Chapter 13

Situating Foucault in Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Measures

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ABSTRACT

In spite of declining teen birth rates, teenage pregnancy in USA remains the highest amongst the industrialized nations in the world. There appears to be a correlation between teenage pregnancy and the culture of the teenagers within the African-American population. African American teenagers may be influenced by the cultural norms of their community resulting in a cycle of teenage pregnancies over the generations. It is essential to break this cycle by influencing the behavior and perceptions of the teenagers towards early motherhood and pregnancies. Using empirical data from in-depth interviews conducted with school nurses and school counselors and Foucault’s disciplinary strategies, this chapter suggests mentoring as a suitable teenage pregnancy preventive measure which might be effective in guiding and shaping the decisions and choices of African American teenagers in their lives.

INTRODUCTION

Teenage pregnancy in USA has declined over the years (Heller & Blackman, 2016; Sonfield, 2012). Teen birth rates have decreased by 67 percent from 1991. In 2016, the teen birth rate was 20.3 births per 1,000 girls in the ages 15-19 years, which represents a 9 percent drop from 2015 (Heller & Blackman, 2016). However, in spite of these declining rates, teenage pregnancy in USA continues to remain the highest amongst the industrialized nations across the world (Heller & Blackman, 2016). Roughly 1 in 4 girls in U.S. becomes pregnant once before the age of 20. While 1 in 6 teen births is a repeat birth. Further there happens to be a significant disparity in teen births across different racial and ethnic groups, geographic regions and age groups (Heller & Blackman, 2016; Sonfield, 2012). Teenage pregnancy is higher amongst the African American, Alaska Native and Hispanic population as compared to the White and Asian American populations (Heller & Blackman, 2016). Teen birth rate among the black and Hispanic teens is twice that of the white teens nationally. While the teen birth rate of American Indian is 60 percent higher than that of the white teen birth rate (Heller & Blackman, 2016; Martin, Hamilton & Ventura, 2015).

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Teenage pregnancy has been associated with various social, health and financial issues. Early motherhood disrupts the girls’ educational and career goals, their future earning potentials and has a direct impact on their parenting skills. Teenage mothers are more likely to live in poverty and be dependent on public assistance (Heller & Blackman, 2016; Akella & Jordan, 2015; Shuger, 2012; Santelli & Melnikas, 2010). While children born to teen parents are also at risk educationally and behaviorally. These children are more likely to have lower school achievements, drop out of high school, become teen parents themselves or struggle with drug addiction or incarceration (Heller & Blackman, 2016; Bryant, 2006; Chen, Wen, Fleming, Demissie, Rhoads & Walker, 2007; Banerjee, Pandey, Dutt, Sengupta, Mondal & Deb, 2009; Papri, Khanam, Ava & Panna, 2016; Summers, Lee & Lee, 2017; Santelli & Melnikas, 2010).

It has therefore become imperative in terms of economic opportunity and development, to prevent young people from getting pregnant early. A variety of teen pregnancy preventive strategies have been designed over years to prevent and combat unplanned pregnancy. These constitute increasing awareness of sexuality and sexual education among the youth in middle and high schools, integrating sexual education as a part of the curriculum in schools, providing access to birth control measures and contraceptives, providing information to the youth on sexual transmitted diseases and the consequences of high risk sexual behavior. Other programs include providing peer mentoring and mentors to the young mothers and financial assistance to young parents. While some programs have integrated technology to create educational apps and videos to reach out to the youth with the needed information on sexual awareness and behavior (NCSL Report, 2016).

Further as mentioned earlier, there appears to be racial and geographical disparity in teen pregnancy rates within USA (Heller & Blackman, 2016; Sonfield, 2012). Therefore, teen pregnancy preventive measures should develop interventions which meet the needs of those specific communities and population groups. For instance, research (Akella & Jordan, 2015; Macleod, 1999; Geronimus, 1991, 2003) suggests that there is a direct link between poverty, education and culture of the teenagers and the occurrence of teenage pregnancies within the African American community. Teenage girls are influenced by the behavior of their parents, peers and others around them. This behavior is then imitated across generations resulting in a cycle of teenage pregnancies. In this situation, it necessary to change the mindsets of the teenagers to cause a change in their behavior. Role models and mentors from similar cultural and social backgrounds like the teenage mothers would be effective in breaking through this vicious cycle of teenage pregnancy. Mentors who could guide these teenagers, intervene in their lives at a very young age, shape their mental schemas, influence their decisions, before these early motherhood mistakes are committed (Akella & Jordan, 2015). This should circumvent early pregnancy amongst the teenagers.

This chapter examines teenage pregnancy amongst the African American population using empirical data gathered from interviews with the school counselors and school nurses and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. The chapter provides possible reasons for early pregnancies amongst African American teenagers and then suggests mentoring as a plausible teen pregnancy preventive strategy.

**BACKGROUND**

In 2010, Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary, Kathleen Sebelius stated “Teen pregnancy is a serious national problem and we need to use the best science of what works to address it...also testing new approaches so we can expand our toolkit of effective interventions.” Teen pregnancy and interventions to reduce it have received substantial amount of national attention and funds from the federal government.