: the Zoe Story

In April 2013, the Zoe Support Centre opened its doors for the first time to provide childcare and a hub for young mums in the Mildura region, aiming to support them in reengaging in education. The Centre opened with one 17 year old mum and her 3 month old baby girl. Now, just a little over 14 months later, 22 young mothers are utilising the Zoe Centre with their children. The Centre provides Family Day Care as the framework to meet regulatory requirements, however within 6 months it was clear this could only be a

temporary solution. The Centre juggles childcare with visiting children who are under the care of their mothers, while they attend activities at the Centre. Life skills programs such as positive parenting, maternal and child health visits, self esteem courses all occur at the Centre along with cooking each Wednesday which concludes with mums, children and staff sharing a meal together. The supported playgroup is open to any young mother to come and visit. Another important program is the social enterprise of Bibs & Buntings: Zoe's young mothers are invited to become part of the sewing program which runs weekly, making bibs and buntings, with the purpose of learning and expanding their skills, socialising, and creating products they then sell at the local markets. The funds raised go toward Zoe Gift Baskets, which are distributed through the local hospital and aboriginal service as a prompt for other 'at risk/vulnerable' young women to contact Zoe if needed. Zoe young mothers make up the baskets of newborn baby items, and each basket is worth \$80. Over 120 have been handed out in the last 18 months. The mums involved in this program love the idea of 'paying it forward' to other isolated mums to let them know they are not alone. The Centre has a study room with computers, internet and printing facilities. Nine Zoe mums are currently engaged in education programs at the two schools nearby as well as at a Flexible Learning Options centre, and two others study online.

Often when a teen discovers she is pregnant she disengages from school because she had no options for support once her baby is born. The Zoe Centre provides the opportunity for young mums to continue school because of the close proximity of the childcare centre to the schools. She can breastfeed or simply spend time with her child. As Amber says:

*'Doing my VCE at Mildura Senior College while my baby and toddler are a few doors down in daycare is amazing! I can see them during my 'free's' and during recess & lunch! And I get to hang with other young mums who are passionate and inspiring.'*

For those young mums already disengaged from education, high risk behaviours that were prevalent often cease once pregnant and they tell the story that it was becoming a mum that made them reevaluate their future for the sake of their child. Amber 21, mother of two says she is now completing her VCE year 12 and intending to enrol in university in 2015. Prior to becoming pregnant with her now 4 year old, she was squatting in an abandoned house, drinking heavily and involved in other antisocial behaviours.

Hence, the Zoe childcare Centre sits between two secondary colleges, one is 7-10 and the other years 11 & 12 only. A close working relationship with the schools and other agencies is essential. Zoe values of dignity, respect, compassion, courage and choice have developed the culture of Zoe into an environment that is considered a second home for the mums who attend.

Like all things, Zoe began somewhere small. A dream to make a difference in a community where a social issue had been identified with the potential to impact many lives. The founding director Anne Webster, CEO, attended university in 2007 and completed two degrees by 2011. Her Social Work honours paper developed a needs assessment for teen mothers to complete secondary education in Mildura. The research findings informed the work of Zoe Support and the services it provides. But it offers more than it originally intended, as Boronagh a young mum who attends Zoe and studies online at the Centre explains, *'It is a second home for young mums and kids, that's how I see Zoe, with all the support and everyone here, it feels like a big family'*.

The future of Zoe Support is in its ability to create and achieve a sustainable model. Ms Webster says to address the imperative of sustainability, the Centre is in process of becoming a Long Day Care centre, to generate revenue for the support services and increase capacity to meet the current and future need. A purpose built facility is the only option for growth and the plans have already been drawn up. While government at all levels have shown interest in the Zoe model, it will take continued energy, time and commitment to see the dream fulfilled. But as one of the plaques at the Centre says: 'Every great achievement starts with a decision to try'. And that is what the Zoe team, and their mums, are doing.

## Discovering Issues with childcare gap payments

The research findings show that sufficient financial support, mentoring, tutoring, childcare in close proximity or onsite at the school, health, housing and transport all remove barriers to education reengagement. Zoe Support services are based on these findings.

There are significant hurdles for these young mothers to go back to school, but two are of interest to this submission are:

- out of pocket childcare fees and
- the length of time the current JET payment is available.

### Out of pocket fees

For the young mothers attending the Zoe Centre, the *current* gap payment for childcare with JETCCFA is a challenge. The current gap is \$1 per hour per child, but for a mother with two preschool aged children while she attends full time secondary school, this adds up to \$80-90 per week. This is a substantial amount for these young women who are most often single, aged between 14 -21 years, and generally struggle to manage basic budgeting to pay rent, put food on the table, buy nappies and other baby needs, let alone manage transport, books, fees, and other additional school costs. Zoe advocates for assistance from various other funded agencies that support reengagement in education, however they are reluctant to pay the childcare gap, even

though this is a distinct barrier to these mothers. If JET or CCB are reduced pending the findings of the Productivity Commission report and the Senate Committee, these young mothers who have decided to go back to school for their children's sake, will find themselves with little alternative but to disengage. This defeats the stated objectives of government to reduce welfare dependency and increase engagement in jobs, employment, training or education.

These young women are dependent on welfare and frequently have come from families who are generationally welfare dependent. The work of Zoe Support is a circuit breaker to this entrenched cycle, but without assistance to cover childcare costs, our clients will self-select out of education.

### **Flexible JET allocation**

The second important issue lies with the period of time that a mother can access JET. Since 2008 it has been made available for 2 years though reviewed yearly, but clearly for a teen mother who is going back to school at 14 or 15 years old, and who wishes to complete secondary school, this is simply inadequate. Let alone those who wish to go on to tertiary education. Currently Zoe mothers are 14-21 years old, are completing year 9, 10, 11 and 12 and then are intending on university or tertiary education. There must be a reasonable plan for young mothers to be able to achieve this, even if based on attendance and other criteria.

I urge the Productivity Commission to reduce the barriers young mothers experience in engaging in education by increasing both access to the JET capped fund, removing the gap altogether for those who can least afford it, and also increasing the length of time JET is available to a young mother attending secondary education to make childcare seriously, affordable, accessible and flexible.

Regards,

Anne Webster

CEO & Founding Director

BSW (Hons); BA; PhD scholar (current); AmusA; MACID

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