

Reciprocal Relationships: Research and The GAP/Options Community

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ABSTRACT

This is a discussion of the relationship between researchers and community based on the collaborative research carried out at the Girls Alternative Program and Options for Pregnant Teenagers, two non-profit organizations in Victoria, B.C.

RÉSUMÉ

Une discussion concernant les rapports entre chercheurs/ses et communauté fondée sur un type de recherche collaborative entre 'Girls Alternative Programs et Options for Pregnant Teenagers', deux organismes à but non lucratif dont le siège social est situé à Victoria, C.B.

The Praxis♀Nexus conference raised important questions about the relationship between community and researchers. The Girls Alternative Program (GAP) and Options for Pregnant Teenagers (Options), where I am participating in a long-term research project, are models of the vital link between community and research and its reciprocal relationship. Central to the collaborative research carried out in the GAP/Options community is the need to validate the experiential knowledge of adolescent women. In this paper, I will provide a description and brief history of the programs, summarize the research that has been carried out at GAP/Options and I will expand on my own experience as a researcher in the GAP/Options community.

Options and GAP, located in Victoria, British Columbia, which offer educational and emotional support for young women between

the ages of thirteen and twenty, are non-profit societies funded jointly by the Ministry of Social Services and Housing and School District #61. GAP was founded in 1970 in order to provide an alternative for young women whose educational needs were not met in the "regular" school system and who were in danger of dropping out. Options was established in 1980 following recommendations by a local taskforce concerning the high rate of school dropout among pregnant teenagers. The two programs share a building and staff which consists of an equal number of teachers and life skills counsellors. The staff is currently all female and share a common commitment to feminist thinking and a vision of education as both collaborative and empowering. The program encourages students to assume responsibility for their own learning, usually on an individual contract basis, offers small class size, flexible

learning and teaching styles, and promotes an atmosphere of mutual support and respect. Total enrollment capacity is 36, and in order to provide maximum flexibility no set numbers have been established for each program. Students from both programs typically take academic subjects together but Options students also attend various pre and post-natal groups. Weekly meetings are held that involve all members of the GAP/Options community in order to address issues of concern. In 1988 an on-site daycare facility was added. An important and precedent--setting aspect of the daycare is the fact that services are provided free of charge. Funding is provided by the Ministry of Social Services and Housing. Staff cite two advantages of free service: a minimum of paperwork which is advantageous to already overworked administrative staff; and the mothers are not required to apply for provincial daycare subsidies from a bureaucratic system which is already perceived by many of the young women as attempting to disempower them.

Various individuals have carried out research at GAP/Options over the past ten years. All the research carried out to date has been of an applied nature and has both specific and broad applications. In order for any research to be carried out with minors, permission must be sought from School District #61; this is only possible with support and endorsement from GAP/Options. GAP/Options has no formal policy on how research must be carried out; but, in general, research must be of value to the program and must be carried out in a respectful manner treating everyone involved as valid contributors to the research process. All of the research carried out at GAP/Options has

focussed on personal narratives as a means of gathering information and comments and recommendations made by research participants are incorporated into the research findings. So far almost all of the research carried out at GAP/Options has been done by people who have a significant and long-standing relationship with the program and an informal ongoing dialogue has been maintained between researchers and staff over the years.

Two former staff members, Pearl Arden and Enid Elliot, have carried out research that was informed by their previous work there. The graduate research of Pearl Arden, a former life skills counsellor, focussed on the experiences and histories of birth mothers, drawn both from the wider community and from GAP/Options, who have given their children up for adoption. Enid Elliot, former daycare supervisor and founder of Options Daycare, is currently working on a doctoral thesis which focusses on the relationships of caregivers at the Options daycare with mothers and children. Both of these topics are of applied value to the Options Program specifically, but they also have a broader focus that is useful at both a community and an academic level. Arden subsequently worked as an adoption counsellor and Elliot organized a conference held at the University of Victoria in 1996 on the attachment processes of infants and toddlers who attend daycare centres.

Research carried out by others has perhaps been more specific to GAP/Options. The master's thesis of Lois Beatty, a substitute teacher at GAP/Options for some years, focussed on the collaborative learning process at GAP/Options and carefully documented its

effect on several GAP students' lives. My own connection to GAP/Options is not rooted in a direct relationship with the program as staff but rather stems from membership in a community of friends who have been involved in GAP/Options over the years as teachers, daycare staff, accountants, administrators and, more recently as students. In 1989, as part of my master's requirements, I carried out a research project for Options Daycare which examined the sources of information concerning infant nutrition and child development used by young mothers enrolled at Options. An additional goal of the study was to determine if the mothers, whose children attended the daycare, perceived the weekly parent education and support group to be effective at providing information about infant nutrition and child development. My approach to the research was based on collaborative feminist research methods which seek to produce emancipatory knowledge and empower the researched. Both the daycare staff and the young women enrolled in Options willingly participated. However, the Options students' commitment to the project and subsequent involvement in reflecting on my research findings were rather limited since, understandably, they had much more pressing matters to deal with such as caring for young children, attending school, and coping with poverty and negative public images of adolescent mothers. The project was definitely empowering to the daycare staff as it reaffirmed their commitment to the philosophy and practices of the Options daycare and enhanced the delivery of developmental and nutritional information. It did not appear, however, to be particularly empowering to the students at the time other than providing them

the opportunity to tell their story which they considered very valuable.

Seven years later I am in the midst of a follow-up study which tracks the lives of those same young women and their children. The former Options students are older, more confident, and very articulate about their experiences at GAP/Options and are now active collaborators in the research process: they have formulated research questions, helped track participants' addresses and phone numbers, and are vitally interested in each others histories since leaving GAP/Options. The current study is of value not only to the GAP/Options program, for whom it reflects the long-term positive effects of an empowering, supportive approach to providing education and childcare to a marginalized group of young women and their children, but also to the young women themselves as it clearly recognizes their authority on both the subject of adolescent motherhood and the role GAP/Options played in their lives.

The panel presentation at the Praxis♀Nexus conference consisted of Leith Leslie, longstanding staff member; Enid Elliot, former staff member and now a Ph.D. student; Susan Blair, former GAP student; Brigitte DeBruyn, former Options student; Lois Beatty, substitute teacher and researcher; and myself. The panel presentation was one of the few presentations at the conference which included the voices of the researched. Like the education and support services provided by GAP/Options, participation in the panel presentation served to empower these young women. In fact, Brigitte and Susan fielded almost all of the questions thus validating them as the true authorities on their lives.