

Written evidence submitted by Leeds Trinity University

Research Study Information

Contained in the following submission are key findings from two linked research studies, titled '*Connected Young Fatherhood: Rural and Urban Experiences during the Pandemic*' and '*New Pathways for Young Fathers*.' Both projects were led by Leeds Trinity University and funded by Research England. Research partners included the County Councils Network, Leeds City Council, and DaddiLife. Across the two studies, we conducted 45 qualitative interviews with young fathers (defined as the age of 25 or under when entering parenthood) from diverse backgrounds and circumstances. The findings from both studies highlight young fathers' views and experiences of secondary, further, and higher education. Our analysis also demonstrated the value of professional support with respect to young men's educational aspirations and journeys.

Relevance

Young fathers either were or are boys at school both prior to becoming a parent and in many cases after. The educational outcomes for young fathers are typically poor. Evidence shows that they are more likely to leave school early, disengage, and gain poorer qualifications in relation to their peers (Public Health England, 2019; Carter and Coleman, 2006; Swann et al., 2003). In the evidence below, we will learn why some young fathers felt that school was not the best environment for them. We can also gain an understanding of why some young men may choose to prioritise building a career over qualifications. Finally, we are able to see how young fathers may reflect on missed educational opportunities as they reach later life. The findings provide valuable insights into the mind-set of a marginalised group of young boys who have to make serious decisions about their future and the future of their dependents.

1. Views and Experiences of Secondary Schooling

- Young fathers had mixed views of secondary education with contrasting experiences reported (prior to and after entry into parenthood).
- Regarding the young fathers who did not engage with secondary school, the reasons were varied, such as:
 - a) Poor relationships with school staff, with alleged reports of discrimination and victimisation.
 - b) Lack of support and understanding from schools during the pregnancy and/or after the birth.
 - c) Schools not accommodating diverse learning styles/preferences amongst students.
 - d) Negative perceptions and comments from teachers regarding the young men's academic competencies and backgrounds.
 - e) Perceiving oneself as 'non-academic' and instead seeing themselves as being more 'hands on.'
 - f) Seeing limited value in the taught content (e.g. outdated or irrelevant information). Fathers here felt that the curriculum should focus more on life skills such as budgeting and relationship issues.
 - g) Not seeing the value in education itself.

- A small number of young fathers reported positive experiences with teachers. Often, these teachers encouraged the young men to do well in their studies.
- For those who had supportive relationships with teachers prior to the pregnancy, these were said to continue and was appreciated by the young men.
- Young fathers who engaged with learning tended to be more academically minded, often with support from family, friends, and teachers.
- For those who became fathers at school and were 'doing well' academically, the demands of juggling parenthood with studying were difficult to maintain. Subsequently impacting upon their attendance, engagement, and assessment/exam outcomes.
- When becoming a father, some young men prioritised finding work to provide materially for their child rather than engaging with or completing their education. The young age of the father and their lack of qualifications meant that finding work was difficult however.
- However, some young fathers who had previously disengaged with education became motivated to succeed once becoming a parent (i.e., to obtain their GCSEs) to improve their future prospects.
- Only a small number of young men who became fathers at secondary school went on to sixth form or further education settings.

2. Views of Sixth Forms and Further Education

- Young fathers we interviewed attended both sixth forms and further education establishments. Most attended the latter and were mainly enrolled on vocational courses and apprenticeships.
- Post-16 education decisions and choices related to young men's personal interests, learning preferences, assessment styles on courses, and plans for the future.
- Many preferred post-16 education compared to secondary school and were more engaged with learning. This was mainly due to the personal selection of subject/s, more independence as a student, and the perception of less authoritarian teaching and classroom management styles.
- For those who became a parent at sixth form or further education settings, some felt it was best to leave education to seek employment in order to provide for their child.
- Those who did not continue with sixth form or further education had obtained some qualifications at school and in some cases, partial qualifications at post-16 institutions. This helped with finding employment compared to young fathers who had left secondary schooling early.
- For those who continued in education, they found it difficult to complete their studies alongside parenting which led to the decision to leave.
- For those who became parents during post-16 education, support from staff was mixed.
- Some staff were supportive and encouraged young men to stay in education, whereas others suggested that seeking employment may be a better option as a father (this was often based on traditional gender views).
- In a minority of cases, young men enrolled for higher education. But this was often later in life (often as a 'mature student,' i.e., aged 21 and over), and not directly after post-16 education.

3. Higher Education

- Young fathers had different views of higher education/HE when asked. Those who were not in HE, often did not see the value of a degree. Some also felt that degree qualifications had no bearing for their current or future work plans.
- Some young men were interested in HE but expressed that there were too many challenges in returning to education, namely financial implications and their lack of appropriate qualifications. Within this group, fathers were not aware of Access to Higher Education courses or student finance.
- Of the small number of young fathers who entered higher education, they were motivated to do so for several reasons. This included career prospects, increasing their future earning potential, self-development, and improving their family's livelihood.
- Young fathers often chose a local higher education institutions/HEI and had a preference for part-time/flexible and online delivery in order to juggle family life with studying and to lower outgoings (e.g., travelling to university rather than relocation costs).
- Positive aspects of studying were reported, including an enjoyment of learning, doing well academically, growing levels of self-confidence as a learner, personally development, and self-fulfilment.
- Despite positive accounts, HE could also be a challenging experience. This included the balancing act of managing studying and parenting, the incompatible nature of HE structures with family life (i.e., lack of awareness or consideration of parents with childcare responsibilities), financial difficulties, and a negative impact on health and well-being. For those who took on part-time work whilst studying, struggles at university were further compounded.
- Applying for financial support was said to be overly complicated and support packages were reported to be out of kilter with the cost of living itself. When faced with financial difficulties, young fathers had to apply for work whilst studying which impacted upon their educational experience and home-life.
- For HE fathers, mental health concerns were frequently reported including 'burn out,' leading to deferral or withdrawal of studies.
- HE young fathers were either not aware or had rarely engaged with support services at HEIs. Regarding the latter, the lack of engagement was due to the stigma attached with health seeking behaviours as a male or poor experiences with professionals in the past.
- Some fathers had disclosed their parental status to lecturers or personal tutors but this information was not formally requested by UCAS/Universities and Colleges Admissions Service or by individual HEIs (based in England) at the time. Where staff members were aware, they were said to be understanding of the young men's circumstances and provided support where possible (e.g., extension requests).
- The new option for applicants to share their parental status on UCAS forms may play a key role in identifying young fathers and ensuring that HEIs put in appropriate support mechanisms. Further research is needed in this area.

External/Professional Support

- Some fathers had received support from external agencies and professionals when younger. This included social care, health, family or youth services, targeted educational support for young parents, dedicated young fatherhood support, and voluntary sectors.
- It was felt by the young fathers that partnership working between external agencies and educational establishments would have been useful in providing a continuation of care.

- Some of these professionals were praised for their help in supporting the young man's parenting journey and engagement/re-engagement with education.
- Our research found that sympathetic, inclusive, and accessible support for young men had a significant impact on the lives of young fathers including their aspirations, educational choices, and continuation. In turn, having a positive effect on the young man's family.
- However some young fathers reported negative experience with professionals and found them unhelpful or unsupportive. Comments included discriminatory views towards young fathers, biased support towards the mother, and ignoring or sidelining young men.
- A number of young fathers felt that better careers advice would have benefited them in terms of understanding the full implications of educational disengagement and low attainment. Some young men reported a lack of, or low quality careers advice whilst in education (at all levels).

Summary

- Those who were not in education, training or employment (NEET) expressed a sense of regret for not engaging with their studies at the time and obtaining any qualifications. This was namely due to the difficulties in obtaining employment, or reduced work options and earning potential.
- Many of these fathers wished they had more support and better relationships with family members and teachers when younger to improve their educational outcomes.
- Becoming a parent was said to motivate some fathers to stay in education or re-enter education at a later time.
- Conversely a number of fathers left education to focus on finding paid work in order to provide immediately for their child.
- For those who had previously disengaged with school or college, some had considered returning to education when older. But the barriers were deemed too great to make this into a reality. For example, higher education was positively viewed but university fees were seen as a barrier.
- Despite the positives of studying and working towards an education, the balancing act of parenthood with studying (alongside other commitments such as part-time work) meant that many young men found it difficult to continue academically. The lack of professional support from a range of sectors compounded such issues further.
- Professional support within educational settings and by external agencies was mixed. Whereas some fathers had benefited from intervention and the support available, others felt 'let down' by professionals or the lack of provision available (often due to funding cuts).
- Despite formal intervention and support, continuing with education as a young parent was still extremely challenging. Difficulties included the practicalities of studying with childcare responsibilities, financial struggles, lack of formal and informal support, housing, childcare costs and availability.

Recommendations

- We have identified a number of difficulties that young fathers can encounter which affects educational engagement and outcomes. This includes relationships with teachers, learning expectations in educational settings, self-perceptions as a learner, entering parenthood, seeking out paid employment as a father, and effectiveness of professional support.

Acknowledging these issues in policy and practice can help fathers to continue with their education or to re-enter education at a later stage.

- Fathers expressed that financial support available (e.g., student finance and other packages) impacted on their decision and ability to continue with education. However, it was reported that financial support available was not adequate with the cost of living crisis in mind, which needs to be considered at policy level if young men are to consider HE and stay in education.
- In relation to financial support sought, often young men were limited in what help they could apply for due to the eligibility criteria. For example, some young fathers were exempt from applying for certain types of financial relief or assistance as the child was not financially dependent on them, or if they could not provide evidence of the child's identity (e.g., the father is not named on the child's birth certificate). Evaluating the criteria for support packages would open up education as a possibility to a greater number of young fathers.
- Some fathers were not aware of the support available to re-enter education such as Access to HE courses and student finance, thus highlighting the need to improve the visibility and accessibility of such information.
- Professional can make a significant difference in the lives of young fathers. Ensuring that professionals are appropriately trained in understanding the support needs of young fathers and the importance of adopting an inclusive approach are vital.
- Young fathers as a student population in HE must be better recognised and student services would benefit from understanding the unique challenges that such a group face.
- HEI partnerships with external support agencies would be fruitful in supporting young fathers' journeys into and through HE (particularly for those who received professional support prior to university).

Project Details

'New Pathways for Young Fathers' (2020)

'Connected Young Fatherhood: Rural and Urban Experiences during the Pandemic' (2022)

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May 2024