AT THE CROSSROADS OF STUDENTHOOD AND MOTHERHOOD

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

to the faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SPECIALTIES

of

THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY
New York

by

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Submitted Date March 3, 2021 Approved Date May 19, 2021

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ABSTRACT

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This study was conducted through an analysis of interview data from interviews with 5 women who first became mothers during adolescence and now define themselves and their children as "successful." Maximum Variation Purposive Sampling was used to recruit women from different geographic areas (The Northeast, Northwest, Central, Pacific, and Southern regions), varied upbringings, and who represented the broadest range of cultural identities possible within the small sample size. Each of the interviewees were over the age of 18 and had at least one child who was kindergarten-age or older. The purpose of this research was to determine if thematic factors of success and failure, identified through analysis of interview data and the literature, could be used to inspire programming that meets the needs of young mothers (both academically and emotionally) while satisfying the "college readiness" demands of curriculum oversite boards.

A sociocultural framework, which acknowledges the impact of racial and cultural status on knowledge acquisition and student engagement, served as the foundation for inquiry and analysis. Likewise, a cosmopolitan perspective on literacy, which urges literacy researchers and practitioners to move away from the traditional, skill-acquisition view of literacy, toward a more critical view that encourages students to investigate

relevant problems at both the local and global levels was used as the framework for analysis and proposed solutions.

Data from the interviews was analyzed using Polkinghorne's Analysis of Narratives in an attempt to understand how these women's specific life events impacted their attaining of goals and fulfilling of perceived life purposes. Data was simultaneously coded using both Values and Descriptive coding and took place in an evolutionary manner as new data is introduced.

While current data suggests a positive trend in both teenage pregnancy and high school dropout rates, these trends have also led to a decrease in funding and attention to meeting the discrete needs of this subset of the student population. It is the goal of this research to present data in a way that will help address the needs of young mothers within the constraints of existing district policies and budgets.

DEDICATION

I would like to start by dedicating this dissertation to my brother. Six years apart in age, we occasionally struggled to find connection in our younger years—me, locking him in my parent's bedroom by using a rope to tie all the doorknobs together, and he, kicking me in the shins with the force of a hundred horses. But over the years, our bond grew strong, and I can say with certainty, that I would not have made it through my PhD studies without him fighting the good fight at my side. We are set to finish our PhD programs around the same time, his, a focus on compassionate urban development, mine on education. I look forward to the day when we can co-author together.

This work is also for my parents, in honor of their never-ending love and support. Through all the joys, tears, and struggles, they have always been there to see me through to the next stage, bringing me coffee, taking the kids to doctor's appointments, and even helping me through the rewrites. I feel so incredibly blessed to have them in my life—this dissertation is as much theirs as it is mine.

And, of course, to my immediate family: Samantha, Brandon, Cailyn, Connor, and Mark. They too have picked me up from the deepest depths of frustration and desperation. They have followed me around the country in pursuit of my studies and my dreams. And they have pushed me to be the best mother I can be—to stay present and grounded in the here and now, when my mind would otherwise carry me elsewhere.

I dedicate this dissertation to every single one of you, because without you all, there would be no work to celebrate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to start by acknowledging some of the wonderful educators at the University of South Carolina, where my PhD studies began. Although I was unable to complete their face-to-face program (my family was unhappy in South Carolina and begged me to return to Hawai`i after only 8 months of study), the foundation I received there profoundly influenced my path of inquiry for the remainder of my doctoral studies.

I would also like to specifically thank Dr. Jennifer Morrison, who urged me to forge ahead on my path to PhD, even though doing so would require starting fresh in a new school and completing my studies through a fully virtual platform. As she said, the feminist in her was angry that I might potentially sacrifice my dream because other people's wishes would take priority over my own. Her words spoke to the feminist in me to push on, regardless of the challenges that might lie ahead. I will be forever grateful for that loving nudge to fight on.

I am also thankful for the patience and guidance of the phenomenal educators at St. John's University—especially those who helped carry me through my advanced statistics classes. If it were not for the compassion and determination of professors such as Dr. Joan Birringer-Haig and Dr. Janice Kooken, who were committed to seeing each of their students through to course completion, I likely would have let me fear of numbers and software spell the demise of my studies. I owe these highly intelligent and caring professionals a debt of gratitude that I can only hope to pay forward one day.

And last, but certainly not least, I am profoundly grateful for the guidance and patience that the members of my dissertation committee have shown me. Dr. Richard

Brown (my committee chair), Dr. Olivia Stewart and Dr. Evan Ortlieb have provided invaluable feedback. They helped me get to the true heart of what I was trying to say, while also affording me the time and space I needed to collect and analyze data at a manageable pace while also working full-time and homeschooling 4 children through a pandemic. I appreciate them all and know that when the title of Doctor eventually gets added to my name, I will have each of them to thank for that.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

For decades, schools and communities have operated under the mistaken assumption that teen mothers and their children are destined for academic failure and a self-perpetuating cycle of doom. More specifically, and most concerning is the fact that the very teachers who are tasked with addressing the academic needs of adolescent mothers are often the most plagued by perceptions of negative predetermination (Luttrell, 2013; Miller Coffel, 2011).While research shows that adolescent mothers who fail to finish high school are at an increased risk of poverty and their children more likely to struggle in school (Bermea, Toews, & Wood, 2018; Comlossy, 2014; Harden, Brunton, Fletcher, & Oakley, 2009; Office of Adolescent Health, 2019), there are patterns of success that beg exploration and open the door to research into how best to meet both the academic and emotional needs of this given demographic.

As researchers Luster, Bates, Fitzgerald, Vanderbelt, and Peck Key (2000) point out, while much of the research is focused on the negative aspects of teen parenting and the negative consequences for the children born to these young girls, there are plenty of success stories as well. And although investigations into factors of success have increased since their research was first conducted, studies into positive trends associated with this specific subset of the population are still limited and outdated (Mollborn & Jacobs, 2011).

At the heart of such investigation is the understanding that adolescent mothers and their children are not just another generic sector of the *at-risk* population. These young

mothers and their children have a unique set of needs tied deeply to the intersectionality of identities that adolescent mothers are faced with making sense of. As Heide Hallman (2007) suggests, competing identities and the negative perceptions associated with a young girl's role as *mother,* impacts her ability to effectively participate in the educational experience. For this reason, it is critical that programming be designed around authentic learning experiences that help young mothers build agency and prepare for life beyond high school in general, and parenting in particular.

Research in the area of socio-cultural contexts of "Family Literacy" (Auerbach, 1989; Benjamin, 1993) has helped bring limited awareness to the need for bridging the gap between adolescent and early literacies, especially in communities where generational cycles of academic struggle are common, but much of this research is reflective of societal biases, with educational practices often disenfranchising the students and families they purport to serve (Luttrell, 2013; Pillow, 2004; Taylor, 1983).

Conflicting school policies, family demands, and community pressures result in an on-going affront to adolescent girls and young women who are routinely called on to choose between their roles as mothers and their goals for academic success (Clarkson, 2015; Hallman, 2007). This dichotomous mindset impacts the ability of these young mothers to fulfill their own potential as learners (Luttrell, 2003; Hallman, 2007) while also setting the stage for long-term academic struggle for their children (Comlossy, 2014; Harden, Brunton, Fletcher, & Oakley, 2009; Luster, Bates, Fitzgerald, Vanderbelt, & Peck Key, 2000). In order to meet the academic needs of children born to adolescent mothers, educators must concurrently address the educational needs of the young girls—

both in terms of functional literacy and a literacy of empowerment (Miller Coffel, 2011)—and their emotional needs as young mothers.

To effectively meet this bold demand, educators must honor the overlapping of these young women's identities as both mothers and students. This requires a coordinated commitment to implement a cosmopolitan literacy framework (Bean & Dunkerly-Bean, 2015; *Second Wave Change*, 2013) while simultaneously honoring the *intersectionality* of these young girls' identities as both students and mothers.

The intention of this research is to highlight the connection between inadequate and/or disenfranchising literacy education of teen mothers, which results from inherently biased and marginalizing educational policies (Luttrell, 2013; Pillow, 2004) and the academic struggles of their children, while providing a foundation for positive change in educational programming for adolescent mothers.

Significance/Importance of the Study

With such a strong connection between teenage motherhood and low socio-economic status (SES) (Penman-Aguilar, Carter, Snead, & Kourtis, 2013), it seems ironic that school districts have worked so tirelessly to figure out how best to close the achievement gap between children from low SES backgrounds and their higher SES counterparts, but have failed to tie those efforts to programs of literary empowerment for the children's adolescent matriarchs. As Christine Stroble (2013) points out in her review of Wanda Pillow's 2006 research into the politics of teen pregnancy and education, "While teen pregnancy has been understood as having implications for education…[it] is repeatedly situated as a psychological, health or social welfare issue and not an educational issue" (p. 11) and therefore often overlooked by early education researchers.

As a former Student Services Coordinator, running the special education department for a mid-sized island elementary school, I was often confronted by anxious young parents who felt ill-equipped to support their children academically. Some, but not all, were teen parents who did not graduate high school. Some worried about cultural or language barriers that might bar them from helping their children the *right* way. Others simply felt that too much had changed in the time since they had gone to school for them to support academics at home. In any of these situations, when children were referred for special education, parents were often left wondering if their child's academic struggle was their *fault.*

When meeting with families and the school-based support team to discuss the challenges faced by the youngest struggling learners, conversations frequently arose in relation to parents' concerns regarding their own inability to support their child's academic needs. More specifically, young mothers often noted that due to their own lack of educational "success", they felt unable to support literacy practice at home. A longitudinal study conducted through the Notre Dame Parenting Project indicates that more than 50% of children born to adolescent mothers will face academic challenges, and that although these struggles can be attributed to a *constellation* of factors (rather than one specific cause), the research has shown that many young mothers lack the awareness and ability to effectively support their children academically (Whitman et al., 2001).

Unfortunately, with a high school dropout rate of anywhere from 50-70% for adolescent mothers (Barshay, 2018; Salceda & Burlingame P., 2015), compared to only 10% of young women who did not give birth during high school (Barshay, 2018), teen moms are disproportionately more likely to lack the skills needed to support positive

academic growth for their children. While current data suggests a positive trend in both teenage pregnancy and high school dropout rates (Barshay, 2018), the disproportionately high dropout rates for teen moms indicate that academic support for this subset of the population is still woefully lacking.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is somewhat multi-faceted. Initially the objective was to better understand how young mothers defined *success* for themselves and for their children, to determine what factors they identified as being critical for yielding successful outcomes, and to determine whether or not the educational community as a whole was moving in the right direction in terms of providing adequate supports for this subset of students, in relation to those identified factors.

As research into the literature continued however, it became obvious that even contemporary reporting is based on studies that were conducted 10, 20, and even 30 years ago. Mollborn & Jacobs (2011) reference similar concerns as impetus for their qualitative study of 55 teenage mothers in Colorado a decade ago. Undoubtedly, much has changed over the past two or three decades, which will impact how success is measured and the type of obstacles that might impede a young woman from obtaining her goals. Moreover, while the general downward trend in teenage pregnancy rates (Barshay, 2018) is seen as positive for communities, it can have negative consequences for the young girls who do become pregnant as funding and resources are reallocated to broader "at risk" subsections of the population ("Teen Parents' Program at Risk," 2017; Uechi, 2018). With the removal of such dedicated supports, it becomes nearly impossible to address the

educational needs of young mothers in a way that fosters motivation while providing education that truly prepares them for life beyond high school.

With such concerns in mind, the purpose of this research evolved to reflect the added desire to determine if thematic factors of success and failure, identified through analysis of interview data and the literature, could be used to inspire programming that meets the needs of young mothers (both academically and emotionally) while satisfying the "college readiness" demands of curriculum oversite boards, within the constraints of existing district policies and budgets.

Research Questions

This study was designed with the intent of answering the overarching question of how the 21st Century literacy needs of adolescent mothers and their children could best be met through an investigation of the following sub-research questions:

1. How is "success" defined and measured by women who had their first child during their adolescent years?
2. What are the similarities and differences across program models that might inform how best to meet the educational needs of adolescent mothers and their children?
3. Can a cosmopolitan perspective on literacy instruction, with an application of a sociocultural lens, help provide a foundation for programming that meets the educational and emotional needs of young mothers while satisfying curriculum oversite boards?

As Schram (2006) suggests, there are practical considerations one must factor in when determining if a research question is answerable—among those are whether or not

there is reliable access to a given population and whether or not the study as planned is *do-able* (p. 58). Through careful analysis, it was determined that the narrative inquiry method for gathering the stories of young mothers could be applied efficiently, respectfully, and with a commitment to *apparency, verisimilitude,* and *transferability* (Van Maanen, 1988). These last three criteria, unique to narrative inquiry, will be further explored in the methodology chapter that follows.

Terminology

Literacy

In line with a sociocultural framework which acknowledges the impact of racial and cultural status on knowledge acquisition and student engagement (Nasir & Hand, 2006), an idiological perspective on literacy has been applied to this research (Street, 2003). The ideological perspective recognizes that all "literacy events" take place in the context of societal practices and that as such, literacy practices can be marginalizing to those who do not hold positions of power within that society, such as adolescent mothers. Literacy scholars, informed by this model, urge literacy researchers and practitioners to move away from the traditional (and often deficit-model) view of literacy "as a set of discrete skills to be mastered" (Bean & Dunkerly-Bean, 2015) toward a more critical view that encourages students to investigate relevant problems at both the local and global levels. Luke (2013) refers to this as "second wave" literacy theory, which encourages students to "read their worlds" as a means of learning with purpose.

She/Her/Mother

While research dedicated to addressing the needs of adolescent mothers might imply a framework narrowed to address only the needs of young females (as determined

by gender at birth), it would be irresponsible and insensitive to ignore the fact that a gender spectrum exists, and that there are a myriad of pronouns available for the purpose of referring to any given individual. While it is acknowledged that childbearing individuals may identify under a broad array of identities including male, trans, and gender-neutral, throughout this paper, childbearing adolescents are referred to with terms of "she" and "mother" as consistent with physical attributes of reproduction. It is assumed that the application of a sociocultural lens will allow for the concepts explored throughout to be applied to the broader community of adolescent parents, regardless of gender identity.

Intersectionality

The term *Intersectionality*, as coined by lawyer, professor, and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (2018) is used to describe the layering of identities and experiences that underscore the marginalization of certain subsects of young women. While Crenshaw identifies this term as a *prism* for understanding the unique challenges faced by young women of color, and certain subjects of the research, as white women, might not fit that description, it is assumed that the stigmas associated with teenage pregnancy (which are often steeped in racist stereotypes) make this an applicable term for describing the lived experiences of all adolescent mothers in this study, regardless of race. Effort has been taken to distinguish between the *intersectional* nature of wearing multiple hats (eg. mother, employee, and student) and application of the term *intersectionality* as intended by Crenshaw.

Adolescent Mother and Related Word Substitutes

For the purpose of flow and in an effort to avoid overly redundant language, several terms are used interchangeably throughout this document: adolescent mother, teen, girls, young women, and young mothers. The dictionary simply refers to an adolescent as "a young person who is developing into an adult" ("Adolescent," 2020) and this research applies most specifically to mothers in this fluid stage of development. In an attempt to better understand the potential differences in child outcomes as they correlate with maternal factors, there has been no minimum age requirement for which the women included in this study became mothers, but a maximum age was set at 21 for students and 18 for non-students.

"At-Risk"

The term "At-Risk" is recognized as one that reflects a deficit mindset, or language that carries a *blame-the-student* mentality (Smit, 2012). As such, any instances where this terminology is used has been done so in quotes to highlight inherent biases in the policies and programming targeted at educating adolescent mothers.

Special Education/SPED

Special Education will often be referred to in its commonly abbreviated form: SPED. It is acknowledged that some people find the term "SPED" to be derogatory in nature. The abbreviated form of Special Education has been applied only to improve the overall flow of writing. Care has been taken to avoid labeling of children as "SPED."

Assumptions

Because the women being interviewed are no longer in the vulnerable status of being mothering adolescents, and because they self-identify as successful, it is assumed

that they have been truthful about which factors helped them achieve their perceived level of success (both as mothers and as academic supports for their children).

Limitations

Due initially to the financial and logistical restrictions of being an unpaid graduate researcher, and later to the constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, planned face-to-face interviews were canceled. As a result, all interviews were conducted by phone and/or video conferencing. Additionally, as a result of internet providers' efforts to provide internet access to large portions of the population who previously had not been serviced (in an effort to increase access to education during the Covid-19 related school closures), internet stability was often compromised leading to interruptions in interview communications and/or instances of spotty recording of dialogue. Through a series of follow-up communications with the participants, it has been determined that despite these limitations, thorough and accurate accounts of the participants' lived experiences have been captured via the interview and analysis process.

Delimitations

Only mothers 18 years and older, who had at least one child kindergarten-aged or older, were included in the sampling selection.

Summary

This chapter discussed issues related to the marginalization of adolescent mothers and societal biases associated with the education of mothering students. Also introduced were the hypotheses regarding the impact of such educational policies on the potential success of adolescent mothers and their children.

The following chapter will provide a review of literature related to the insufficiency of support-systems for minor parents, the impact of societal stigmas on education policy and potential outcomes for young mothers, as well as research linking mothers' constructed identities and perceptions of success to academic outcomes for their children.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

A rich tapestry of theories and perspectives informs the existing literature regarding research into services aimed at adolescent mothers. While a number of these frameworks will be noted in the review of literature, for the purposes of this study, a somewhat broad sociocultural framework (Nasir & Hand, 2006; Rueda, 2011), interwoven with a cosmopolitan perspective on literacy (Bean & Dunkerly-Bean, 2015) and feminist theory (Acker, 1987), has helped guide the research and data analysis. Each of these will be addressed in turn.

Nasir and Hand (2006) offer a review of Sociocultural Theory that highlights some key principles of the framework:

1. Human development is multi-level and happens in response to a combination of personal short and long-term lived experiences as well as changes in social structure and cultural evolution.
2. Development and learning are defined by social and cultural contexts, making analysis of cultural norms, practices, and biases, a critical part of analyzing the learning process.
3. Learning is directly tied to social contexts and the relationships that the learner holds with those around her.

The challenge with understanding how cultural norms and practices impact learning and development lies in the understanding of what constitutes *culture.* As Rueda (2011) indicates, there are cultural levels within society, which at the most basic level can be broken down into dominant and non-dominant cultures. Within these cultures, there

are normalized beliefs and practices which serve as *models* that help individuals make sense of the world around them. In the case of adolescent mothers, who may find themselves transitioning back and forth between cultural groups, the task of interpreting and abiding by group norms can be incredibly complex.

The concept that learning is directly tied to both short and long-term lived experiences, along with continuously evolving relationships with others, has profound relevance for those interested in understanding how best to meet the learning needs of adolescent mothers. Not only are young mothers forced into abruptly redefined relationships with others in response to their lived experiences, but societal norms (*stigmas)* surrounding teen pregnancy often impact how teen mothers perceive their relationships with others (Bermea et al., 2018; Watson & Vogel, 2017).

Both Watson & Vogel (2017) and Bermea et al. (2018), reviewed in more detail below, consider the impact of stigma on the academic motivation of pregnant teens and young mothers. While Watson & Vogel apply a Critical Race lens (Crenshaw et al., 1995) and Bermea et al. employ Stigma Theory (Golfman, 1963) to make sense of the impact of social relationships on the schooling experience of young mothers, it is important to recognize how both theories rely heavily on this underlying sociocultural framework for understanding the interconnectedness of learning and socio-cultural factors, first introduced to the learning community by Lev Vygotsky (Nasir & Hand, 2006).

While one might assume that an investigation into the impact of maternal literacy on child outcomes would naturally lead a researcher to draw heavily on Family Literacy Theory, as the researcher who coined the term suggests, the rhetoric surrounding “Family

Literacy" is often centered around a deficit mindset in which families are to blame for the *undereducation* of their young children (Taylor, 1983). Although there is undeniable value in reviewing the research into how family practices influence children's responses to educational practices, it is essential that one do so with the mindset that all students come to the classroom with family-based funds of knowledge (Moll & Greenberg, 1990) as opposed to inherent deficits, and that honoring those strengths is imperative to creating positive interpersonal relationships and learning contexts. Moreover, it is critical that researchers consider how traditional family literacy programs, which emphasize training parents to reinforce school-like literacy practices (Morrow, 1995; Tracey & Morrow, 2012b), reinforce hierarchies of power through which students and their families are marginalized (Cairney, 2003). It is critical that conscientious effort be made to avoid practices and policies that disparage students' home cultures (Delpit, 1995). The choices schools make in this regard directly impacts the learning context and lived experiences of mother and child.

One theoretical approach that has challenged the traditional type of deficit-model thinking and the ways in which certain school policies and practices reinforce systemic socio-economic inequalities is Critical Literacy Theory (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). As such, Critical Literacy Theory forms the foundation for several of the studies tied to the education of adolescent mothers, which appear throughout the following review of the literature.

Another theoretical model that draws heavily on Critical Literacy while also considering the impact of an ever-changing global community on literacy practice is New Literacy Theory (capital 'N', capital 'T') and its sister-fields of new literacy theories

(lowercase ‘n’, lowercase ‘l’). While not serving as the theoretical model for this research, it is important to note that the distinction between the “autonomous” and “ideological” models of literacy, introduced by New Literary Theorists such as Street (2003), not only serves as a foundational conceptual model for New Literacy Studies (NLS) but helps inform the perspective on literacy that underpins this study.

The ideological model recognizes that all “literacy events” take place in the context of societal practices and that as such, literacy practices can be marginalizing to those who do not hold positions of power within that society (e.g. adolescent mothers). It is this ideological view of literacy which calls on educators to move away from the traditional skills-based model of literacy, and emphasis on the *Single Story* (Adichie, 2009) which can disempower individuals whose controversial lived experiences are omitted from any literary texts, and whose linguistic practices are identified as “improper” or “broken” (Baker, 2008). It is with this framework in mind that cosmopolitan literary researchers such as Ntiri (2009) and Luke (2013) suggest that students should be encouraged to *read their worlds* and solve problems relevant to their lives, instead of focusing on the learning of discrete skills or interpretation of classic literary texts.

As Smitherman (2002) suggests in her review of the College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Committee’s efforts to bring forth a national policy regarding “all students’ right to exist (e.g., read, write, think, understand, and so on) in their own languages—or whatever language varieties (e.g., dialects, sociolects, argots) students were bringing with them to class” (Perryman-Clark et al., 2015), the *language crisis* that results for any student who is made to feel that their home language (or lived experience)

is somehow "'deviant' or 'marginal'" (Gee, 1998) has far reaching impacts for all learners. Arguably, it is not just the marginalizing of voices that leads to a language and literacy crisis, but positions of power/powerlessness related to cultural status and lived experiences that contribute to that crisis as well. Furthermore, Smitherman emphasizes that the crisis applies not only to students of color or those who are deemed to be English Language Learners (EL/ELL), but to white Appalachian students, white counterculture students, and to females in general.

In this regard, the additional application of a socialist feminist theoretical lens (Acker, 1987; Brenner, 2014) has helped complete the framework through which policies aimed at educating young mothers were interpreted. Whereas Acker first helped distinguish between the defining features and goals of various branches of the feminist movement (primarily the distinction between liberal feminists who leave *structures of oppression* untouched, and socialist and radical feminists who reject such *structures*), Brenner applies the concept of *intersectionality* to 21st Century Feminism to help explain how women's overlapping and often conflicting identities can reinforce the marginalizing practices that hold all females back across educational and professional platforms.

To pave the way for her exploration of 21st Century socialist feminism, Brenner (2014) discusses the "second wave" feminism of the 20th century, the birth of social-welfare feminism (one of the many feminist *currents*), and the effort to address the specific burden of the "double day" experienced by working class women. As Brenner suggests, western society has long held a double standard for women to serve as primary caretaker and homemaker regardless of employment (or schooling) status, where those same expectations are not applied to men or boys. Working women are expected to be

available for classroom volunteer *opportunities,* fundraising bake-sales, and providing an educational foundation for their children prior to kindergarten but are not afforded the financial or logistical support to do so within the regular working (or school) day. This double standard becomes even more impactful for young mothers who have attendance requirements at school (i.e. skipped days can lead to truancy charges) and severe logistical restrictions such as the inability to get a driver's license, and defunding of school-based childcare and parenting programs ("Teen Parents' Program at Risk," 2017; Uechi, 2018). As such, it is impossible to fully appreciate the challenges associated with parenting a child while still attending school without the application of a lens that helps frame the double standard for mothers of all ages.

And so it is the complementary blending of sociocultural (Nasir & Hand, 2006; Rueda, 2011) and feminist (Acker, 1987; Brenner, 2014) theories, in combination with a definition of *literacy* in accordance with the cosmopolitan literacy perspective (Bean & Dunkerly-Bean, 2015) that has served as a foundation for this research. Inquiry and analysis has been founded on a belief that policies geared at educating pregnant teens and adolescent mothers have traditionally been designed around socio-economic, racial and misogynistic biases, serving as intentional marginalizers of those they propose to serve. This multi-faceted framework has been applied in an attempt to provide a unique glimpse into both the potential and perils of programming geared at the education of teen mothers and their children.

Research Exemplars

While research and theory related specifically to the education of adolescent mothers and their children has been minimal, there are a few trailblazers who have drawn

on frameworks from other fields to help pave the way for progress in this domain. For example, Wanda Pillow (2004) used a social justice model for her research, applying *feminist geneology* throughout her qualitative study. Her work in this area provides a crucial roadmap for anyone looking to understand the negative implications of biased programming and policies on outcomes for teenage moms. Pillow draws heavily from an educationally-situated Critical Race Theory (CRT) integrated with a feminist lens to emphasize the need to help teen parents establish a sense of agency over their bodies and their education. She applies this integrated lens when crafting her research questions, and points out that policies aimed at structuring the education of adolescent mothers have historically been steeped in racialized constructions of morality and immorality and biased interpretations of whose bodies need policing, and which individuals are worthy/unworthy of support. It is this blended framework that informs not only her theory and study design, but her data analysis and ultimate call to action.

Similarly, Watson & Vogel (2017) applied a critical race lens in designing their case study of 6 Colorado teen mothers. The objective of the study, as explained by the researchers, was to dismantle certain stigmas associated with teen parenting, and further their exploration of societal misconceptions that influence education policy and ultimately the potential for teen mothers to find success in an academic setting. They emphasized the impact of systemic disenfranchisement on current educational trends for adolescent mothers and the need for systemic policy overhauls to significantly change outcomes for this subset of the population. This perspective dovetails nicely with a socialist feminist lens, which emphasizes the impact of systemic structures of oppression (Brenner, 2014) on policies which directly marginalize mothers.

While the Watson & Vogel (2017) study did not provide a complete model for the following study, the analysis of stigma in relation to educational outcomes provided a helpful paradigm for applying a sociocultural lens to analyze the narratives shared by interviewees in the context of how their lived experiences, interpersonal relationships with others in the school setting, and educational contexts impacted their perceived ability to be successful in school, life, and parenting.

Related Research

Stigma

While this current study limited itself to women over the age of 18, much can be learned from investigations into the lived experiences of adolescent mothers while they were still in a vulnerable minority-age status. One of the challenges to conducting research with vulnerable populations is that even when the researchers take utmost care to design an ethical study, modeled on practices intended to benefit the community study-participants represent, it can be difficult to build a study pool large enough to yield meaningful data. Oftentimes researchers have difficulty recruiting a sufficient number of participants, and even when they do, some may be lost to attrition over the course of the study. In a 2018 study conducted by Bermea, Toews, & Wood, the researchers benefitted from access to an existing study of pregnant and parenting girls who were enrolled in a program designed around relationship education. As a result, they were able to include 83 participants (a seemingly large number for this type of research) across 6 schools. While the racial profile of the participants was limited (95% Hispanic), the researchers' ability to recruit students from various educational settings and age groups (freshman through seniors), added value to the findings and increased the likelihood of generalizability.

Similar to Watson and Vogel's (2017) research into the factors of educational resiliency amongst teenage mothers, Berma, Toews, and Wood (2018) were interested in understanding the educational impact of stigma and perceived stigma amongst adolescent mothers. Using a Stigma Theory model, these researchers chose to drill down and look at the various types of stigma, including public stigma, self-stigma, and institutional stigma--distinctions that hadn't previously been considered as relevant to the current study.

The Berma, Toews, and Wood (2018) qualitative study applied a focus-group model, which was used to conduct a series of 19 semi-structured interviews with participants at the end of the fall and spring semesters of a single school year. The authors point out that thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews and focus-group notes (including details of nonverbal behavior) yielded themes of stigma and related impacts, despite the fact that participants were never directly asked about their perceptions of stigma or stigma-related experiences. Moreover, the girls made distinctions between the various types of stigma they experienced and differentiated between the impact each had (e.g. public stigma pushing them to work harder but institutional stigma posing as an obstacle to success).

One of the major implications of these findings is that the perceptions teachers and school personnel hold and act upon in regard to pregnant teens and adolescent mothers, have the potential to directly foster or impede the academic success of these young girls. These findings are directly supported by sociocultural theory which highlights the impact of interpersonal relationships and educational contexts on learning (Nasir & Hand, 2006). Berma, Toews, and Wood (2018) equate stigmatizing behavior with bullying and suggest that not only do educators need adequate training on culturally

responsive teaching practices, but that those who engage in negative treatment toward pregnant teens and adolescent mothers should be held legally accountable for their actions. In addition to the findings of negative impact, the authors offer positive suggestions for improved academic outcomes (based on the feedback provided by research participants) including longer maternity leaves, equal to that of school personnel, paternity leave for adolescent fathers, providing access to children during the school day, specific accommodations for breastfeeding mothers, and alternative attendance policies.

These findings help reinforce the socialist feminist theory (Brenner, 2014) that empowerment of young mothers requires a complete structural overhaul to address institutionalized systems of oppression, as opposed to just a simple revision of curriculum. After careful thematic analysis of the interview data for the current study, it is clear that certain factors, such as alternative attendance policies (or flexible scheduling options) and teacher perceptions have been consistently reported as significant factors for those who completed the educational program (high school or college) that they were enrolled in prior to getting pregnant. Other factors, such as access to breastfeeding/pumping sessions and paternity leave for young fathers did not present as universal themes in the current study.

As with the Bermea et al. (2018) study, Wanda Pillow (2004) chose to unpack the relationships between social stigma related to teenage pregnancy and adolescent motherhood in her qualitative study. In doing so, she examined the ways in which such stigma influenced historical policy initiatives designed around the education of young mothers. As Pillow explains, school districts and educational researchers have been

hesitant to take ownership of investigating the needs of pregnant teens and adolescent mothers, situating such concerns as a public-health, rather than an educational, issue. Such neglect has led to the implementation of ineffective and often harmful educational practices and programming for young mothers.

Pillow's research was conducted as a multi-year case study, throughout the course of growing her own family. As such, she defines it as a professional journey as much as a personal one. Her book serves as a synthesis of data that she gathered through interviews, classroom-visit field notes, and educational policy research. Pillow does not specify in the pages of this text the specific number of students interviewed over the years, the interview format(s), or the selection criteria for choosing her subjects (other than to point out that her subjects were all enrolled in traditional or alternative programs at the time of the research), but she does reference her dissertation work in the bibliography where presumably such details are fleshed out.

While omission of these details might serve as a hindrance to fully understanding the scope and generalizability of the study, this specific Pillow work has served as a foundational resource for many researchers drawn to this area of inquiry, making an analysis of this text an essential part of any literary review tied to the education of pregnant teens and adolescent mothers.

Educational Resiliency

Similar to Bermea et al. (2018) and Pillow (2004), Watson and Vogel's (2017) study considered the impact of stigma on the academic success rates of young mothers, but then used a narrative case study design to investigate and recount participants' personal stories as they related to educational resiliency. Their investigative process was

enhanced by the addition of a relatively new social science design method known as *portraiture*. Through this process, metaphors shared by the young mothers during their interviews, such as relating teenage motherhood to a rollercoaster or Charlie Brown Christmas tree, were restoried into portraits, which were then embedded into the report alongside the narratives. In an effort to ensure the reliability and validity of the interpretations, the researchers used a combination of member checking, triangulation, and reflection on researcher biases.

The study was conducted across three Colorado schools: a traditional high school, an alternative high school, and a young parenting program. The researchers defined their participant selection method as purposeful sampling, with participation criteria narrowed to focus on actively parenting students (not pregnant teens), in their senior year of high school, and on-track to graduate with their same-aged peers. The final participant pool was six students, ages 15-17, and either Caucasian or Latina in race. Due to the small size of the sample, the researchers were unable to obtain a balanced distribution across all three settings. Ultimately two students represented the experiences of students enrolled in the young parent program; three were enrolled in the alternative high school; and only one was drawn from the traditional high school. Of the six young women who completed the study, five graduated on time.

The purpose of the Watson and Vogel's (2017) study was to determine the factors that contributed to the resiliency and successful academic outcomes (in this case, graduation) for the teens. The researchers considered school environmental factors, the influence of perceived stigma, and the perception of support for the mothers in working towards their academic goals. The study yielded four themes across journal entries and

interview transcripts: struggle (including emotional, physical, and social); hope; support (including educational and familial); and perseverance.

As part of the Watson and Vogel's (2017) study, similar to the research conducted by Bermea et al. (2018), the participants offered suggestions to teachers and schools (related to the aforementioned themes) regarding how best to support teen mothers. Essentially, they expressed the need for teachers who could help motivate and understand their students without judging them. These suggestions were further expanded upon by the researchers who emphasized the need for educators to familiarize themselves with Title IX guidelines (which protect the educational rights of teen parents under the law) to provide safe and supportive school environments, and to ensure that all students, regardless of placement, have access to high academic rigor. As such, this narrative inquiry study serves as a methodological exemplar.

Similar to the Berma, Toews, and Wood (2018) study, certain themes in the Watson and Vogel (2017) study were reflected in the current research more than others. For example, each of the women in the current study reflected on the impact of teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward their future potential, though the relative impact of those relationships varied from one participant to the next. It should be noted that despite the wide net cast for soliciting participants, of the 5 women who volunteered for this study (and self-identified as "successful"), 3 were 18 or older and had already graduated high school when they learned of their pregnancy. The 2 who identified negative perceptions as significantly impactful (and who also failed to graduate "on time") were the 2 who were under 18 and still in high school at the time that they became pregnant.

Identity Construction and Factors Which Appear to Directly Impede Educational Resiliency

As Alexander and Fox (2011) point out, "Adolescents face the developmental task of preparing for adulthood, and weigh aspects of their eventual adult identity, including vocation, gender, ideology, sexual orientation, and religion, while integrating those aspects into a coherent self" (p. 164). In reviewing the research on parenting and the early postpartum period in general—and teenage pregnancy in particular—it becomes obvious that pregnancy in the adolescent population is a broad-scale social concern, in that identity construction by pregnant/mothering students has far reaching implications. More specifically, if young women associate *illiteracy* with their constructed identity, or view themselves as incapable of supporting literacy in their own children, the result is a self-perpetuating cycle of decreased family literacy. As educational psychologist Ludo Verhoeven (2011) points out, the type and degree of language and literacy support within the home has an impact on not only early literacy skills, but long-term literacy comprehension and performance throughout the upper grades. While the research on this front was conducted in relation to addressing the needs of English Language Learners where there might not be a great deal of support for English literacy in the home, the finding is highly relevant to all families where overall vocabulary levels and English reading proficiency rates are low.

In an effort to better understand the factors that lead to successful literacy outcomes for children born to low-income adolescents, Luster et al. (2000) studied 86 children who were participating in a family support program for adolescent mothers. The families were followed until the children were 54 months old (with check points at 24,

36, and 54 months of age). For the purpose of their report, data was analyzed for 44 children—the 22 who scored the lowest on the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised (PPVT-R)* and the 22 who scored the highest.

Although as the authors point out, no definitive causal relationships could be confirmed through this study, findings did suggest that caregiving patterns and education achieved by the mother both had a significant impact on language and literacy ability of the children. As the researchers pointed out, young children who were most successful in school had mothers who were more academically *successful* and contributed to literacy in the home by reading to their children (Luster et al., 2000).

While these findings might confirm what many would instinctively assume, an important secondary finding relates to the emotional well-being of the mothers. While the researchers could not confirm a direct link between the level of self-esteem of the mothers and their children's success, their findings did suggest that the most successful children were raised by mothers who indicated higher levels of trust in their relationships with others (Luster et al., 2000). This is directly supported by sociocultural theory which highlights the impact of interpersonal relationships on human development and the learning process (Nasir & Hand, 2006). Although none of the mothers in the current study indicated access to educational programming that helped them build self-esteem and positive interpersonal relationships, when considering Luster et al.'s findings holistically, it seems reasonable to conclude that programming designed to help adolescent mothers be more successful in school, while also helping them build relationships of trust and support, might have the indirect benefit of supporting the academic needs of their children.

The findings of Luster et al. (2000) are especially interesting when considered along with data gathered by Betty Hart and Todd Risley (2003). Hart and Risley relied on the same assessment as the Luster study for measuring preschool academic performance—The *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised (PPVT-R)*—as well as the *Test of Language Development-2: Intermediate (TOLD)*. What Hart and Risley found from six years of study was that children from higher income groups tended to experience not only more direct conversation with their parents, but a higher ratio of encouraging to discouraging talk (similar in concept to Luster et al's (2000) distinction of "more supportive care") from their parents, compared to those from lower income groups. The authors also found that a marked contrast between quantity and quality of words by income group directly correlated with overall vocabulary performance for children in each of the measured income groups (Hart & Risley, 2003).

In other words, those who were spoken to more, and with more affirmative language, also performed better on tests of language ability. For Hart and Risley (2003), this equated to a definitive distinction between income classes and helped to explain the word and overall performance gap between low, middle, and high SES students.

It is on that note that it becomes important to look at the two studies together. While Luster et al. (2000) also indicate that children growing up in more language/reading–rich, supportive households tended to perform better on pre-academic language scales, their study indicated that this finding held true even within income groups. More specifically, their research supports the premise that even children from low-SES households can do well when raised under the *right* conditions (with this author noting that such a term is a loaded one in and of itself). In other words, researchers and

educators should be careful to remember that poverty alone is not a guaranteed precursor to literacy struggle.

Phillips, Hayward, and Norris (2011) reinforce this warning in their efforts to challenge "six erroneous beliefs" tied to persistent reading disabilities. As they point out, a study conducted by University of New Brunswick professor J. Douglas Willms in 2002, "Challenged the 'culture of poverty' thesis and 'the widespread belief that the children of poor families do not fare well because of the way they are raised"' (p. 111). As the authors explain, Willms's study confirmed that children raised in supportive households, where education was highly valued, fared better on assessments than children who were not raised in such environments, and that "parenting practices were neither strongly related to SES nor to family structure" (p. 111).

This suggestion that income status and family structure do not necessarily correlate with child-literacy outcomes begs a review of Luster et al.'s (2000) findings. While the Luster study suggests that even children from low income households and/or born to adolescent moms can succeed under the *right* conditions, the authors also state that "School-age children born to teenage mothers were most likely to have academic problems or behavioral problems if they had been exposed to one or more of several risk factors…includ[ing] poverty, a large family size, low maternal education, and low maternal self-esteem" (Luster, et al, p. 134). Seemingly this finding is in direct opposition to Willms's (2011) conclusion (and even their own generalized findings).

While some of the conflict can seem frustrating, there is hope in the spaces of overlap. It is encouraging to find that despite the methodology and demographics specific to each of these studies, common themes have emerged. For example, time and again,

researchers have found that households that value education, emphasize dialogue and/or song, and support reading in the home tend to yield better outcomes on tests of early language and literacy for the children of those homes (Hart & Risley, 2003; Luster et al., 2000; Phillips et al., 2011). It seems reasonable to assume that such findings could inspire programming that supports positive parenting (rooted in an emphasis on building self-esteem and strong interpersonal relationships) for the adolescent mothers of these children. Collectively, this is a strong starting point for further studies into how best to support those conditions for all families, regardless of income level or the age and marital status of the parent, while still being mindful to respect cultural norms and guard against unintentional devaluing of traditional family practices.

These findings also beg the return to a review of Alexander and Fox's (2011) exploration of identity construction. A young mother's perceived inability to support her child academically often results in an overall self-identification as *bad mother.* As sociocultural theory informs us, these negative self-perceptions color a young girl's lived experiences as both mother and student, have the potential to impact interpersonal relationships, and create less than ideal learning contexts (Nasir & Hand, 2006). Moreover, the lack of confidence that adolescent mothers have in their own ability to parent, coupled with a perceived absence of social support, is a major source of depression for many young women (Cox, et al., 2008).

Based on a collective analysis of the aforementioned studies, it is reasonable to assume that an adolescent mothers' lack of confidence in providing sufficient academic support to her child (just one element of parenting) would impact her overall sense of success or failure as a mother. In referencing a 2006 study by Monica Oxford and Susan

Spieker for her dissertation, Mary Schmidt Duncan (2016) explains that teen mothers often have lower verbal skills than older mothers and are known for talking less to their children. Not only do decreased language and literacy environments in the home tend to lead to future academic struggles for the children of these young mothers (Hart & Risley, 2003), they often correlate with greater amounts of postpartum stress amongst mothers as well as stress, abuse and neglect in the home (Duncan, 2016; Sipsma, Jones, & Cole-Lewis, 2015). In other words, finding ways to support language and literacy in the home is critical not only for closing educational gaps between the highest and lowest performing students, but for helping promote the emotional health of future generations.

Programming that Appears to be Working

The Eastview School.

Considering the potential for stigma-based policies and ineffective programming to negatively impact the identity construction of young mothers, research into effective programming becomes critical. One school where pop-culture is driving instruction to meet the literacy needs of pregnant teens and adolescent mothers is the Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens. As Professor Heidi Hallman (2009) at the University of Kansas suggests in her review of the school, the use of "out-of-school literacies" such as Hip hop can work as vehicles for both academic and societal change. Teachers and students at Eastview school are moving away from the traditional "basic skills" model of educating pregnant and mothering teens and "Challenging conceptions of what learning opportunities can be successful with 'at risk' students" (p. 37). As Hallman, Alvermann (2011), and so many others with an eye towards critical literacy suggest, the key to meeting the needs of these young women reaches far beyond teaching decoding and

fluency strategies—the answer lies in social justice and student empowerment.

Well-crafted literature is only valuable to those who can both access and find value in accessing the texts presented to them. While decades worth of literacy research addresses text-based instructional strategies for meeting the needs of struggling readers, it is in the more current research that emphasis is found placed on the importance of also considering the needs of disengaged readers and writers whose lived experiences have been thus far marginalized by traditional curriculum. Programs such as those at the Eastview School intentionally draw from the narratives of traditionally marginalized voices and help address an additional concern regarding the education of pregnant teens and adolescent mothers: the fact that a large number of these young mothers were disengaged prior to becoming pregnant in the first place (Hacker et al., 2000; Mollborn & Jacobs, 2011).

As the studies suggest, it is critical that literacy researchers consider the long-term societal effects of failing to address the needs of disengaged adolescents as a whole, while simultaneously acknowledging that for some young women, motherhood can inspire a renewed engagement in the academic process (Mollborn & Jacobs, 2011). Interestingly, a number of recent studies have demonstrated that pregnancy and motherhood can serve as a positive experience for some adolescents, providing them with a new sense of purpose, and possibly even encouragement for returning their focus to academics (Watts, Liamputtong, & Mcmichael, 2015; Watson, & Vogel, 2017; SmithBattle, 2007). According to Jeane Anastas (2017), professor of social work at NYU's Silver School, a "discovery from an Afrocentric perspective has been that becoming a mother can be a rational route to attaining adult status and independence for

young women who do not have the educational and economic advantages that more affluent teens do" (p. 133). In such situations, pregnancy and motherhood can be viewed by some as a pathway to heightened self-esteem and self-identification as *successful*, rather than as an obstacle.

Southwest High School.

Another model designed around addressing the needs of marginalized youth is New Mexico's alternative Southwest High School. As part of her dissertation work, investigating the potential of a Project Based Learning (PBL) school model to address the literacy needs of students who had been previously unsuccessful at their home school, Collins (2013) visited Southwest High School to explore their successes and challenges. While Collins' study was not specific to pregnant teens and adolescent mothers, some of her findings are highly relevant to investigations on this topic. As Collins explains, her primary findings indicate that helping students establish a sense of relevancy is critical to educating formerly disengaged students. As one teacher in her study pointed out, the traditional five-paragraph essay lesson not only fails to engage such students, but equally fails to adequately prepare them for professional success or self-advocacy post-high school.

In other words, unlike with traditional teaching models, a critical part of lesson planning for successful alternative teaching might be seen as flexibility and a willingness to allow student voice and choice to drive instruction. Referring to Maren Aukerman's 2013 work on *dialogic teaching ethics*, Collins (2017) explains that school settings, especially those designed to meet the needs of students whose priorities might not center around formalized education, must offer more "open-ended and dialogical opportunities

to explore ideas and processes unrestrained by an overpowering focus on specific technical skills, prescribed strategies, and predetermined outcomes" (p. 48).

Georgia's Second Chance Home Network.

In response to Georgia's chart-topping standing in 2001, as the leader in teenage pregnancy, Georgia's Campaign for Adolescent Power and Potential (founded by Jane Fonda in 1995 as an intermediary between government agencies) introduced the Second Chance Home Network (SCH)—a system of housing and parenting support for Georgia's most challenged teenage mothers (Hudgins et al., 2014). The goal of the SCH program, modeled after programs in Texas and Massachusetts, was to integrate governmental systems of education, parenting, and residential support, to help young mothers and their children break the cycles of poverty that appeared to be reinforcing the high teenage pregnancy rates for the state. The program was designed around five core components that had been identified by The Child Trends and Healthy Teen network as critical to creating a home environment which yields healthy outcomes for teen parents and their children: Self-sufficiency, housing stability, financial stability, successful and engaging parenting and attachment, and healthy relationships in the home (Hudgins et al.).

According to a recent review of the program, evaluating outcomes for a decade's worth of service implementation, 556 teenage mothers and their children were serviced over a ten-year period, 64% of whom had previously been under custody of the state's Department of Family and Children's Services, 36% of whom were referred by the Department of Justice, and all of whom were considered at the highest risk for dropping out of school (Hudgins et al., 2014). Essentially, the program was designed to specifically target those adolescent mothers who the research notes had been failed by the educational

and social-support systems long before ever getting pregnant (Anastas, 2017).

Having lived in the South for a brief period of time, and having seen her own children through the South's version of Sex Education (noted on one form to be approved by the local clergy), it has long struck this researcher as odd that Southern officials have continued to wrestle with the *dilemma* of teenage pregnancy, while continuing to focus on abstinence-only sex-education programs. At the heart of what *does not* work for adolescent parenting support models is an abstinence-only focused curriculum (Santelli et al., 2006). As an alternative to this clergy-approved, abstinence-only model, Georgia's Campaign for Adolescent Power and Potential focuses on evidence-based practices of comprehensive sex education, coupled with residential support services, intensive case management, educational support, healthy parenting and relationship education, and transportation services (Hudgins et al., 2014).

Hudgins et al., (2014) conducted a comparative analysis of intake and discharge data for SCH program participants. Their findings indicate that the programming is working. Whereas only 75% of girls were attending school or on track to graduate at intake, 93% of 413 residential program participants were actively attending high school, post-secondary school, or had graduated by the time of discharge. Although by the final follow-up assessment dropout rates had increased to 50% for former residents, this was considered to be significantly better than dropout rates for non-program participants, which rests at approximately 62% for girls who become parents before the age of 18 (Hudgins et al.).

As the researchers indicate, while they were happy to see that school completion rates and independent living statuses appeared to improve as a direct result of the

programming, the primary objective of the study was to determine the impact of the services on repeat pregnancy rates. The results were staggering. Whereas the rate of repeat pregnancies for mothers under the age of 20 was 25% state-wide, this rate dropped to 4% for program participants. Over the 11 years for which program data was reviewed, only 6 girls experienced a repeat pregnancy while participating in the program (Hudgins et al., 2014).

While the study's data for repeat pregnancies, educational completion rates, and independent living status appeared to all be positive, data related to custody and parenting were a bit less clear. There appeared to be some inconsistencies in long-term custody rates for the program's teenage mothers, with possible declines in custody over time. That said, the researchers reported that "summary evaluations revealed the finding that most teenage parents contacted after they left an SCH were succeeding in life," and even more significantly, that "their children have better access to health care services and are at appropriate developmental stages" (Hudgins et al., 2014). With such data in hand, it seems reasonable to conclude that the more comprehensive the service package being offered to adolescent mothers, the more likely it is to yield desired outcomes.

Beyond teen-only programming: Triple P-Positive Parenting.

Over the past several years, this researcher has continuously sought out information about teen parenting programs in the local community—whichever community that might have been at the time. And what has been shared time and again is something to the effect of, "We used to have this great program at --- but they closed it down." What has been learned through these informal investigations is that although the rationale for defunding a program is essentially tied to the budget of the general school

fund, the decision to stop funding any given program is usually much more complex than, "We didn't have the money."

On the island of Maui, for example, there have been plans to build a high school on the southern part of the island, in the town of Kihei, for over thirty years. While there is finally some progress being made on this front (dirt has been dug up, and tractors can occasionally be seen on the site moving to and fro), most island dwellers have given up on seeing their child graduate from Kihei High. In the meantime, Kihei residents continue to be shuttled to the overcrowded Maui High in central Kahului.

Maui High is where the island's single teen parenting program used to be housed. It accommodated students from all 5 of the island's public high schools. Plenty of island residents will report that their friend, or *Auntie*, or even they were assisted by educational, Parenting Ed, and childcare services that were offered through that school. But the childcare and parent education programs were operated out of some of the school's many "portables", and as the school population continued to grow, with no relief in sight from the opening of a Kihei High, those portables had to be repurposed as classrooms for the general school population.

While the story of a more recent experience in Huntington Beach, California is slightly different, there is a similar underlying theme: the needs of the broader population outweigh the interests of a small group of pregnant or parenting teens. Although this researcher is yet to meet anyone who was directly involved in the decision to defund the teen parenting program in Huntington Beach, the message received from those spoken to is that as teen parent numbers dwindled, often to less than 5 girls at any given time, the support for dedicating space and resources to this small subset of the population tapered

off as well. This pattern of decreased funding in response to a downward trend in teen parenting statistics is documented through news articles and community reports ("Teen Parents' Program at Risk," 2017; Uechi, 2018)

It is understandable that those in charge of school budgets and asset allocation would focus energy on implementing programs that serve the greatest needs, and that in doing so, certain small programs designed to serve niche populations would be cut. If teen parenting advocates are to accept this likely eventuality for teen parent programming for many districts nationwide, then it becomes critical to look for alternative solutions.

The Triple P-Positive Parenting Program (Triple P) might provide a model for such an alternative. Developed at the University of Queensland in Australia, Triple P aims at helping elementary schools address disruptive student behavior through a broad-scale parenting program (Sanders, 2008). What makes this model interesting is that it comes through a Public Health initiative (much like some of the community-based teen-pregnancy programs in the United States), but its focus is on improving academic outcomes for school-aged children (as opposed to pregnancy prevention or economic independence for the parents). The program is designed to support positive parenting practices across a broad demographic and is not specific to age of the parents, though it does acknowledge that programming which is too universal in scope is unlikely to attract a large number of participants. As the author points out, specially tailored *variant* programming has worked to address the needs of specific subgroups of the population (eg. parents of children with disabilities, or those living in rural communities). Such variants might serve as useful models for addressing the needs of adolescent parents.

Triple P emphasizes 5 core principles: Creating a safe and engaging home

environment; fostering a positive learning environment; practicing assertive discipline (as an alternative to coercive and threatening tactics); setting realistic behavioral expectations as related to stages of childhood development; and engaging in parental self-care. Because this programming is designed to addresses the needs of a broad demographic, it does not specifically target the educational needs of the parents (as related to academics or college and career readiness). As such, it might not appear to address the interests of this current research. But there are some program-based strategies which have proven useful, which might serve as guides for developing a more comprehensive program geared at meeting the needs of adolescent mothers.

One of the core strategies is to build a self-sustaining system wherein service providers are trained to *disseminate* positive strategies for working with parents through a self-regulatory approach (aka, a ripple effect). Trainers are encouraged to encourage self-directed learning, personal goal setting and independent problem solving (Sanders, 2008). Such practice might be used to *disseminate* strategies into school-based programs which could effectively be housed in an adolescent mothers' home school.

Another critically central component of the Triple P program is to engage parents in a culturally respectful manner. As Sanders (2008) suggests, "Disadvantaged parents living in poverty, recent immigrants, and indigenous parents need additional efforts to engage them in parenting programs" (p. 513) and in a manner that is "both effective and culturally acceptable to parents" (p. 511). Some methods that program developers have found effective is to design tailored programming to meet the specific needs of parents (including phone-based services for those who cannot travel, documentary-style tv programming, and the offering a small financial offerings for low-income families. While

not noted specifically, it seems reasonable to assume that translation services, and the inclusion of community/home-language service providers, would be an excellent way of providing such culturally responsive services.

While the Triple P method is one that would likely have to be modified and or expanded to effectively meet the niche needs of America's adolescent mothers and their children, it does seem worth noting that research on the method has been conducted over a 30-year period and has yielded note-worthy results. Analysis began with a single case-study design and eventually evolved to randomized controlled studies across a wide range of delivery modalities, dissemination processes, and demographic areas. Across all trials, Triple P programs have proven to have positive effects on child-parenting relationships, as well as educational and community outcomes (Sanders, 2008). As such, it is worth considering how the Triple P program could be used as a model for this country's educational and parent programming needs as they relate to the adolescent parent population.

Relationship Between Prior Research and the Present Study

The Stigma Theory model identified by Bermea et al. (2018) was largely based on Erving Golfman's (1963) research and expanded upon by Bos, Pryor, Reeder, and Stutterheim (2013) in recent years. The authors chose to apply the four manifestations of Stigma Theory proposed by Bos et al. (public, self, institutional, and stigma-by-association) to their analysis, noting that they did not gather data from friends of the research participants (leaving them unable to analyze stigma-by-association data). They also noted that because the study was limited to students who had not dropped out of school, data related to self-stigma might be skewed. Their framework provided a useful

roadmap for identifying themes in the qualitative data for the current study. For example, each of the interviewees, at some point in their storytelling touched on at least 2, if not more, of the identified sub-categories of stigma and having a framework for identifying those themes proved helpful

Likewise, although the current study did not include currently vulnerable populations, Bermea et al.'s (2018) disclosures regarding the limitations of who was included and who was naturally excluded served as a helpful reminder of the limitations associated with attempting to study individuals whose lived experiences might be less than positive, and whose personal perceptions of stigma might impact their accurate representation of such experiences. More specifically, the fact that 3 of the 5 women who volunteered for the study (whereby self-identifying as *successful*) had already graduated from high school by the time they learned they were pregnant, appears to be more a reflection of "self-exclusion" (as identified by Bermea et al.) of girls who got pregnant prior to graduation, rather than the result of a random-sampling coincidence.

Similarly, findings from Pillow's (2004) research provide a clearer insight into what constitutes the *average* teen mother—an understanding that otherwise might be lost as data is generally not collected specific to pregnant and parenting students outside of alternative programs. As Pillow explains, much of the data collected regarding the academic performance of adolescent mothers has generally been intertwined, and inextricable from related data such as truancy, failure, and drop-out rates. With such wisdom in mind, a conscientious effort was made to keep these limitations in mind when reviewing any publicly available data and integrating it with the qualitative analysis.

Whereas Pillow (2004) and Bermea et al.'s (2018) research served as foundations for understanding the social impacts on success as perceived by young mothers such as those represented in the current study, Watson & Vogel's (2017) study proved critical in a different way. Their research helped provide insights into the best ways to specifically address the academic needs of pregnant teens and adolescent mothers. While it is important to look at as many factors as possible when attempting to determine a pathway forward to positive programming for pregnant teens and adolescent mothers (wherein a study of social and emotional factors is certainly relevant), no such study would be complete without considering the specifics of academic programming.

While an expansion of Watson & Vogel's (2017) study to include a larger sampling, preferably to include a broader range of ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds would be helpful, the research as it stands provides valuable insight into the academic wants and needs of parenting adolescents. For example, this small study demonstrates that while a multitude of alternative education programs exist, supposedly designed around meeting the academic needs of parenting adolescents, many of them are academically ineffective and lack the rigor needed to adequately prepare students for college, professional careers, or even just basic self-advocacy after graduation.

Additionally, studies consistently show that despite the popular misconception that negative outcomes for young parents are the result of early pregnancy, the hurdles to success for these young women were often in place long before conception (Anastas, 2017). In other words, the educational failure that is often attributed to early parenthood is often likely the result of an educational system that has failed to motivate and prove its relevance to these young girls (Mollborn & Jacobs, 2011; Watson & Vogel, 2017). Such

insights are critical as efforts are made to parse out the factors that might have influenced the perceived success of a young mother and the child(ren) she is raising.

As noted earlier, the desire to better understand how best to support adolescent mothers and their children is based on data that suggests that *we,* as a nation, still aren't getting it right. Dropout rates for teen mothers are still too high (Barshay, 2018) and far too many children are being raised in emotionally unhealthy conditions (Cox et al., 2008). While the national epidemic of domestic abuse cannot solely be attributed to teenage pregnancy, it is a concerning offshoot which demands attention.

More specifically, relevant to the concerns of these young women as students, is the direct impact that stress and possible depression have on interpersonal relationships, the learning context, and perceptions of lived experiences, all of which have the ability to indirectly impact academic growth and overall development of both mother and child (Nasir & Hand, 2006). While each woman in the current study reported strained relationships and self-esteem challenges in the early days of parenting, 4 of the 5 women reported that specific positive interpersonal relationships (with parents, biological fathers, and/or individuals in the community) had a direct impact on both their individual success and their ability to serve as positive role models for their children.

As such, it is reasonable to deduce that positive interpersonal relationships, identified by each of the women in this study, and their self-reported perception of success (along with a reduced tendency towards depression and a sense of failure) was not a coincidence of random sampling. In other words, research that suggests that programs which help build maternal self-esteem and positive interpersonal relationships lead to better academic and personal outcomes for young mothers and their children

(Luster et al., 2000) appears to be supported by the current study. Likewise, findings from the current study appear to support research that suggests that higher rates of depression and an overall sense of failure are associated with a perception of an *absence of social support,* and that exposure to a traditional literacy curriculum which is disempowering rather than self-advocacy building (Ntiri, 2009; *Second Wave Change*, 2013), in turn dramatically impacts a pregnant or mothering adolescent's ability to access the general literacy curriculum.

It is with these assumptions in mind that research was conducted to determine whether effective programming could be designed to meet the literacy needs of pregnant teens, adolescent mothers, and their children, while meeting the demands of curriculum oversite boards and operating within the constructs of limited school budgets. Interviews and the review of relevant research was conducted with as open mind as possible, but with an eye toward determining whether programming which is global in nature (offering counseling support, logistical resources such as childcare and flexible scheduling options, and parenting-education courses) while offering targeted, culturally relevant literacy instruction that is tied directly to young mothers' needs for a cosmopolitan approach to literacy, would effectively meet national goals of decreasing dropout rates for pregnant adolescents and ensuring their college readiness, while also improving outcomes for their children.

As professors Peter Freebody and Jill Freiberg (2011) point out, traditional means of literacy education are often grounded in language that is oppressive to those who are supposed to be *liberated* by its study, and designed to reinforce *orderliness, conciliation,* and the standing political system (which often operates counter to the needs of

marginalized youth). A cosmopolitan approach to literacy instruction suggests that the path to teaching all adolescents effectively is with an eye towards popular culture, the solving of real world problems and texts designed to address students' self-efficacy needs (*Second Wave Change*, 2013). In terms of specifically addressing the needs of marginalized youth in general, and pregnant teens and adolescent mothers in particular, finding ways to address their literacy needs through such measures takes on a critical urgency as these are the individuals most likely to withdraw from the traditional system at a time when they need it most.

Contemporary research is now showing that much of the identity construction that adolescents partake in comes through their interactions with both oral and text-based language, and while more research is certainly needed in this area, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that narrative inquiry and exploration, tied to the lived experiences of traditionally marginalized adolescents, holds the greatest potential for building engagement and providing a foundation for increased literacy (Alexander & Fox, 2011). Building on this principle, it is reasonable to suggest that a combination of research and curriculum, centered around narrative inquiry and writing (tied directly to the traditionally marginalized realities of pregnant and mothering adolescents) would be a sound starting place for identifying some of the structures and strategies that might be most effective in meeting the needs of this given student demographic.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Feminist geographer and ethnographer Kim England (1994) reminds researchers of the importance of reflection on positionality and potential for personal bias before entering into fieldwork. As she points out, fieldwork is a *dialogical process* with the researcher's lived experiences and positionality directly impacting her "understanding of 'others'." Clandinin (*Experience and Story: Jean Clandinin and Tarquam McKenna in Conversation*, 2016) expands on this by suggesting that no researcher should embark on narrative inquiry research without first embarking on an auto-biographical examination. With such caution in mind, I felt it was critical to reflect personally (in a way that might seem discordant with formal writing) on my own experiences prior to starting the field exploration process. The following first-person narrative manifests that process.

Statement of Positionality

Pursuing a PhD while working full-time and simultaneously tackling the demands of motherhood has been a painfully difficult process. And while I feel that my experiences as a mothering student allow me to better empathize with the young women whose needs I hope to address through this research, I must acknowledge the *legitimacy* that marriage and adulthood afford me and the fact that I can never possibly understand the plight of the adolescent unwed mother working to navigate the choppy waters of pursuing an education while pregnant or parenting.

When I first set out to design a pathway for my doctoral studies, I only knew that I wanted to marry my rich experiences as a mother, teacher, and former labor doula. I felt that each of these components of my identity and related experiences had been critical in shaping the woman and educator that I've become, and I wanted to honor that complex

identity as I pushed forward with my education. What I didn't anticipate in those early days was that it was this belief in honoring the overlap of social identities and lived experiences that would form the foundation for the bulk of my research.

As the mother of 4 children, it is impossible for me to ever shelve the identity of *mother*. Whether I am at work, addressing the needs of students receiving special education services, or at home, working on my research and writing, the wants and needs of my children are always hovering there beside me, nagging me to be evermore present in their worlds. Likewise, it can be difficult to turn off the demands of work and school—the deadlines of class assignments, or the emotional tug of a student who I know is struggling in a way I just can't seem to touch. It is impossible to detach from any one identity for too long because each is so meticulously intertwined with the others.

What I've learned through my research and self-reflection, is that it is critical for me to honor the complex being that I am and respect the fact that being a *good mother* is no more or less important to me than feeling successful at work and at school. My sense of accomplishment or failure in any one arena directly impacts my physical and mental health and indirectly impacts my ability to care for my family. Unfortunately, when it comes to supporting young mothers, the ones most susceptible to feelings of failure, one of the first things we tend to do is force them to choose between their identities of student and parent. It is my hope that my research will help inform the development of programs that help honor and support the complex needs of mothering students, which will in turn result in improved educational outcomes for them and the children they raise.

Rationale

As the primary purpose of this study was to determine if there was a connection between the supports provided to adolescent mothers and the propensity for academic success or failure for them and their children, it first seemed reasonable to start with an investigation into how young mothers typically define success. But as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) point out, the entry point into narrative research isn't really with the first question asked—it is with the development of trust and relationship building between the interviewer and her subject(s). These authors emphasize the importance of entering into the narrative inquiry process with an understanding of equality between the interviewer and interviewee and in many ways, handing the reins of power over to the one being interviewed. As they point out, many individuals who find themselves as the subject of investigation come from a position of powerlessness, where the expectation is that even though they are being asked questions, in the end, they will be left voiceless in the actual process.

Montero and Washington (2011) further this point by highlighting the fact that common narrative genres, such as autobiography and memoir, are Western constructions which are largely unfamiliar to individuals from non-Western cultures. For example, as they explain, in Africanist traditions, oral communication often comes in the form of ring circles, song, dance, and spiritual explorations. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to encourage the interviewee to share her story in way that feels natural to her, and then to have an opportunity to provide feedback on the way in which her story is represented. This process helps ensure a socially-just and culturally respectful transfer of ideas.

After carefully considering the depth of insight desired through the restorying of the interviewee's narratives, it was determined that a narrative inquiry approach would be the most effective for accessing the themes of success and frustration as told through each mothers' story while still allowing for each woman's unique Truth to shine through. As Montero and Washington (2011) point out,

> Narrative inquiry distinguishes itself from traditional research methods in matters of purpose. It does not strive to discover and verify knowledge about the real state of the world; rather, it strives to portray experience, to question common understandings, and to offer a degree of interpretive space (Coulter & Smith, 2009, as cited in Montero and Washington).

With such wisdom in mind, it was determined that a consideration of how young mothers *perceptions* of the supports they received, and the relationship of that impression to their *perception of* success for themselves and their children was more relevant to the investigation than what the numbers might have suggested in terms of institutionalized conceptions of success (eg. graduation rates, test scores, and involvement in special education or social service programs). It was with this framework and a consideration of Pillow's (2004) wisdom that certain quantitative data (such as truancy and drop-out rates) can be difficult to disentangle from specific statistics related to teenage mothers, that a strictly qualitative study was settled upon.

While it is important to acknowledge that the researcher will always be burdened with some preconceived notions of what will be uncovered through the inquiry process (in this instance, in large part due to the review of existing studies) it is also important to note that care was taken to avoid any formal pre-theorizing or hypothesizing of what the

study would yield in terms of qualitative themes. As Montero and Washington (2011) caution, it is critical that the narrative inquiry process focus more on listening than categorizing, and that ambiguities (and possibly even conflicting ideas) be considered as potentially more valid than "certainties." Furthermore, as Connelly & Clandinin (1990) suggest, the analytical process should be more focused on Van Maanen's (1988) criteria of *verisimilitude* or an appearance of truthfulness, *apparency*, or the presentation of ideas in a manner that is easy to understand, and *transferability,* or allowing for readers to make their own connections with the text, rather than the traditional methodological constructs of validity, reliability, and generalizability.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that narrative analysis distinguishes itself from other forms of qualitative analysis in that it relies on a restorying of interview data in a manner that is consistent with storytelling. In other words, events that have been shared by interviewees and deemed by the researcher to be significant for the purpose of analysis, must be incorporated into a storyline, with all the critical elements of a story including character, setting, and plot (Polkinghorne, 1995; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2016). In order to accomplish this restorying, it was necessary to pull data from various parts of the transcripts and weave them together in a way that painted a picture for the reader as it related to a specific challenges or triumphs experienced by the participants. For example, in order to effectively restory Mary's traumatic birth experience at the hands of sadistic midwife, it was necessary to pull together threads from not only various parts of Mary's interview transcript, but from follow-up emails as well. The restoried rendition of this life event, captured in Figure 1, also demonstrates a type of zooming in and out that allows the storyteller to both share the intimate details of a lived experience

and to tie the scene to its broader contextual significance within a small area of space on the page.

Figure 1

Sample of Mary's Restorying

After being pinned down by her husband and locked in a room at the direction of her midwife, Mary's cervix was manually dilated without her informed consent, and ultimately led to third-degree tears in her vagina. Mary ultimately made her way out of her apartment (where she had been laboring towards a planned homebirth) and made her way out to the parking lot, where she drew the attention of neighbors. She describes her memory from that point on as spotty and notes that "somehow I ended up at the hospital where I eventually delivered safely after 36 hours of labor."

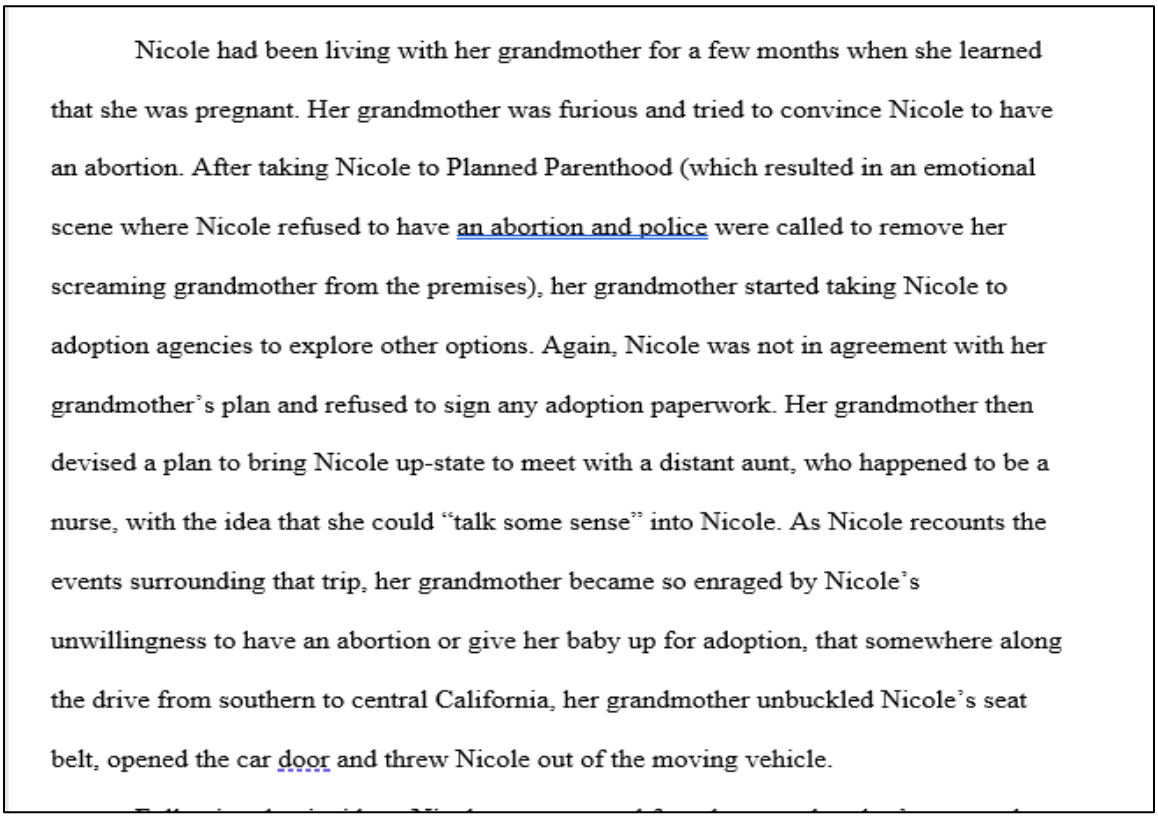
While such an experience is not typical of homebirth with midwives, Mary's dependence on an individual, referred to her through her church affiliations, lead to her lack of agency in choosing appropriate care for herself. As Mary states, the midwife ended up losing her license, but Mary's relationship with her husband was irrevocably harmed by the experience and she entered into a state of deep emotional isolation following her son's birth: "After that episode, I left the church and cut that entire social group out of my life" (Mary, written communication).

Another example of how threads from various parts of an interview can be woven together with details shared in follow-up correspondence presents itself in the restorying of Nicole's experience being thrown out of her grandmother's car. Figure 2 captures a scene resulting from Nicole's refusal to get an abortion (within the broader context of the pressure she was facing from her family at that time). Some details from the original transcript were omitted in an effort to highlight the degree to which her family was willing to go to have Nicole terminate her pregnancy, while also attempting to avoid

overwhelming this section of her data analysis with pages of fine detail and clarification that appeared throughout her personal narrative and written correspondence.

Figure 2

Sample of Nicole's Restorying



Nicole had been living with her grandmother for a few months when she learned that she was pregnant. Her grandmother was furious and tried to convince Nicole to have an abortion. After taking Nicole to Planned Parenthood (which resulted in an emotional scene where Nicole refused to have an abortion and police were called to remove her screaming grandmother from the premises), her grandmother started taking Nicole to adoption agencies to explore other options. Again, Nicole was not in agreement with her grandmother's plan and refused to sign any adoption paperwork. Her grandmother then devised a plan to bring Nicole up-state to meet with a distant aunt, who happened to be a nurse, with the idea that she could "talk some sense" into Nicole. As Nicole recounts the events surrounding that trip, her grandmother became so enraged by Nicole's unwillingness to have an abortion or give her baby up for adoption, that somewhere along the drive from southern to central California, her grandmother unbuckled Nicole's seat belt, opened the car door and threw Nicole out of the moving vehicle.

For the purpose of simplifying storylines and highlighting the connections between specific lived-experiences and their relationships to the research questions and identified themes, the stories of each interviewee were broken into sub-stories, each aligning to one of the 7 identified themes: Family Background and relationships; Experiences Surrounding Pregnancy and Early Parenting; Experiences with Education Before and After Baby; Balancing Success and Stigma; Responsibilities and Challenges; Overall Perceptions of Support; and Intimate Relationships: Marriage, Divorce, and/or Dating.

In addition to the *nature* of information set forth for discovery, there was also an interest in looking at the way the methodology might impact findings. As such, interviews were conducted with a secondary intention of determining if the narrative, both as a source of investigative inquiry, and an empowering tool of self-exploration and self-expression, might hold the key to providing adolescent mothers with the culturally responsive learning environment that they need to experience success.

In many ways, Nicole speaks directly to this consideration through her follow-up to a question she had been asked (about why she chose to participate in the interview) when she shared her experience with a book she is quite fond of. The book was written as a daily journal, by a midwife in the 19th century. Nicole noted that it was "sweet" that the woman thought she could write—that the writing consisted of "terrible penmanship…her sentences have terrible structure…her spelling's atrocious…" but as Nicole suggests, the book is "fantastic" because it "brought to life what everyday women were experiencing at that time. And it wasn't through a man's eyes. It wasn't through an author's eyes" (Nicole, written correspondence)—it was the woman's own perception of her lived experience that carried such value. In line with this, she states that "if sharing my story brings some insight, or something…to a bigger picture, then I want to be able to make that happen…It doesn't have to be a huge impact. Just something" (written correspondence). With these words, Nicole encapsulates the potential of the narrative process to empower and inspire those involved.

This power to transform a lived experience into something of a "bigger picture" speaks to Connelly & Clandinin's (1990) description of narrative inquiry as both a phenomenon and a method. As they explain, with this methodology's unique ability to

serve multiple roles, and its placement at the intersection of psychology, critical theory, anthropology, and feminist studies, it has the phenomenal potential to serve not only as an investigative tool, but as a possible answer to the questions being asked. As such, it was through this narrative inquiry process, in combination with consideration of programming trends as gleaned from public access data, and analysis of patterns of both positive and negative programming that a search for themes in the data was embarked upon. Such themes were then highlighted for the purposes of informing future discussions around the subject of educating young mothers and their children. Through a sustained investigation into the lived experiences of 5 mothers across the country, insights were gained as to the practices and supports that help meet the learning needs of young mothers and their children within the realistic constructs of a formal education system.

Research Design and Data Analysis

With the words of wisdom set forth by the previously mentioned narrative researchers, and the flexible but instructive skeletal outline set forth by Montero and Washington (2011), research was conducted in a way that was ethical in nature while allowing for a presentation of findings that were in accordance with a more contemporary view of the *narrative as story* (Montero & Washington, 2011; Polkinghorne, 1995). An honest attempt was made to represent the interviewees' lived experiences as life-snapshots (events captured as scenes) as opposed to exposition. Polkinghorne (1995) describes a storied narrative as a "linguistic form that preserves the complexity of human action" (p. 7). Moreover, as Montero & Washington (2011) suggest, more important that confirming or disconfirming the particular details of each story as told, is capturing the

essence of what a particular experience *meant* to the storyteller. This effort to capture the data in a way that is purposeful to the research questions being asked, while also honoring the need of participants to tell their stories that is meaningful and empowering to them is no easy task, but the value of a full-bodied restorying of these women's lived experiences was worth the effort.

It was the intention of the study to conduct interviews over a period of 3 months, through a combined-process of face-to-face and phone-based conversations, but in March of 2020 (the data collection year), the introduction of Covid-19, a world-wide pandemic, led to the nearly complete shut-down of society. Schools were closed, public transportation restricted, and a large number of public institutions completely shuttered. At the time of writing, the country is 9 months into the pandemic, with many of those restrictions still in place. As a result, interviews were conducted strictly via phone or video conference, and the data-collection process stretched out over more than 5 months. In the end, over 9 hours of interviews were conducted and transcribed into roughly 250 pages of transcription. Interviews were transcribed as close to the interview date as possible, but in some cases, the process of transcribing a single interview took upwards of 1 month to complete.

While a list of potential discussion questions (Appendix B) were crafted and submitted for IRB review and approval, these questions served more as prompts in instances where interviewees indicated struggle in determining a path for their own storytelling. Of the 5 interviewees, only 1 needed repeated prompting with questions to move her story along. The other 4 appeared eager to share their stories, and in more than

one instance reflected on the fact that nobody had seemed interested enough to ask before.

The questions were designed to guide participants towards addressing matters related to the research questions, but interviews were conducted in an open-ended format which allowed for a free-flow of ideas from the interviewees. At the end of each interview, the list of questions were reviewed as a form of check-list to ensure that critical components of the planned inquiry were not overlooked. In two instances, the women sent follow-up statements (via email and personal message) regarding clarification of ideas and follow-up to thoughts they felt they had omitted in the initial interview. Complete analysis of the data was conducted as a combined reflection of both the biographical narrative inquiry and autobiographical narrative inquiry data (D. J. Clandinin & Huber, in press).

Autobiographical reflection also factored into dialogic conversations with the mothers, forming the foundation for a type of *oral history interview,* in which the resulting narrative was more of a "collaboratively constructed oral history" as opposed to a focus on sheer "information gathering" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 111). While this researcher does not share the lived experience of being a teen mother, there were numerous other instances of shared experiences in relation to birth and the early parenting years that formed the foundation for establishing rapport and co-creating "a framework on which to construct their oral histories" (p. 112).

Instruments

Data from the interviews was analyzed using a combination of Polkinghorne's Analysis of Narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995), which focuses more on the constructed

reality that evolves as part of the narrative process, and paradigmatic analysis (Sharp et al., 2018), which encourages analysis of common and contrasting themes through which an attempt was made to glean an understanding of how these women's specific life events impacted their attaining of goals and fulfilling of perceived life purposes. Data was simultaneously coded using both Values and Descriptive coding (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2016) and took place in an evolutionary manner as new data was introduced. As Saldana (2016) explains, coding must be viewed as a *cyclical act,* with the first round of coding merely serving as a foundation for further analysis. With such wisdom in mind, thematic analysis took place over a series of months rather than days or weeks.

Because this study was designed to understand which educational factors, if any, impacted the mothers' perception of success, as well as their perceived ability to serve as positive educational role models for their children (and how those factors might transfer to the larger population of adolescent mothers), it was necessary to challenge long-standing assumptions that adolescent mothers and their children are predisposed to academic failure along with perceptions of what *success* entailed.

It was with such a critical lens that the qualitative interviews and overall data analysis was conducted. Countless articles suggest that adolescent mothers are more likely to drop out of school and live in poverty and that their children are more likely to repeat grades in school and/or be born with intellectual disabilities which necessitate special education services. In the case of the research subjects for this study, 3 of the 5 women shared stories of extreme financial struggle in the years immediately following the birth of their children and 4 out of the 5 mothers identfied their children as demonstrating some type of atypical learning, developmental, behavioral and/or

neurological performance. With these findings in mind, it was imperative to consider whether themes that emerged were the the result of societally-presumed predispositions (eg. young girls with lower than average IQs have babies with the same, creating unbreakable cycles of underperformance) or whether it was politiczied programming that reinforced such trends (especially in the instance of behavioral concerns).

Furthermore, as it became evident through the data analysis that these mothers' academic paths were significantly altered following their pregnancies and births (in some situations resulting in an inability to meet graduation goals the mothers had set for themselves), it became critical to evaluate how inadequate or harmful school practices impacted those outcomes. Such findings have been used to call for programming action to help level the educational playing field for both the mothers and their children. This will be explored in more detail in the Discussion section.

Methodology Specific to Research Questions 2 and 3

Whereas the first research question, designed to clarify how mothers define success for themselves and their children was assessed directly from interview data, the answers to questions 2 and 3 were ascertained through a combined analysis of interview data and a review of various programs discussed in the literature.

Table 1

Analysis of Interview Questions

Interview Question	Means of Data Collection	Means of Data Analysis
How is "success" defined and measured by women who had their first child during their adolescent years?	Interviews	Polkinghorne's Analysis of Narratives; cyclical process of Values and Descriptive coding
What are the similarities and differences across program models that might inform how best to meet the literacy needs of adolescent mothers and their children?	Combination of interviews and categorization of program features reviewed throughout the literature	Charting of program features as defined in the interviews and literature
Can a sociocultural framework help provide a foundation for programming that meets the educational needs of young mothers while satisfying curriculum oversite boards?	Program reviews found in the literature, and review of sociocultural theory	An analysis of program characteristics as described in the literature in relation to the lived experiences of young mothers as described in the interviews, in the context of a sociocultural framework

Question 2 was designed to uncover similarities and differences across program models that might help provide programming guidance for meeting the academic needs of the mothers and their children. In reviewing the existing literature on this subject, program analysis appeared to be primarily tied to generalized academic success (high school graduation rates, continuation onto college, etc.). While such data can be helpful in determining broad literacy attainment (eg. high school graduation equals basic literacy), it also became evident through analysis of the mothers' narratives that perceived success (at this point in their lives) is more directly tied to an ability to advocate for themselves and their children in the real world, their ability to guide their children academically (as opposed to whether or not they hit their specific academic

goals such as on-time high school graduation, completion of a college degree, etc.), and their overall sense that they are contributing positively to their communities. The question then evolved somewhat, into whether or not existing programs are preparing adolescents for that type of post-secondary, real-world *success*.

Question 3 was designed to determine whether or not a broad sociocultural framework (Nasir & Hand, 2006; Rueda, 2011), interwoven with a cosmopolitan perspective on literacy (Bean & Dunkerly-Bean, 2015) and feminist theory (Acker, 1987) could help improve programming for adolescent mothers and their children. The program assessments that have been reviewed thus far have been helpful in that they speak to sociocultural concerns in regard to academic growth and development (specifically how the layering of lived experiences and social contexts directly impact such development), while also highlighting academic success rates for program participants compared to the general population. It should be noted that none of women who were interviewed actually participated in any type of programming designed to educate or support pregnant teens and adolescent mothers. As such, it was not possible to determine the effectiveness of specific "program models" in these mothers' communities. That said, there were certainly factors of perceived support and struggle that appeared repeatedly in relation to the education of these women and their children.

As interview data was analyzed, it became obvious that while no programming commonalities could be found across the mothers' educational narratives, certain social contexts were associated with positive educational experiences for the women and their children (eg. reliable childcare and/or an ability for mother to learn from home, scheduling that allowed for mothers to engage in paid employment while attending

school, and access to specialized academic supports for the children). In line with Saldana's (2016) advice to treat the narrative inquiry process as a cyclical act, as such themes emerged, new codes were developed to investigate similarities across seemingly disparate narratives.

Participants

Qualitative data was gathered through a series of oral history interviews (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) with 5 adult women who had their first children as unwed adolescents and now describe themselves as academically and/or professionally "successful" and consider their children to be academically "successful" as well. The first interviewee was a woman who was referred by her friend who had heard mention of the study in a breastfeeding support group. The second interviewee was referred by the researcher's daughter. The two young women were former colleagues and from conversations the two had had, the researcher's daughter thought that the study might be of interest to her former work partner. This young mother was eager to participate and yielded one of the most comprehensive interviews of all the women. These first two interviewees provided a stark contrast to each other, growing up in drastically different communities and with quite disparate ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

In an effort to further expand the breadth of experiences studied, Maximum Variation Purposive Sampling (Ilker et al., 2015) was used to recruit 3 additional interview participants. Due to the nature of the research, and the constraints of working as an unpaid student, interview solicitation was reliant on nonprobability sampling techniques. Of the two most common types of nonprobability sampling (convenience and purposive), convenience sampling is often disregarded as the least "scientific" because

sample populations tend to be more homogenous (lacking randomness) and are therefore more prone to bias. In an attempt to broaden the research lens for this study and allow for the most expansive definition of "success" possible, a conscious effort was made to include women who came from different geographic areas, had varied upbringings, and who represented the broadest range of cultural identities possible within the small sample size.

As part of this effort, a formal request for participants, using an IRB approved social media recruitment script, was shared with friends and family via social media. At that point in the recruitment process, existing interviewees represented the Pacific Northwest and Pacific Islands regions. The recruitment request was shared with a notation that there was a specific interest in speaking with women from the Midwest, Northeast, and Southern States regions. In the end, 3 additional women stepped forth to participate in the study: 1 from Downstate New York, 1 from Arizona, and 1 who originated in Southern California and ultimately completed her education and has raised her own children in Nebraska. Two of the mothers indicated that they came from middle-class households that could provide some type of financial support to the new mother and her child, 2 indicated that there was such financial strain in the family prior to them becoming pregnant that they were called upon to contribute to the family budget while still in high school. In regard to ethnic/cultural diversity, 1 identified as Hispanic, 1 as Hawaiian, and the other 3 as white, non-Hispanic. Two of the women identified their children as bi-racial and all 5 of the women identified themselves as Christian.

Identification of Resonant Threads

Each woman's story was unique and insightful in a way that cannot possibly be captured in a few lines of text. That said, Andrew Spires, in his study of compassionate math instruction geared at high school math students (2017), used "Resonant Threads" as a means of introducing each individual that he met with, as part of his dissertation research. While the threads he identified were designed to highlight somewhat of a theme across participant narratives (which is not the intent of the findings review that follows), the idea of letting each woman lead off in her own voice, in a way that seemed to embody the essence of her overall narrative, seemed fitting for a study whose primary objective is to empower young mothers to bring about the change that they want to see in educational practices geared at serving adolescent mothers. It was difficult to choose just one quote for this segment of the analysis, but effort was made to identify the sentiment that spoke to each woman's personal lived experience as a young mother.

Participant Safeguards

Because human subject research is a delicate undertaking, careful precautions were taken to ensure confidentiality and informed consent of all participants. These considerations are carefully laid out in the Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposal. All of the names presented in the restoried narratives are pseudonyms designed to protect the identities of the interviewees and their families.

Diligent effort was taken to ensure the informed consent and confidentiality of interview participants, while also protecting them from undu harm as detailed in the IRB proposal. While participation in the interview process lead to strong emotional responses from some of the participants (with some women crying at various points in their interviews), the overall experience for each woman appeared to be positive and cathartic,

which each woman expressing some sense of pride in being able to share her story with others. As such, it has been assumed that there are no negative psychological, physical, or social consequences associated with this research. More significantly, it is the researcher's belief that the application of a sociocultural framework which has been applied to the study design will provide valuable insights and pathways for potential policy change and more effective programming to meet the needs of adolescent mothers and their children.

Trustworthiness

While narrative inquiry criteria set forth by Van Maanen (1988) and endorsed by experts in the field such as Montero & Washington (2011) and Connelly & Clandinin (1990) served as a guiding principal for inquiry and analysis, it was also determined there was value to considering Creswell's (2003) strategies for ensuring the accuracy of the interpretations. As such, *member checking* was used to confirm the accuracy of stated facts and interpretations while also honoring the rights of participants to feel heard. Specifically, copies of each narrative were sent to the participants for review and input. While some of the women asked for minor changes (such as a change in pseudonym for one, or correction regarding which sister was involved in a certain dialogue for another), some of the edits were substantial and required ongoing collaboration to get to the point where each mother felt accurately represented.

Self-reflection was also practiced throughout the research and analysis processes to check for bias or positionality as it related to the researcher's role in the research. Additionally, point was made to seek out and report on "*negative or discrepant information* that runs counter to the themes" (even though as Clandinin & Connelly

(2000) suggest, and sociocultural theory reinforces, both lived experiences and reconstructions of the past are at best reflections of the context of the moment and as such not subject to measures of absolute truth). Finally, consultation with peers for the purpose of *debriefing* both the analysis of relevant literature and the research data (Creswell, 2003) was conducted before submitting for final review. This was critical when applying certain concepts, such as *intersectionality* (Cresnshaw, 2018) to the analysis of any woman or group's lived experiences. It is the hope that these careful precautions will not only preserve the integrity of the research but will improve the likelihood that the findings can be used to improve educational conditions for pregnant teens and adolescent mothers in a wide variety of settings.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In an effort to remain true to the protocols of the institution overseeing this research, a formalistic approach to writing this dissertation was adhered to. Aside from writing in the third-person objective voice, which complicates the interjection of the autobiographical reflection—a critical component of narrative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000)—the Review of the Literature was encapsulated in its own chapter, while the analysis of narratives presents itself here in Chapter 4. As Clandinin and Connely (2000) suggest however, this leads to some tension for the narrative researcher who is inclined to see every component of the research (from a review of existing studies, to data collection and autobiographical reflection, and eventually narrative analysis) all as delicately intertwined. As Clandinin and Connely indicate, whereas the primary intent of many traditional researchers is to contribute to the bank of theoretical paradigms and possibly the associated literature on a given topic, the intent of the narrative inquirer is more often to create "a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic" (p. 42). In other words, the purpose is often to get people to reflect on their biases and perceptions and to consider new ways of approaching a topic. Nowhere could this be more important than when considering the impact of *attitudes,* not only on the outcomes for adolescent mothers and their children, but on the actual lived experiences of these individuals during an incredibly vulnerable time of development.

This objective of calling on the reader to consider their own perceptions in response to the *appropriateness* of elements within existing program models would be easier done if restoried narratives could be interwoven with the review of the literature, to address each element in turn, but it is the hope of this researcher that memory will serve

the reader well enough to synthesize the two as they go. In an effort to avoid redundancy, a full recapping of the literature will be avoided here, but it seems critical to note that restoried experiences shared below are offered as a compliment to the programming reviewed in the literature review, and in a manner that is designed to challenge the reader to reconsider their own preconceived notions of what it means to be *successful*, what it means for programming to be *effective,* and the potential for a sociocultural framework to help frame discourse around educating adolescent mothers and their children *properly.*

The stories have been broken up thematically, according to common threads that appeared across narratives and which best aligned sociocultural concepts: Family Backgrounds and Relationships; Experiences Surrounding Pregnancy and Early Parenting; Experiences with Education Before and After Baby; Balancing Success and Stigma; Responsibilities and Challenges; Overall Perceptions of Support; and Intimate Relationships. At the risk of appearing diffuse, a recap of the core sociocultural principles used for guiding this analysis will be reiterated here as it seems most imperative to have those concepts at the forefront of the mind when reading through each woman's story:

Nasir and Hand's (2006) overview of some key principles of the sociocultural framework suggests as follows:

1. Human development is multi-level and happens in response to a combination of personal short and long-term lived experiences as well as changes in social structure and cultural evolution.
2. Development and learning are defined by social and cultural contexts, making analysis of cultural norms, practices, and biases, a critical part of analyzing the learning process.

3. Learning is directly tied to social contexts and the relationships that the learner holds with those around her.

Mary

Resonant Quote

In sharing what it means to her to be successful and a related statement regarding differences between her and her oldest child's father who recently died:

> There is such a huge difference between the personalities and attitudes of teenage moms and the men who get them pregnant. Women should be better protected than we are. On the bright side, my daughter has seen me overcome many barriers and she knows that short term obstacles can't stand between her and long-term success….We talk about my life a lot, and while her judgement can sting at times, I am so glad that my daughter understands birth control and that she wants to wait to have kids until she's 'at least 28.'… And I think most important of all, she knows that she can come to me with bad news, when life shreds her plans and she has to figure out a new path forward. She has a parent who understands and will stand by her without question, and she knows enough about me to know that I won't and can't judge her for whatever mistakes she makes in her future. That alone I think really sets her up for success (Mary, written communication following her personal interview, March, 2020).

Family Background and Relationships

Although each woman interviewed had a unique story to share, Mary's uncommon upbringing was perhaps the most likely to trigger a response among readers. While the general public tends to have preconceived notions about some of the subgroups

that the interviewees belong to (eg. foster youth, children living in poverty, and individuals of Hispanic origin) and their predisposition to both becoming a teen parent and "succeeding" as one, trends in research and reporting seem to indicate that less is known (or thought about) in regard to teen pregnancy in cult-based communities.[1] When reflecting on Mary's experiences growing up in an *ultra-fundamentalist* community (Provenzo, Jr., 1990) however, it becomes obvious that her development as both a mother and student has been dramatically shaped by socio-cultural factors such as a "combination of short and long-term lived experiences" and striking shifts in her social structure and community (Nasir & Hand, 2006) as a direct result of her atypical religious upbringing.

For example, as Mary explains, she was raised in a community (beyond just her immediate family) that taught her to be fearful of authority figures and "establishment systems" such as schools. She was indoctrinated to believe that "people were going to try to come and take us from our family, and that homeschoolers were targeted…that religious people were targeted" (Mary, personal communication). This type of

[1] When this section of the story was written, the term "isolated religious communities" was the term chosen by the researcher in hopes of avoiding charged language. But when Mary reviewed the writing, she indicated that she felt the term was misleading in that her community was physically integrated into the local neighborhood. The term "cult" was adopted based on this following feedback from Mary: "This could be my own interpretation, but "religiously isolated communities" brings up rural images in my mind. Most of us lived in suburban or urban areas in the 80's and 90's, and the existing members I still have contact with haven't moved. The men all worked at normal jobs. We were not necessarily poor families, either. I would say that at least half of these families lived below the poverty line, but there were affluent families in our community as well. The people in this network are kept isolated through active brainwashing activities, such as driving groups of pre-teens to college campuses for the afternoon with the mandatory assignment of sharing "the gospel" with at least 10 people. We were disciplined if we weren't aggressive enough to meet the quota, so naturally due to our behavior we met with unfriendly to hostile responses from the college students. When we returned to the church, we were praised and welcomed back to the fold and reminded that persecution is the hallmark of a true believer. This type of activity is repeated over and over with very young kids, and enforces the idea that the world is against us and your only refuge is inside the cult. I don't know if it's worth articulating this in your paper or not, but in light of recent events I would think readers are wondering about these communities and how they exert so much control over their victims."

psychological manipulation has become associated with what Eugene F. Provezo, Jr. describes as "ultra-fundamentalism" that he explains grew out of the Christian Evangelical movement of the 1980s and 90s: "It is opposed to the doctrine of Separation of Church and State [and school] and what it believes to be a growing secularization of American society" (1990, p. xi). More specifically, those who identify with this faction of Christianity view the "humanist movement", affiliated with philosopher B. F. Skinner and writer Isaac Asimov, as detrimental to the moral fiber of the nation (Provenzo, Jr., 1990). This conditioning in Mary's early years not only impacted her approach to personal academics, but her perceived ability to support her own children's education in a traditional school setting.

The cult that Mary's family belonged to is associated with the Quiverfull movement, which is based on a deeply patriarchal ideology, encouraging women to reproduce as much as possible in order to "outnumber the sinners" (Dumitru, 2015). What some might view as inconsistent views on family planning (demanding that she forgo contraception but then shunning her when she became pregnant), Mary describes as perfectly in line with the Quiverfull philosophy, which advocates for the subjugation of women for the advancement of male dominance. As she points out, many of the women in her former community suffer from severe medical complications resulting from decades of pregnancy and prolonged nursing, in combination with malnourishment, but this outcome for women is seen as compatible with the belief that self-persecution offers the best pathway to Heaven.

This emphasis on sacrifice of the female body lead to conflicting emotions for Mary, who was more inclined to critical thought and reasoning. When Mary was 18, just

prior to marrying the pastor's son, she visited a doctor for a pre-marital check-up. As she explains, she had recently undergone a fairly rigorous exam (with multiple inoculations) in preparation for a mission trip to Mexico. Believing that marriage was "at least as momentous as travel", she decided to visit the doctor again in preparation for her exchange of vows. After discussing her plans to hold off on getting pregnant, the doctor prescribed Mary birth control pills. As Mary shares,

> My mom found out that I had seen a doctor about birth control and panicked. She started calling our friends and relatives telling them that I was on birth control and several called me to tell me that I was going to give myself cancer. The pastor started a sermon series on the evils of birth control and spent several Sundays in a row preaching about how my chosen form of birth control was abortifacient. I went online and read about how the pill actually worked and I was positive that everyone around me was completely wrong, but the pressure was anxiety-provoking. I found myself accidentally skipping doses here and there, or forgetting to refill my prescription in a timely manner because I felt conflicted. It didn't come as a complete surprise when I found out I was pregnant.

But when asked about how their family responded to the news of the pregnancy, Mary shared that she and her new husband "told everyone right away, not realizing how badly the same people who pressured us to stop using birth control would respond to news of our pregnancy. The women in my life were and continue to be the worst. There was so much judgement. I felt hated" (Mary, personal communication). Mary went on to explain that there was a period of roughly 8-9 years where her husband's family would not even speak to them following the birth of their first child.

Experiences Surrounding Pregnancy & Early Parenting Years

Despite the negative pressure exerted on her by her family and community, Mary was excited about her pregnancy and looked forward to becoming a mother. She did not take pregnancy, birth, or parenting classes because she felt confident in her ability to self-educate and had a sense of confidence in herself as a prospective mother based on her own experiences caring for younger siblings over the years. As she pointed out,

> It was pretty common in the community we grew up in …especially for older girls to essentially parent the younger siblings. That was sort of the expectation. And everyone around you pretty much did that as well, so I didn't see it as different. So I had pretty strong ideas about how I wanted to take care of kids before I had Kids (Mary, personal communication).

Mary's reflections on her eagerness to raise a family in accordance with her own strong views on effective parenting echo the findings of Jeane Anastas (2017). As noted in the literature review, while this research out of NYU's Silver School of sociology focused on an Afrocentric perspective on young mothering, findings that "becoming a mother can be a rational route to attaining adult status and independence for young women who do not [otherwise] have the educational and economic advantages that more affluent teens do" (p. 133) is highly relevant to Mary's own lived experience. In reviewing this narrative, Mary indicated that Anastas' findings truly resonated with her in that "without a child, it was impossible in our community for a woman to attain adult status."

Unfortunately, Mary's confinement to birthing resources of the cult (primarily what she refers to as a "violent misogynist" midwife) left her in a tenuous situation

during labor and delivery. She had had experience with birth prior to her own delivery and was knowledgeable enough to make a birth plan and arrange for a doula, but ultimately the birth of her first child led to a deeply traumatic experience that impacted her for many years. As Cook and Loomis (2012) point out, a woman's overall feeling about her birth experience can be a profound, with life-altering consequences. The actual perception of birth outcomes that a mother holds is generally reflective of a combination of factors including her perception of control and decision making throughout the labor process, including the ability to make bodily decisions. A perceived lack of control is generally associated with negative childbirth experiences, and in some cases, trauma, which can in-turn impact the overall well-being of the family (Cook & Loomis, 2012).

While insufficient data exists in relation to specific labor and delivery experiences for adolescents, due to a strong research focus on adult mothers (Coley & Nichols, 2016), access to supports like doula care and mother-centered childbirth education, which typically emphasize self-empowerment, are shown to have positive outcomes for women overall, but are generally less accessible to younger mothers. In Mary's case, while she was able to employ the services of a doula, her limited access to compassionate midwifery care (outside of her patriarchal church-based system) resulted in physical and emotional trauma and ultimately Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which plagued her for years.

After being pinned down by her husband and locked in a room at the direction of her midwife, Mary's cervix was manually dilated without her informed consent, and ultimately led to third-degree tears in her vagina. Mary ultimately made her way out of her apartment (where she had been laboring towards a planned homebirth) and made her

way out to the parking lot, where she drew the attention of neighbors. She describes her memory from that point on as spotty and notes that "somehow I ended up at the hospital where I eventually delivered safely after 36 hours of labor."

While such an experience is not typical of homebirth with midwives, Mary's dependence on an individual, referred to her through her church affiliations, lead to her lack of agency in choosing appropriate care for herself. As Mary states, the midwife ended up losing her license, but Mary's relationship with her husband was irrevocably harmed by the experience and she entered into a state of deep emotional isolation following her son's birth: "After that episode, I left the church and cut that entire social group out of my life" (Mary, written communication).

Experiences with Education Before & After Baby

Mary describes her early years of education as isolated and unhealthy. She recalls sitting in a room, eating Saltine crackers, and sipping water for hours on end while reading through the encyclopedia. When asked if she had ever considered homeschooling her own kids, she responded that "People should not be allowed to homeschool. It's not a safe situation" (Mary, personal communication). She later went on to explain that while some of her son's teachers and doctors had suggested possible homeschooling for him so that Mary could customize a learning plan to address his individualized needs as a child on the autism spectrum, it was an option that she was unwilling to consider due to her own negative experiences as a homeschooled student.

It should be noted that at the time Mary made this statement, the country was still operating "normally", just prior to the Covid shut-downs. In reviewing this part of the narrative, Mary thought it was critical to point out that in the months since her interview

(during which time she became drastically ill from Covid) she made the difficult decision to homeschool her children. She stated that she felt their local school district was not "demonstrating sound judgement" in regard to Covid-related safety protocols and as of this writing, she indicated that her children would not be returning to a traditional face-to-face setting for the foreseeable future. She says this difficult decision was based on the fact that while she was able to overcome the isolation and negative experiences associated with her personal homeschooling journey, "you can't overcome disability and death."

In terms of her own education following the birth of her son, Mary took remedial classes at the local community college after failing to obtain what some would view as a "legitimate high school diploma." While she was able to get what she refers to as a "DIY" homeschool diploma, such documents were generally viewed as meaningless to employers and schools in the state. She explained that while the university she eventually applied to and attended asked for copies of her high school transcript, they never actually followed up on the request, so she was able to pursue higher education, despite the lack of an official high school diploma. She reports feeling well-prepared for college studies (possibly more so than her publicly educated peers) but states that after receiving good grades at the community college level, she "got to the university and it was like hitting a wall." As she points out, she did not understand the value of "academic exercise," and found herself questioning the practical applications of anything that was presented to her. She wanted to know, "How does *this* make money?" She reports butting heads with professors who explained their roles in teaching her "to think" and felt disparaged by

those who seemed not to appreciate the perspectives and life experiences that she carried with her to the classroom.

She specifically recalls feeling disenfranchised by the curriculum in her economics classes: “You know, where they’d be talking about the motivators for people living in poverty and there’d always be a handful of students like me, hanging out in the back, looking at each other like, ‘well—this is blatantly insulting.’” She chuckled while recounting such experiences but also emphasized that at the time, she had tried hard to explain to “the experts” why some of their models and theories were inaccurate but felt that her input was generally dismissed and the conversations went nowhere.

In the end, Mary did manage to graduate with a bachelor’s degree, but notes that it took her 10 years to fully complete it. She mentioned that the combination of switching to an online program, where she could learn from home and eliminate the need for childcare and taking a sufficient course-load that opened up access to student loans “turned things around for [her].” As she points out, getting married allowed her to remove her parents’ income from her FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) application, while affording her better student loan opportunities. As she suggests, this was a major incentive for her to marry young. While she was never able to quit working completely, and was restricted to part-time coursework (limiting her access to certain types of financial aid and grants), accessing student loans provided her with some greater degree of financial stability than without.

Interestingly, while Mary suggested that the effort to complete her degree was worth it in the end, at the time of her interview, she stated that she did not feel that what she learned during her time at the university provided her with any skills of value. After

months had passed from the initial interview however, Mary noted a change in her perceptions about her education:

> Living in the pandemic world, I see greater value in my degree now than I did when we first spoke. My degree is in Integrated Social Sciences. I focused my studies on economics, global health, and media communications. In the Covid world, I actually do have skills that have proved very useful. I know how to vet data quality and how to analyze and apply it to make data-driven decisions. I understand what is going on in our country's economy, and was able to double my investment portfolio during the pandemic because I could anticipate changes. I also understand the significance of metaphors in rhetoric, and can deconstruct political conflict to understand political subtext. I credit these skills for my family's stability in the pandemic. While college didn't prepare me to support my family financially, this year has opened my eyes to the value of the intangible assets I did gain. If nothing else, my time at the university introduced me to a network of affluent, educated liberals, and because of that, I have been able to work from home and keep my family stable and safe at a time when most people are struggling.

Balancing Success and Stigma

It is not unusual for young mothers like Mary to report feeling isolated from peers, starting during pregnancy, and often continuing throughout their early years of parenting (Jacobs & Mollborn, 2012). Whereas older mothers are often able to seek out circles of support through local breastfeeding programs such as LaLeche, the federally funded WIC (Women Infants Children) program, or Mommy-and-Me classes through the

local library, adolescent mothers often feel cut out from those community resources because of their age. As Mary suggested, she often felt judged by other mothers and believed that she "was definitely not welcomed in most of these groups." This type of isolation often leads to a "forced autonomy" as teen mothers try to find ways to navigate the challenges of the early parenting years alone (Jacobs & Mollborn). In studying the narratives of 48 adolescent black and Latina mothers in the Denver metropolitan area, Jacobs and Mollborn found that young mothers often feel forced to develop unique coping strategies for not only addressing the financial and emotional needs of the family, but for continuing their own growth and development in the absence of close relationships with others.

As Mary says, she has struggled her entire adult life to build close friendships with other women. She had started to connect with another young mother when her first child was a baby, but that girl's relationship with her child's father turned violent and she was forced to move to California. And unfortunately, in professional settings, Mary always felt guarded against letting others know that she had a child at a young age, preventing her from building relationships with other mothers in her workplace: "That's been the most sickening and difficult part for me. There's no kind of sisterhood. There's not support with other women. You have to hide from the other women. I have not ever felt comfortable at a job letting people know that I have children."

Of any of the elements of Mary's narrative that stood out most to the researcher, it was this image of a workspace barren of photographs and preschool drawings. Even in the most sterile of work environments, like banks and medical offices, there are a handful of pictures that help connect an employee to her personal life. But for young mothers like

Mary, such connection is not always possible. While Mary has managed to build a successful career in the nonprofit sector, establishing what she sees as financial stability for herself and her kids while also providing for her children's financial futures, she has always felt forced to "compartmentalize" work and home, which she suggests has taken a major mental and emotional toll on her. Even now, as the program director for a major nonprofit, she shares that the need to separate her personal and professional lives is strong, and the overall feeling of isolation from her younger years has never actually gone away.

Responsibilities & Challenges

While Mary now describes herself as financially successful, with the ability to hire a nanny while she continues to advance professionally, this was not always the case for her. In comparing her life now (after divorce, remarriage, and sustained professional growth), she states, "In my mind, as a low income young mom, having babies meant giving up your entire life and spending all your time and energy on them. This new path has its own difficulties, but it's definitely more financially secure and more personally satisfying" (written communication).

Mary's adult-like responsibilities began long before she ever became a mother. As she explains, her parents were kind of "checked out", and often relied on her to keep the household running. When she got married and moved out of her family home, she took one of her sisters (who was about 13 at the time) to live with her. Her youngest sister was about 9 when Mary moved out and struggled the most from the loss of her big sister. As Mary recalls,

I didn't realize how checked out my parents were [at the time]. At least when I

> was living there, we could rely on my parents to pay the bills, go grocery shopping—you know, do basic things. But when [my youngest sister] reached her twenties and we started relating to one another more as adults, I actually found out that she experienced food insecurity and the power getting shut off—things like that….Everyone assumed that someone was taking care of the youngest one, but she was actually pretty much on her own all through high school.

The added burden of worrying about her siblings made the challenge of young parenting that much harder for Mary. During those initial years of marriage and parenting, they lived in low-income housing and relied on public transportation to get around. As Mary recalls, lack of access to a reliable vehicle was the most challenging part of being a young parent. As she points out, the one car they had for a brief time was often broken down, and because of their young ages, they could not even rent a car in an emergency. General errands like grocery trips and doctors visits would take up a large portion of her day, "so it was not a minor inconvenience."

As a means of making money, she often took in other children from the neighborhood since paying for babysitting in order for Mary to work was generally cost-prohibitive. The young family started in a studio apartment, and eventually upgraded to a 1-bedroom, but they did not have any real furniture beyond a mattress and chairs. As Mary shares, they spent whatever spare money they had on quality toys so that they could attract neighborhood families to her home-based daycare. While she was grateful for their close proximity to a community park and playground, she points out that they lived in a high-crime neighborhood with a large homeless population: "It was an interesting phase in life for sure" (personal communication).

When asked if she knew how her children felt about the struggles of being raised by a teen mom with little means to provide, Mary explained that her oldest doesn't seem bothered by it now, but that "he has really vivid memories of, you know, going to the food bank and getting abandoned by a bus that just never shows up and having to figure out how to get home."

In addition to the financial and logistical challenges Mary faced in the early years, she had the additional burden of trying to figure out how best to support her son's special needs. He is on the autism spectrum, which she says made it impossible for her to leave him with anyone—including his own father. When her son was 4, she tried working for a preschool so that she could take advantage of their reduced tuition for employees, while still keeping him close. Unfortunately, her son was kicked out for aggressive behavior. She says his aggression was the result of his disability, which lead him to misinterpret visual cues, but she was not able to access disability protections to keep her son in the program. Mary states that things started to get a little easier once her son neared kindergarten and he started receiving services with an occupational therapist and speech pathologist. Unfortunately, she had a second child by this time, who she reports was colicky, and could not be left with caregivers. Mary found herself trapped in that cycle of being unable to afford quality childcare and therefore unable to pursue a career.

At one point, Mary was asked how she coped with all the challenges that she faced—managing these demands on her own without any support from her family. She said, "I don't think I understood that it was a lot at the time…I was still a kid myself when I started having children. I didn't have anything to compare it to." Interestingly, she finds life's sacrifices harder now in some ways. She said staying up all night with a

crying infant was easier when she was young and full of creative energy, but now, with her third child, born after a few years of "normal adulthood", she sees "a huge difference" in her ability to keep up with the demands of taking care of a baby. She shares that she has less youthful energy and excitement now and that she also knows what she is "giving up on" when parenting an infant.

In a follow up email, Mary shared that she felt she was actually a better parent when she was younger because she was "like bottled lightning at that age," and that "if the world had supported [her] with the basic things [they] needed—just transportation, stable housing, basic food and healthcare," their entire life experience would have been different. She is grateful that she is now able to contribute to making her community a better place through her nonprofit work, but states that "when society lets young women like me fall off the map and punishes us for our 'sins', it's society that misses out."

Overall Perceptions of Support

Because Mary was not enrolled in a traditional high school program when she learned that she was pregnant, there is no way to determine how her local school district or community associations might have supported her through pregnancy and early parenting, but Mary's story does give some unique insight into how her isolated community treats young mothers. When asked about the response to her pregnancy news, Mary shares that there was never any type of baby shower or offer of gifts. Nobody came to give her diapers or offer to take her to medical appointments.

In terms of educational support, Mary reports that counselors at the local community college discouraged her from taking classes until her "life situation improved." She says that she had heard stories of other mothers being able to take young

children to class when childcare fell through, but any time she had asked for such support from her own teachers, she says that they refused to accommodate her. She says that it was because of these childcare set-backs that it took her more than 10 years to get a 4 year degree:

> I couldn't afford the childcare centers on the school campuses, and they all had long waitlists anyway that didn't meet the needs of students like me who might need to take classes at multiple schools and transfer credits in order to get the schedule I needed. It was always tricky and I took many breaks and rarely took more than two classes each quarter, but the more discouraged I felt, the more I wanted to prove these people wrong and show them how foolish they were to write women like me off as wasted potential (Written communication).

Intimate Relationships: Marriage, Divorce, and/or Dating

From the time of Mary's traumatic labor and delivery experience, her relationship with her husband had always been strained. She says that marriage counseling and support for her to enjoy an occasional "date night" with her first husband might have helped, but ultimately feels that the father of her first child was just too immature to be a husband and parent. They stayed together for roughly 10 years, but after he started dating someone that he met while taking classes at the local college, they finally filed for divorce. Mary reports that this added strain to her already tenuous relationship with her parents who are so firmly opposed to divorce that they have stayed married for decades while keeping separate houses and living in different parts of town. She says that her mother "takes a lot of pride in that they have not ever filed documents to get a divorce"

and that from time to time she will still make comments about Mary's decision to leave her husband.

Two years ago, Mary's ex-husband died unexpectedly. During the initial interview, Mary did not share the specifics of how he died, but in a follow-up correspondence, she explained that "growing up the way we did, at home and largely isolated, he never learned basic water safety skills and did not know how to swim at all. I distinctly remember trying to teach him myself, and realizing that he couldn't even float in a swimming pool. Lacking education but full of confidence, and desperately wanting to have shared experiences with the kind of people he viewed as normal, he went on a beach vacation and tried to swim in an unsupervised beach during a high surf advisory. He drowned." While noting the difficulty her children had in coping with the loss of their father, she also expressed gratitude for being able to "get her ducks in a row" prior to his death. She stated, "Actually, I'm really glad that if he had to die young the way he did, that we divorced first because it forced me to build a life outside of him and be able to provide for the kids without that support" (personal communication).

Now that Mary is remarried, she notes that there are still challenges to maintaining a healthy romantic partnership. In her previous marriage, her husband was not involved much in parenting or running the household, so Mary enjoyed a level of autonomy in decision making that she does not have now. She points out that having a partner who is more actively involved brings challenges of its own as there is a need to communicate and compromise more than when working alone.

Tina

Resonant Quote

In following up on a reflection of what it was like to be a young mother as her son grew into his teenage and then young adult years:

> It was actually when I brought my son to college…I would always make a habit, you know, of setting up his bed and stuff. And it was always hot. So it never occurred to me why when I was going to my son's college and setting up the bed…I'm wearing shorts and whatever and I'm on the bed…making everything…My son would close the door. And leave. And it wasn't until I overheard in the hallway one of his dorm-mates say, "Wow—she's hot. Who's that?" And he's like, 'That's my mom." People would get, like, confused.

Family Background and Relationships

Of all the participants in this study, Tina received the most support as a young mother, referring to herself as incredibly lucky compared to the average teen mom. As Tina points out, her mother was also a teen mom (19 at the birth of her first child) but because she had the legitimacy of marriage and the housing and financial stability that comes with having a husband in the Air Force, her parents did not struggle the way most young families do. Tina is the youngest of 3 children. Her older two siblings were born just 10-months apart when her mother was 19 and then 20. Tina came along 8 years later, after her family had further established themselves financially.

When asked if she ever felt that it was a struggle for her parents to support her and her young son in her early years of parenting, she stated that they were financially comfortable enough and happy to do it. Her father had been a union iron worker for

years, enjoying a high salary and medical benefits that he could share with his daughter, and her mother worked from home and was able to offer childcare support for Tina's son while Tina attended college classes during the day and worked in the evenings.

Despite the close relationship that she had with her parents, and the support that she would receive from her parents over the years, Tina did not share her pregnancy with them until she was 7 months pregnant, and even then, it was not until her mom noticed her expanded belly in the laundry room one day. Tina recalls her mother asking her, "Do you have something to tell me?" at which point Tina shared her news and the family started to prepare for the baby's birth together. When asked why she decided to hold off on telling them about the pregnancy, Tina said, it was more about the shock and unwillingness to accept this for herself. She felt that as long as she did not share it with others, she could pretend the pregnancy was not real and that her life could go on as she had envisioned.

While Tina indicated that her mother was worried at first that being young and pregnant would leave Tina "trapped", and dependent on a man for support, she was overall supportive of the pregnancy and happy to help however she could. Likewise, Tina never doubted her father's pride and support for her life choices. She recalls him earnestly telling her to remember that she should never let anyone put her down or treat her as less than anyone else. Ultimately, both parents rose to the occasion of being active grandparents who offered every level of support to ensure Tina's future success.

Unfortunately, it was not until that 7th month, when Tina's parents became aware of the pregnancy, that Tina actually started receiving prenatal care, and even that was limited. Tina explained that there was an actual program, designed for teen mothers, at

the local hospital that focused on getting the girls in for routine blood-pressure monitoring and growth checks for the growing fetus. When asked what the program was like and whether or not there was some type of labor and delivery coaching, Tina explained that anything like that would have been *extra* and so she did not participate. She simply showed up for nonstress tests and basic baby monitoring until the delivery of her son, and otherwise was focused on working and getting her degree.

Experiences with Education Before & After Baby

Tina was in her first semester of college when she had her son. She had been working and attending school as a full-time student when he was born, and she only took off 2 weeks following his birth. Shortly after starting college, she was able to get a job with a financial institution that covered the cost of tuition and provided her with medical insurance. She switched to part-time status (to honor the requirements of the tuition reimbursement program) so her 4-year degree program took 5 years to complete—a sacrifice that she does not regret making. When asked whether or not her college offered programs to support young/working mothers (such as on-site childcare or parenting classes), she explained that she never felt the need to look into any of that because of the support that she was receiving from home and her employer, so she could not speak to whether or not such supports were available for others.

In regard to supporting education for her child, she explains that things got challenging when her son was in kindergarten. He started to have behavioral problems at school and Tina started receiving concerned calls from his teachers on a regular basis. One day, in the spring of his first grade year, her son had a seizure at school. Tina stated that it seemed the principal was "overjoyed" because now she could justify "getting rid of

him" since the school did not have the resources to provide a medically safe environment for him.

Over time, Tina's son was diagnosed with Attention Deficit, Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and a seizure-disorder. As Tina explains, the school her son had been attending recommended to have him transferred to a school specializing in learners with behavioral needs, but Tina's mother did some research on the school and they decided it that it was not a good fit for her son's needs.

After a period of homeschooling, during which they addressed her son's medical needs, while making use of district-provided home tutoring support, Tina and her parents wound up transitioning him to a local public school. This new school was one that not only had the resources to support his learning and medical needs with an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) but that was also culturally diverse. Tina expressed that having him in such an environment was important to her because her son is bi-racial and she didn't want him to be stigmatized because of his race. When her son first arrived at the new school, he was placed in a small, self-contained classroom, based on reports from his previous school, but he was quickly moved out into a more inclusive setting. Tina found the principal to be caring and supportive and describes the overall educational experience for her son, and for herself as a young mother, to be positive.

When asked about her ability to juggle the responsibilities of work, school, and supporting academics for her son with special needs, Tina expressed a sense of confidence in her ability to balance her schedule and determine appropriate work-loads for herself: "I knew my limitations. Like, I knew how to balance the schedule with, you

know, accounting…I wouldn't pile all of the hard stuff into one semester. I knew how to balance."

And somehow, she did just that. Over the years, Tina not only completed her degree, but worked her way up from part-time bank teller to high-level administrator, employed for twenty-years with the same institution. One might argue that the investment this company made in supporting Tina's education (along with providing for her financial and health care needs) has more than paid for itself in what she has shown this company in loyalty.

Balancing Success and Stigma

While Tina describes her work and educational responsibilities as good distractions from loneliness, she does acknowledge that she was fairly isolated over the years. She split up with her son's father shortly after the birth and lost all of her social acquaintances in that transition. She shared that most of the people she had spent time with until that point were actually more friends of her boyfriend and that it did not bother her to lose those relationships because they were mostly partyers and she was "the nerd of the group."

When asked if she made any "mommy friends" over the years, she explained that she "was the young mom. Nobody wanted to talk to the teen mom." She shared that when she would take a turn picking up her son at school or taking him to a sporting activity, the only ones who would engage in conversation with her were the grandparents who did not quite fit in with the mommy crowd themselves.

When asked how it made her feel to be left out in that way, she responded, "Whatever, right? They were just jealous… I didn't have time for any of that anyway. I

was too busy…going to school…taking care of him…and so…it actually didn't bother me. But I've always been a loner."

Tina did mention that she made one life-long friend after her son's birth—the mutual friend who had directed her toward this study—in the brief period of working at a local grocery store before transitioning over to the bank. As she explains, the few friends that she has made over the years have been work colleagues, and most of them are more acquaintances than friends.

In talking about what it means to be successful, Tina highlighted tenacity as the key feature of success. Not only is she proud of all that she accomplished for herself, but she feels that her son's willingness to push through challenges is a key marker to their success story. According to Tina, there have been several instances where her son faced adversity, especially in later years as he worked his way towards completing his Merchant Mariner degree and securing a position on a commercial ship. Some had tried to discourage him from continuing on with his program at Maritime College, but as Tina proudly notes, he just pushed on.

Experiences Surrounding Pregnancy & Early Parenting Years

Tina did not expand much on her experiences with pregnancy or birth and notes that her first few years of parenting were relatively stress-free (or at least no more stressful than they would have been had she been older when her son was born). She took 2 weeks off following the birth of her son, and promptly returned to work and school while her mother stayed home and cared for her baby. Tina was not specifically asked about her labor and delivery experiences and she did not touch on this subject independently. Tina did reference bottle feeding at one point in her narrative, but there

was no specific discussion around whether or not she breastfed for any period of time and how feeding choices may have impacted (or been impacted) by her work and educational responsibilities.

Responsibilities & Challenges

Tina notes that she has not had many challenges as a young mother. She had access to a reliable car, free room and board, and a supportive, loving household to raise her son in. Her son's father has remained mostly distant over the years, failing to provide child support or shared child-rearing, but Tina does not seem to consider that a challenge. When asked if her son has expressed any regrets over the loss of a relationship with his father, she stated, "there doesn't seem to be any love lost there." Tina did note that her son's paternal grandmother has kept in touch over the years, calling from time to time, and coming up to attend his high school graduation, but that overall, she feels her family provided her son with a strong support network which eased that emotional burden for her.

Tina was able to stay living at home into her son's adolescent years, so her focus could be on continuing her education and establishing her career. She did not have to pay rent and had her parents to help with things like school pickups and drop-offs or getting him to birthday parties and doctor's appointments. Her parents even afforded her time off during the year to take vacations on her own. In this regard, Tina had more support in her early parenting years than many adult mothers.

Although Tina did not experience any of the types of common challenges that the other participants described (such as strained finances or childcare and housing concerns), she did describe some unique challenges that came along with living under the

same roof as her parents for so many years. For example, she says co-parenting her son with her parents was a sometimes difficult learning process. As she describes it, the family joke was that her son was more of a "family child" than just her son alone. And while Tina was grateful for the support she received from her parents, she sometimes struggled to exert her ability to make parenting choices for him. In one instance, she recalled coming across her mom in the kitchen, adding cereal to her son's bottle: "I was like, 'SSTTTOOOPPP! The doctor said NO!" Tina says that her mother's initial response was to defend her actions by suggesting, "Don't you want to sleep? I gave all you kids this and you're fine." But ultimately her mother relented. Tina shares that much of the time her mother offered advice in the form of a "suggestion" rather than an order.

Additionally, Tina found herself struggling to assert herself with her son on certain occasions. As she recalls, her parents would think nothing of disciplining her in front of her son, which she feels sometimes interfered with his ability to see her as an adult. In some ways, that confusing layering of child and adult, in relation to her son and parents, lasted for roughly 13 years, until her parents moved down south. At that point, Tina was engaged to be married (to her son's barber) and her parents felt it was finally time to give here some space.

What seemed most interesting when reflecting on Tina's story is how her personal experiences, and overall lack of logistical challenges, impacts her ability to relate to other adolescent mothers. She refers to herself as "the original Teen Mom" (in reference to a current TV show on the subject) but does not express a sense of comradery in regard to their struggles. While she acknowledges that her circumstances are unique, and that most young mothers do not enjoy the type of supports she had, she made a statement at one

point in the interview that suggested her frustration with many young mothers who fail to get ahead. She was talking about how much she enjoys watching the show Teen Mom and how frustrated she gets watching the young girls turn to drugs or otherwise neglect their responsibilities as mothers. She stated that she enjoyed the earlier episodes more, but that lately she just watches and thinks, "You're selfish—going from boyfriend to boyfriend…Go to school. Take care of your kid."

Overall Perceptions of Support

Unlike other mothers in this study, Tina's perceptions of overall support have been addressed in each of the subsections regarding her lived experience as a teen mom. While reiterating those stories of support would be redundant here, it seems important to emphasize that Tina expressed repeated gratitude for the financial, educational, and emotional support that she received over the years, allowing her to thrive as a mother and independent professional. While she delayed her own personal needs for intimacy and close relationships in favor of raising her son and establishing her career, she expressed time and again an overall satisfaction with the supports she received and her experience as an adolescent mother.

When asked if she had ever considered marrying earlier or having a second child, she stated that while she loves her son, she never considered expanding her family. And while many kids might push their mothers to give them a sibling, she feels that her son was always happy to be an only-child and stay as the focus of the family's attention.

Intimate Relationships: Marriage, Divorce, and/or Dating

When discussing her ex-boyfriend—the father of her child—she describes him as "a dirtbag" and "a loser" who passed intermittently into and out of her son's life. When

asked about that relationship, between father and son, Tina shared that several years back, her son's father had come for a brief visit. He said that he would be back the next day to pick up their son and spend the day with him, but he never showed—that was the last time they ever saw him.

But the relationship Tina had with her son's father was certainly not something she would refer to as a fling. She had dated him throughout most of high school, and describes herself as "young and in love" when she got pregnant. Shortly after her son's birth however, she realized that her child's father was not going to be a stable force in their lives or provide for them in any way. She broke off the relationship with him shortly after the birth, but allowed for him and his family to keep a connection with her son based on their own comfort levels.

Around the time that her son was in kindergarten, Tina formed a friendship with his barber. They maintained a close relationship over the years, and eventually started dating, but as Tina points out, her husband never tried to assume the role of father with her son. They eventually married when her son was in his senior year of high school. When asked about the relationship between her husband and son, she said that her husband, "didn't want to overstep." He had been raised by his grandmother and had a complicated relationship with his mother and her boyfriend, so he did not want to play a role in complicating Tina's relationship with her son. When describing the relationship her son and husband have, she said, "They talk. They have things in common—like cars and stuff." She did not expand beyond that.

Alani

Resonant Quote

Alani started working full-time when her son was 4 years old and talks about the positive shift in her self-esteem and overall mental state once she started providing financially for herself and her son:

> Um…My dad always tells me that we come from a family of hard workers. And I kept that in my head. He was like, "[Alani], we were poor. Our family was poor. We didn't get any…Like, nothing was given to us." And so I kept telling myself, "I have to work. I have to work." And once I started working, I felt…more…more of an adult. Because…I don't care how old you are, if you have a child, it doesn't make you…no one grows up…You know? No one's ready for a kid. That's what I told myself—like no one's ready. I don't care how much money …no one's emotionally ready for this….But I felt more independent. And I started getting my head on right when I was working. But it kinda' sucked because I was away from my son (Alani, personal communication, March 2020).

Family Background and Relationships

Of all the women interviewed for this study, the time spent with Alani was by far the most emotionally moving. She spent the first 90 seconds of the interview shooing family members away from the door and chuckling over the chaos of trying to have alone-time in a crowded house, but then quickly shifted to crying. At 1 minute and 50 seconds into the session, she started her story, explaining that it was her mother who had done the home pregnancy test all those years ago. First she smiled at the memory. Then, as she recalled the trauma of losing everything she had known for the first 17 years of her

life, she cried. She then shed tears off and on for nearly 3 more hours as she shared the story of her life as a teenage mother.

Alani grew up in a close-knit family, with her parents and 2 sisters. References to Alani's mother evoke images of the traditional Hawai`ian Tutu (a term for grandparent or elder)—full of aloha and welcome, but also no-nonsense! When asked how it came to be that her mother administered the pregnancy test that revealed Alani's pregnancy, she explained that when her mom found her crying one day, she "freaked out" when Alani explained that she had missed her menstrual cycle and immediately sent Alani into the bathroom with a pregnancy test. When asked why her mother had a test on hand, Alani simply replied, "Oh yeah—she had pregnancy tests…drug tests…the whole…she ordered them online." As Alani explained, after having Alani pee in the cup, her mother took the urine sample to her room and locked the door while waiting for the results. Alani was locked out. Her older sister was locked in. The way Alani describes the scene, it would be quite comical if it were not in reference to such a life-changing moment.

In talking to her sister some years later about that moment, her sister shared how she was both terrified and excited at the same time. In the end, the whole family rejoiced around bringing a new baby into the family and supported Alani through the ups and downs of being 17 and pregnant.

When news got out of Alani's pregnancy, she lost everybody she had been close to outside of her family. In a tearful retelling of those early weeks following her pregnancy announcement, Alani recalls how she lost all of her friends: "That's when, you know—people's true colors come out." And with her boyfriend only 1 year older than she, he was not in much of a position to support her—financially, emotionally, or

otherwise. As she started to sense that everyone close to her was pulling away, she says that she started to second guess her ability to be a mother. But as she recalls, her family kept her going. In moments when she started to doubt herself, they were there—even if only to tell her things like, "go cry it out in the shower and you'll be fine" when she started to get overly emotional.

As the years went by, Alani's family continued to be the rock that she leaned on when her challenges got to be too much for her. Alani moved out of her family house when her son was only 3 months old and moved in with her son's father and his family. But as she explains, there was a lot of strain in that living arrangement. She describes her husband's parents as alcoholics and regular drug users and explains that she was too nervous to leave her son alone with any of them. Because she was too fearful to rely on them for childcare and other options were too expensive, she stayed home to take care of her son for the first 3 years, but she says that arrangement took a major toll on her mental health.

Over time, Alani started drinking more regularly and describes those early years as some of her darkest days. As she explains, it was her younger sister who came to talk to her and told her that she did not like the direction that Alani was heading in. She pleaded with Alani to stop drinking—and so she did. When asked what she did to stop drinking, she responded, "I just stopped...the only thing I could think about was my son. And I would tell people that—He's the only reason I'm still breathing right now." It was at that point that she also committed to ending the unhealthy relationship with her boyfriend. She recalls a phone call from her boyfriend that set her on her new path. He

had called to yell at her about something, and "Oh my God. It just…I don't know…I think I was so over it. I snapped out of it. I was like, no—I'm done!"

Alani eventually moved back in with her mother, which allowed Alani's son to form a deep attachment to his maternal grandmother. Alani's mother took on a good deal of the care-giving responsibility, as Alani increased her work hours, and took time to establish positive experiences like reading stories with her grandson before bed. While Alani explains that her son has been pulling back from his grandmother recently (something that Alani attributes to increased tension with his father), she notes that his grandmother's Lazy Boy chair is still his favorite place to snuggle up for comfort.

Experiences Surrounding Pregnancy & Early Parenting Years

The day Alani gave birth was mixed with chaos and excitement. As Alani explains, her mother had a sense that birth was imminent and spent the 24 hours prior to labor in close proximity to her. Labor started in the middle of the night, and Alani says that her mother never left her side. When labor progressed, Alani transferred to the hospital and her "support team" grew larger. As Alani recalls, her mother, boyfriend, and a good deal of his family were all there, "swapping in and out." One person would come in to give support, and the other would go on break. But as labor progressed, the crowd dwindled to just her mother and boyfriend.

While they were both there to coach her through the long hours of labor, it seems that not much physical (or true emotional) support was offered. Her mother stayed back and to the side, later explaining that she did not want to "bombard" the couple or come across as overbearing. When Alani asked her mother about her distance after the fact, her mother explained that she wanted Alani to be able to experience birth for herself and to

feel free to "cry out or do whatever" she needed to do through the process. Unfortunately, Alani's boyfriend remained distant as well. As she recalls, he wouldn't touch her or hold her hand: "Basically he just stood right there—right next to me. He wouldn't hold my hand…nothing. Just kept telling me, 'Oh, it's coming, it's coming.' That's about it."

After an emotionally exhausting pregnancy, followed by a long and challenging labor experience, Alani knew that she did not want to accidentally find herself pregnant with a second child any time soon. She says she had known too many girls to get pregnant within 6 months of having their first child, and she was determined not to make the same mistake. She remembers "freaking out" in the hospital and telling herself "I am *not* gonna do that! I'm not gonna' get pregnant again and be stuck with 2 kids in diapers." So when the doctor asked her about her thoughts on birth control, she emphatically stated that she would like to start taking birth control immediately—she took her first Depo-Provera shot the very next day.

Once she was home, Alani seemed to transition into motherhood rather easily. She notes with pride that she established a strong breastfeeding relationship with her son that lasted for years. She enjoyed co-sleeping and an overall close bond with her son, which she noted made it difficult for her to leave him with anyone. She shares stories of her early connection with her son with pride, but also notes that there was a lot of emotional labor involved. She recalls that prior to getting pregnant, she had ironically worked on a school project with a friend, in which they educated other students about the challenges of being a teen parent. As she points out, teen parenting is much more emotional than anything they had discovered in their research. They had simply Googled some facts about how hard things would be and stuck the information into a slide show,

but, “It’s WAY more—you gotta’ work your butt off!” She says, “It’s not like the fairytales. It’s not always love…” She added that when she tells people about her experiences with motherhood, they sometimes get scared. Laughing, she says she likes to tell them, “You kinda’ should be scared!.”

Experiences with Education Before & After Baby

Alani had always been a capable student, getting good grades, and getting along well with teachers. But when she turned 14, things started to change for her. As she explains, her best friend had started hanging out with a new group of girls that did not seem to like Alani much. Alani felt pushed to the side and started hanging out with a new group of kids who “were, like smoking in the back of the high school…or the drinkers and stuff.” She started dating a guy who drank and smoked, and she became more of “a partier.” She says that she had started to tire of that lifestyle however, just before getting pregnant. She notes that she had stopped drinking a few months before she found out that she was pregnant and stopped smoking as soon as she got the results of the pregnancy test.

All in all, she spent 3 years, or roughly freshman through junior year focused more on partying with friends, than academics, but by senior year, she was still on track to graduate. She doubled up on some classes that fall, in the hopes that she could carry a lighter course-load in the spring and still graduate on time. By the spring of senior year, she was no longer physically attending school, but she was keeping up with her classes online. She recalls that there was another girl in her class who was pregnant also, but that she had transferred out—presumably to the other area high school that offered a teen parenting program on campus. When asked if she had ever considered transferring

herself, she said no—that her focus was on plowing through her classes and having her baby.

Unfortunately, things did not work out exactly as she had planned. Alani says that she felt pushed out by the school and labeled as a failure. She says that certain individuals talked down to her and accused her of doing things like smoking and being an irresponsible mother to her unborn child. Although there were some teachers who she felt had been extremely supportive, allowing her to go to the bathroom or snack on saltines and ginger ale as needed (while she was still attending face-to-face classes), Alani's overall sense was that she was no longer welcome as part of the school community.

As graduation day neared, things took a dramatic turn. After working hard to take extra classes in the fall, and complete remaining credits online in the spring, Alani says that she was approached by one of the teachers just 3 days before graduation who told her that she would not have sufficient credits to graduate. As she recalls, "They told me I was supposed to have a history class. And the teacher told me, literally to my face, we don't think you can finish in 3 days. You're done."

At this recollection, Alani started to cry again. Her memory of being so close to achieving her goal and then having it ripped away was almost too painful for her to bear. But she continued, sharing the most painful part of the story: The school, having realized so close to graduation that Alani did not have the credits needed to graduate, was unable to retract her name from the newspaper announcement sharing the names of all the students in that year's graduating class. Family members from all around started calling to congratulate her—"Your name is in the paper!" Having to explain to family members that she would not be in fact be graduating made the heartache that much more profound.

Although the school ultimately offered her a chance to make up the credits after the fact and earn her high school diploma, Alani was too mistrustful after feeling let down by so many on the school staff. In the end, she chose to finish up her credits through the local adult school, and earned her GED a few months later. Although she has not officially returned to school since that time, Alani is currently working towards certification as an RBT (Registered Behavioral Technician), while working to support students with severe behavioral needs. At the time of the initial interview, Alani noted that she sometimes toys with the idea of going to college to pursue a degree in child development or related field (something that her current boyfriend is very encouraging of her to do), but that at the time she was happy with a work-life balance that allowed her to feel like she was contributing to her community, while also having time to be an active participant in her son's life. Upon reconnecting with the researcher in the fall, as part of the member-checking process, Alani noted that strong encouragement from her boyfriend convinced her to apply to degree program in social work. She was excited to report that she would starting her new program in the fall.

Balancing Success and Stigma

Alani is happy with her current role in life—describing her current work with kids as her "life's dream"—but notes that her path to success has not been an easy one. As she suggests, some of the greatest pressure on women in general, and on mothers in particular, comes from other women:

> Women judge women on…the way they are, or the way they look…sometimes it's "you're too young to be a mother…" or… "you're too old to be a mother…I saw something. I saw a video—no matter what age you are, women will always

be judged. Mothers will always be judged."

And while Alani seems to be at peace with her role as a young mother now, noting that when people say things to her like, "Oh—you were young!" she simply responds with "yes," without feeling the need to explain or justify. But Alani notes that she is a relatively quiet person who does not always stand up for herself or speak her mind. She recalled a particularly unsettling encounter with a young manger where she worked when her son was young. She described the manager as "cocky and rude" and says that he liked to challenge her about always looking so tired. When Alani tried to explain that she was a mom to a young child and that she did not always get a lot of good sleep, he responded by saying "So—it's not like you have another job." But while she stood by, too upset to respond, the cook had heard what was said to her and came to her defense. She recalled with great gratitude how "he backed me up—and like *ripped* my manager…and was like, 'you know, I give you props for being a mom and going to work.'" That one simple act of kindness had a profound impact on her, and lead to a new working relationship with her manager.

Throughout her years of parenting, Alani bounced around taking on various low-paying jobs (sometimes more than one at a time) to provide for herself and her son. While some work-places were more accommodating of her parenting responsibilities (such as leaving to pick up her son in emergencies, or even bringing him into work when childcare fell through), with other employers or customers she was much more on guard. Island life is small-town life, and over time, there tends to be a lot of crossover between people one sees in their work-place, and out in the community. As Alani points out, when

she would run into customers with her son, they would express shock at learning that she was a mother.

Now that Alani's son is older and she has transitioned into a profession that is in high demand—there is a greater need for RBTs in the public schools than there are trained individuals on the island—she seems to have a better sense of *self* beyond motherhood. In talking about her sister, who has been home for a couple of years now raising her own kids, Alani says, "I don't know that I could do that." She says she would love to settle down with her current boyfriend and expand her family—it is something that they talk about often—but she recognizes that having a career where she feels valued is an important part of her maintaining a positive self-identity.

Responsibilities & Challenges

One of the most difficult challenges for Alani has been dealing with her own bouts of depression and supporting her son's emotional needs—especially in relationship to his father. When he was younger, her son often asked about the possibility of his parents getting married and having another child, but as time has gone on, the relationship between father and son has become more strained. And while Alani describes her son as "very smart—*VERY* smart," she points out that the tension between him and his father has started to impact his performance in school.

Lately, Alani reports, her son has taken to doodling and "spacing off" in class. He says he is bored and just does not want to participate, but Alani says his increasing defiance to the teachers is starting to worry her. She keeps in communication with the school through an application on her phone, and says that the teachers tell her that they're not too worried about him, but Alani says that some days he just comes home so angry

and refuses to talk about what is bothering him. Her son is now in 6th grade and according to Alani, everything was fine until this year.

As Alani points out, this sudden shift in school performance and mood seems to correspond with a decline in the relationship between her son and his father over the past year. Her son had been spending weekends with his father until he was about 9 years old, but his father's relationship with his new girlfriend has gotten more serious over the years which has impacted his ability to spend time with his son. His father and his girlfriend recently had a new baby and moved off-island for several months which further severed the bond.

Over the years Alani says that she has tried to encourage her son to keep a relationship with his father, but she now has concerns about his ability to do so safely. She says that her son recently started crying, begging to not have to go to his father's house and reported that he was scared of the way his father treats him. Alani is not sure how much of her son's unwillingness to spend time with his dad is related to the new family structure and how much is the result of possible physical aggression, but Alani says that when she has tried to confront her son's father about the accusations, he yells and "cusses her out."

As a result, Alani is now supporting her son's decision to not communicate with his father at all. This leaves her conflicted however—while she reports that her son seems "sweeter" and more of his "loving self" since breaking off ties with his father, he also seems more sad. She has found her son crying at times like birthdays and Christmas, when he would otherwise see his father, and says that recently her son has started referring to himself as depressed and anxious.

Unfortunately, this is a struggle that Alani knows all too well. While Alani suggests that her troubled relationship with her ex-boyfriend took a toll on her emotional well-being, she also notes that depression is something that she has always had to cope with. She recalls that as far back as intermediate school, she would have cyclical mood changes and go into a "dark mode", where she would not be able to eat or talk to anyone. While she does not experience these mood changes quite so often now that she is older, she does recognize that the sadness still "just kicks in every once in a while." When this happens, she is able to work and "go on with her day", but she mostly keeps to herself, avoiding as much interaction with others as possible.

Although Alani has never quite identified the exact cause of her sudden mood shifts, she has noticed that hormones play an active role in her physical and mental well-being. After the birth of her son, she had started out using Depo-Provera as a means of avoiding a second unplanned pregnancy, but noticed that after a few months, she was putting on excessive amounts of weight and feeling very depressed, despite exercising and trying to maintain a healthy lifestyle. It took her years to fully make the connection, but after changing her birth control regimen, and breaking up with her ex-boyfriend, she lost 40 pounds and found herself feeling more emotionally stable.

Despite the emotional challenges associated with pregnancy and parenting at a young age, Alani emphasizes that she has never regretted her son for a moment. She does note however, that becoming a mother at such a young age left her feeling "vulnerable." She describes herself as having lacked a "voice" and an overall inability to stand up for herself. She says it took her 7 years to fully stand up to her ex-boyfriend and to walk away from him for good. She regrets having waited so long, but tries to use the life

knowledge that comes from that experience to help others. She is currently working with someone who is in a difficult personal relationship, while trying to co-parent a 4-year old. This young woman is struggling emotionally and looks to Alani for advice and support. Alani has told her, "Don't wait like I did…years from now…this kind of emotion is gonna' bring you down even more. You think you're depressed now? It's like—it's gonna be worse." Alani started to tear up again on thinking of that exchange and added, "it was just a lotta sadness," but pointed out that she is happy with her "outcome."

Overall Perceptions of Support

In the earliest years of parenting, Alani did not feel that she had the type of support she needed to be a mother and provider at the same time. Although she was able to live with her boyfriend's family, she felt she was unable to trust them and generally felt unable to leave her son with anyone. She managed to establish a strong bond with her baby, but found that it made it difficult for her to leave him, as he would cry for long periods whenever she was gone.

She also did not get much support in parenting her son. She says that after the first 2 months of newborn period, her son's father was not involved in caring for their child. As she recalls, he would not hold or bathe the baby, and generally seemed emotionally and physically detached as a parent. She did note that her ex-boyfriend had a car, which was a big help for managing things like food shopping and doctors' visits, but otherwise, he did not provide much in terms of financial support, which left Alani reliant on food stamps and other social services. While she says that she was immensely grateful for the financial help that she received from the state, it was not something that she wanted to be rely on long-term.

Around her son's fourth birthday, Alani felt the need to start putting the pieces of her life back together. She was not proud of the person she had become and wanted to start working towards the independent person she knew she was capable of being. She started working a couple of jobs to bring in a steady income. One of her first jobs was at a frozen-yogurt store, where the owners were very supportive of her need to earn money while staying close to her son. They allowed her to bring him to work with her when other childcare was not available, and would give him all the free yogurt he could eat. They also provided space in the back where Alani could leave him to nap or watch movies while she worked at the front counter.

At night Alani went to her second job, where she worked until midnight. She could not bring her son with her to that work-place, but now that her son was older, she felt more comfortable leaving him with others. Both sets of grandparents took turns helping with childcare, as did her sisters and her best friend. She says that there were times where her sisters or mother would come and get her son for days at a time so that she could just focus on work and trying to get some sleep between shifts, but Alani struggled with this arrangement, not wanting to just be a "weekend parent." Around the time of her son's 5th birthday, Alani told her boyfriend that she wanted to move back in with her mother so that she could see more of her son. This was not an official break-up, as she told him that he could "follow her or stay." In follow-up correspondence, Alani explained that although her son's father initially followed them back to her home town, he was having affairs with other women and the relationship officially ended shortly after.

It seems critical to note here that despite the challenges that Alani had to financially provide for her son—working 2 jobs and still not being able to afford to get a place of her own—she refused to go back on public assistance. She says that there have been instances over the years where friends and family have suggested that she should "go back on it," but Alani recognizes how critical it is to her mental health and self-esteem to provide for her son, and therefore has not entertained that option.

Intimate Relationships: Marriage, Divorce, and/or Dating

An unhealthy relationship with the father of her child plagued Alani for years. Unfortunately, she is not alone. According to public health expert Fiona Danaher (2012), approximately 1 out of every 4 adolescent mothers experience some type of intimate partner violence (IPV) leading up to or following the birth of their child. And as Alani's story highlights, it can take years to escape the trap of negative self-esteem that results from an abusive relationship with the father of a young woman's child.

Alani and her boyfriend had frequent fights, with him often accusing her of not being emotionally responsive enough to his needs. In one instance, she recalls overhearing a conversation between her sister and her boyfriend regarding his frustration with Alani. Her sister asked him if he trusted Alani, to which he replied, "Like, yeah—I guess. I mean, look at her. No one's gonna' check her out or look at her." In those early years following her son's birth, Alani's mental state was already tenuous. Powerful birth-control hormones coupled with obesity, lack of financial security, and a history of depression left Alani vulnerable to this type of negative manipulation imparted by her boyfriend. By keeping her feeling unattractive and unworthy, he minimized the chance that she would build her independence and create a life for herself without him.

Fortunately for Alani, a switch in hormone therapy along with the support of her family and friends allowed her to build her self-confidence and rebuild her sense of self.

After 7 years of trying to fix an irrevocably broken relationship, Alani finally built up the courage to start a new life for herself and her son—one that was not reliant on a partner for physical or emotional support. And over time she was able to form a new, healthier relationship with someone who seems genuinely interested in being her partner and friend.

Alani says that when she first ventured back into the "dating scene", she was hesitant to let anyone meet her son, but she quickly determined that this man was a good fit for her family. He quickly started forming a bond with her son, taking him fishing and spending time with him where they could have "heart-to-hearts." After a year of dating, they decided to move in together and Alani says that when she brings her son home from school, he immediately drops his bag and gives her boyfriend a hug. She likes to point out that her new partner also helps out with the cooking and cleaning and is even "a math guy" so he is able to help her son with homework. It took Alani a long time to get to this type of healthy balance between independence and personal connection, but she is very happy now with what she has.

Nicole

Resonant Quote

In reflecting on the fury that she felt when she learned that her teenage brother had been sneaking into her unheated garage each night, at their mother's request, because their mother had dogs that she couldn't keep in her apartment:

[My husband] needed to get something from the garage. He opened the garage

door, and there is my brother, sleeping on a futon mattress, on the floor, with the dogs. He had been doing it for over a week. He *had* been sick [something her husband had suspected], and I was furious! That feeling that I had had—that I couldn't make a mistake or I would lose my children… Came flooding back to me in a rage. It was not a fear that I could talk myself out of. It was a rage that I could possibly lose all four of my children because she was having my 16-year old brother sleep in my [unheated, detached] garage in September—because I wouldn't let the dogs into the house.

Family Background and Relationships

Of all the participants in this study, Nicole's recounting of her relationship with her family members was by far the most shocking. Abandoned by her father, sexually abused by her step-father, bounced around through foster care, and thrown out of a moving car by her grandmother, Nicole has had a long list of emotionally trying experiences from which to recover—all as a result of family ties. Fortunately, when one speaks with her, she projects an air of confidence and self-assuredness that lets the listener know that she has put in years of hard work to give herself and her family a homelife filled with love and respect. One might go so far as to say that Nicole has come the furthest in terms of "beating the odds."

Nicole was also the youngest of all the women in relation to the timing of their pregnancies and birth experiences. Nicole was 14—just shy of her 15th birthday—when she learned that she was pregnant. At that time, she was living with her grandmother after just having transitioned out of the foster care system. Nicole's mother still maintained a connection to Nicole at this point, but the relationship was strained. A couple of years

earlier, Nicole had filed charges against her step-father for sexual assault and he was found guilty and served jail time as a result. Nicole's mother never fully believed the charges and blamed Nicole for breaking up the family.

Nicole had been living with her grandmother for a few months when she learned that she was pregnant. Her grandmother was furious and tried to convince Nicole to have an abortion. After taking Nicole to Planned Parenthood (which resulted in an emotional scene where Nicole refused to have an abortion and police were called to remove her screaming grandmother from the premises), her grandmother started taking Nicole to adoption agencies to explore other options. Again, Nicole was not in agreement with her grandmother's plan and refused to sign any adoption paperwork. Her grandmother then devised a plan to bring Nicole up-state to meet with a distant aunt, who happened to be a nurse, with the idea that she could "talk some sense" into Nicole. As Nicole recounts the events surrounding that trip, her grandmother became so enraged by Nicole's unwillingness to have an abortion or give her baby up for adoption, that somewhere along the drive from southern to central California, her grandmother unbuckled Nicole's seat belt, opened the car door and threw Nicole out of the moving vehicle.

Following that incident, Nicole was removed from her grandmother's care and transitioned to the home of her pastor, where she stayed for a short time before moving back in with her mother. Just a few weeks shy of delivery, Nicole moved back home, but her mother wanted her to work full-time to cover rent, food, and any other related expenses, so Nicole was eager to find other living arrangements. At this time, Nicole's boyfriend was still living with his grandparents, but was eager to move out as well. At 16, shortly following the birth of her child, Nicole asked her mother (who still had legal

rights over Nicole) to sign emancipation paperwork. Nicole's mother complied, which eventually allowed Nicole and her baby's father to get married.

The time surrounding the baby's birth was filled with transitions. Shortly following the birth, Nicole's mother took an extended vacation to Kansas. Because Nicole was still a minor and the emancipation paperwork had not yet been processed, the choices were for Nicole to return to state custody or go back to living with her grandmother. She wound up taking her newborn daughter to live with her grandmother for over a month while waiting for the paperwork to go through. But as Nicole points out, it was not because she had reconciled with her grandmother—it was because she "was out of options for places to put a roof over [their] heads."

Nicole says that her husband's family would have been happy to take them in, but that they were "hoarders", which made Nicole and her boyfriend uncomfortable with having a baby in that environment. She describes living with her grandmother for that month as "picking the best situation out of the worst options."

A couple of months after the birth, Nicole's emancipation paperwork was processed and Nicole and her boyfriend were able to get married. Unfortunately, given their young ages, they had difficulty finding someone who was willing to rent to them. In the end, they wound up having Nicole's step-father (recently released from jail in relation to the sexual assault charges of sexually assaulting Nicole) sign off on the lease paperwork, as he was the only one willing to do so.

While the complicated relationships with Nicole's parents and grandmother might have been quite enough to for Nicole to emotionally process, she also had siblings with physical and emotional needs that Nicole felt an obligation to address. Over the years,

Nicole and her husband took in her younger siblings for varying amounts of time, at one point assuming full legal custody of her brother. In another instance, her younger sister moved in with them after being raped by her boyfriend. Shortly after, Nicole's mother suffered an injury at work, so Nicole's sister stayed on with them for a longer period than initially planned.

According to Nicole, custody of her siblings had been managed in somewhat of a tug-of-war fashion with her mother, and at the present time, she has little connection with any of her siblings, who now maintain a closer relationship with their mother. As of this writing, Nicole has not spoken to her mother or grandmother in years, has little contact with 2 of her siblings, and almost no connection at all with the third.

While less impactful on her specific lived experience as a teen mom, it still seems important to note Nicole's father as part of her family history. Nicole's mother and father had met at a party when they were both teens and had a one-night-stand. Nicole's mother got pregnant that night. Nicole's paternal grandmother refused to let Nicole's father get *caught up* in the challenges of teen parenting as he was only 13 at the time. When asked if she had ever had contact with her dad, Nicole explained that because his name was listed on the birth certificate, the state had reached out to him when Nicole got placed in foster care to see if he wanted to assume custody.

Nicole's father was married and had a new baby at this time. He declined the *offer* to take custody of his daughter, but roughly 6 months later invited Nicole up to his house to meet his family. Ironically, it was while visiting her father, who had abandoned her so many years earlier, that Nicole learned of her own unplanned pregnancy. Although she did not share the news with him at the time, the state later notified him of the pregnancy,

again asking him to reconsider custody as Nicole was now pregnant and recently removed from the custody of her grandmother, who had been charged with throwing Nicole out of a moving car. Again, her father declined.

After some time had passed, Nicole's paternal grandmother extended an olive branch. She wrote to Nicole, explaining her choices to keep Nicole's father distanced. Nicole replied, and in time, a letter-writing relationship between this distant grandmother, Nicole, and the kids was established. As Nicole pointed out, if nothing else, it served as educational opportunity for the kids to practice their letter-writing skills. When asked if she forgave her grandmother for her decision to separate father and daughter, Nicole responded, "I don't know if forgiving is the right word. I don't know that I was ever upset with her."

In time, Nicole's father got divorced and remarried, with his second wife picking up the task of corresponding with Nicole through letters. It was only after several years of letter-writing between Nicole and the various women in her father's life that she actually received a letter from her father himself. He wrote to apologize for abandoning her, and a new relationship was forged. The two have since managed to have a few phone calls and even get together twice in recent years. While Nicole does not quite think of this man as "dad", she seems a bit grateful to have this small part of bloodline to connect her children to, especially now that her mother and maternal grandmother are no longer in their lives, and the youngest of the children do not even have memories of either woman.

Experiences Surrounding Pregnancy & Early Parenting Years

Nicole's approach to childbirth and parenting is quite progressive—even by adult standards. Given the fact that Nicole expressed such trepidation around violating cultural

norms for fear of having her children taken from her by the authorities, her commitment to homebirth and extended breastfeeding is quite remarkable. And while homebirth is somewhat more commonplace in her starting place of California than her current home of Nebraska, her fear that asking others for advice on parenting would make her look unqualified for the role of mother kept her from engaging in communities where birth-related discussions would occur. Nicole primarily attributes her commitment to the natural birthing process to her aunt who birthed all of her children naturally at home. As a result, Nicole approached the labor and delivery of her first child with a sense of confidence that this was something her body was "designed to do."

When asked how she came to came to be so committed to breastfeeding, she acknowledged that it was a combination of experiences that shaped her views on the matter. As she points out, the fact that her mom had breastfed her and all of her younger siblings helped normalize the practice for Nicole, making the act of breastfeeding one's child "just something you do." But Nicole also attributes a good deal to reading La Leche's League's *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding,* as having "definitely shaped [her] future." Ironically, this book was given to her as part of a small care package by her aunt—the one that Nicole's grandmother had been driving her up to go meet with when the incident of being thrown out of a car happened. While Nicole was initially being taken up to see her aunt by her grandmother in the hopes that she would talk Nicole out of keeping her baby, the end result was a parenting care package that profoundly shaped Nicole's future as a mother.

In time, Nicole would come to turn her passion for breastfeeding and the natural birthing process into her life's work, first serving as a support counselor to nursing

mothers through the federal WIC (Women Infants Children) program, and later as the office manager for a local doula organization. She has also become a strong proponent of the homebirth movement in Nebraska, fighting at the Capitol for the legalization of homebirth midwifery care in the state. And while all of her children have been birthed safely at home over the years, she points out proudly that her most recent birth was what one would refer to as "unassisted", as there was no trained medical professional on hand. As she explains, that experience has left her feeling "pretty cocky." All in all, Nicole's confidence in her ability to birth and nurture her children, fueled by positive birthing and nursing experiences, has provided her with a level of self-confidence that so many young mothers otherwise lack (Cook & Loomis, 2012).

Experiences with Education Before & After Baby

Nicole started her high school years at a traditional high school in her hometown, but after transitioning from the foster care system to the custody of her grandmother, she was forced to look at other schooling options. Her grandmother was willing to take Nicole in but did not want to make the commute back and forth to Nicole's old neighborhood. As Nicole puts it, acclimating herself to a new school culture and working to make new friends was "the least of her priorities," and so she figured out a way to finish high school through an independent study program. Nicole did all of the leg-work, researching various program options and reaching out to school administrators, only leaving it to her grandmother to sign the papers.

Nicole started that new program as a sophomore, and did relatively well through her sophomore year, despite the unplanned pregnancy early that school year. She worked hard to stay on track with her course load, but in time found that working and attending

school full-time, all while pregnant, was just too much for her to keep up with. Moreover, she resented the fact that she was being forced to take classes that seemed to have little relevance to her impending role as mother. As she explains, "I didn't need an extra art class. I needed to know how to make first foods…[and recognize] developmental milestones…just basic things."

Her husband managed to finish high school during that last year that they lived in California. He switched to an independent-study program, like the one Nicole had been in, and managed to complete his junior and senior programs within one academic year. This helped position him for college courses down the road, but Nicole was left with some challenges to furthering her education in the years ahead.

When Nicole was 18, her husband's job offered him an ability to move up in the company if he accepted a transfer to Nebraska. They moved that year, to an unfamiliar place where they knew no one and "weren't really sure who to trust…finding your way in a new city kind of thing." Nicole started working at a Super Target, toggling schedules with her husband so that they would not have to worry about childcare. She was quickly recognized as a hard and dedicated worker, but when the management team looked to promote her, they found that her lack of a high school diploma would prevent them from doing so.

One day, while she was discussing the matter with her managers, a random customer walked up to her cash register and overheard their conversation. Serendipitously, the man happened to be the vice principal of a local alternative school. He said that he wanted to do whatever he could to help Nicole complete high school and get her promotion. Fortunately for Nicole, she was still 18 and eligible for enrollment as a

high-school aged student. Unfortunately, when she followed up with the vice principal to start the enrollment process, she learned that she would need to have her mother's signature of approval. As it turns out, while she had been emancipated and married in California, and was now the federal age of majority, according to Nebraska law, she was still a dependent minor. As an aside to illustrate the point, she pointed out that while she was able to vote in federal elections that year, she was unable to vote in state and local elections until she turned 19.

This left Nicole with a difficult decision to make. Nicole was hesitant to reach out to her mother from help, but the vice principal was eager to help and took care of all of the paperwork for her. As Nicole says, in all of her experiences with the educational system, only once or twice has she encountered an educator who was so committed to helping her make things work.

While a traditional program would have been prohibitive for Nicole, given her childcare needs, this alternative program allowed for flexible, independent study, and within a few months, she had the credits needed to graduate. Wanting her to have the legitimacy of a "real diploma", the vice principal pulled a few strings so that the paperwork could be issued from one of the local area traditional schools. He then made it a point to be there, to hand her the diploma on graduation day, and promptly called Super Target to let the management team know that Nicole was ready for promotion.

As Nicole says, this man was a true gift in her life: "He didn't have to be there that day…there were plenty of other cashiers that were open. And he didn't have to listen." But he did. And that chance encounter, with a truly compassionate educator, profoundly impacted Nicole's life for the better.

Nicole's personal experiences with public education led to conflicts in her own heart when it came to managing educational pathways for her children. Her oldest daughter was deemed to be "exceptional", reading books like Charlotte's Web and the Bible by the age of 5. When preschool teachers suggested that Nicole consider homeschooling, she and her husband had a serious conversation about the matter, but in the end caved to pressure from family members who said that Nicole did not have the education necessary to teach her own children. As a result, they managed their oldest two children's educational needs within the public school system until her oldest was in 5th grade and her second child was in 3rd grade. But by that time, they were having serious concerns about a lack of challenge for her oldest, and years of bullying that left her second child afraid to go to school. Ultimately, they wound up switching the girls to a homeschool program, later adding the younger children to the mix. As Nicole explains, they have not regretted that decision for a moment and feel that all of the children are thriving as a result.

Balancing Success and Stigma

According to Nicole, success is not measured by an individual's profession or salary. Success is "finding something that you can do that gives your life purpose." Nicole is certainly doing that through her work with the birthing community and political activism. Her oldest daughter—the one born to 16-year old parents and homeschooled by a "high school dropout"—successfully graduated high school the year before this writing and was accepted to all 4 of the colleges she applied to. As Nicole proudly boasts, this first-born is taking a "gap year", but is highly respected at her job, bought her first car

with her own money, and has successfully built up her savings account to independently take care of emergencies like flat tires, as she had to do recently.

Of course the path to *success* hasn't always been easy, and fear of stigma has often gotten in the way of otherwise simple problem-solving processes. As Nicole shares, the one good friend that she kept from high school—the one who stuck with her through the pregnancy and early parenting years, when everyone else faded away—had a mother that Nicole felt quite close to growing up. But when Nicole became a mother herself, and started asking this woman for advice, the response was often, "you should ask your doctor." Years later, Nicole would come to learn that this woman was afraid of how she would be judged by her peers if she appeared to be too supportive of a teen mom. As a result, she intentionally distanced herself from Nicole and refused to give the type of guidance and advice that one generation of mothers often love to pass down to the next.

And as Nicole shared repeatedly throughout her storytelling, her own fear of being judged by others often kept her from seeking answers to her most basic questions. If she ran into difficulty while nursing (e.g. trying to figure out how to successfully nurse through the teething stages), she turned to books rather than other mothers. And as she points out, this type of independent research was even more difficult 20 years ago, before the dawn of Google and ebooks. As a result, she has dedicated herself to forming play-dates and mothering groups around her community where she can help facilitate dialogue between mothers in a judgement-free environment.

Interestingly enough, something about the conversation about success caused her to reflect on a question that had been posed to her earlier in the interview about why she thought she and her husband had managed to stay together. She said,

> You asked at the beginning, "Why do you think we've made it this far?" I think it's because at some point very early on, we stopped listening to what people expected of us. It didn't stop it from haunting us…and driving us to do better…because you know, that fear of failing and losing my children definitely overwhelmed me numerous times in the last 19 years, but it definitely allowed us to be our own motivators and to direct…ourselves.

In this one statement, Nicole so perfectly captures the power of stigma and the impact that it has on decision making and real-life outcomes. As she shares in this commentary, letting go of the world's expectations can help individuals be masters of their own destiny. That said, letting go of those expectations, and perceptions of judgement, can be incredibly difficult for young parents who are just getting to know themselves as individuals and learning to trust in their own ability navigate the grown-up world. The question thus becomes, can the adults stop stigmatizing young parents as they chart their own paths forward?

Responsibilities & Challenges

In the state of California, in order for a minor to be approved by the courts for emancipation, (s)he has to prove financial independence. While specific guidelines can change from year to year, at the time of Nicole's emancipation, filing for independence from her mother meant that she could not apply for state-funded medical, food, housing, or other assistance. Because WIC (Women Infants Children) is federally funded, she was able to take advantage of this program, but the vouchers provided by WIC are generally meager and provide for only a small portion of what is needed to feed a mother and child. This is especially true in the case of breastfeeding mothers who require additional

calories, but do not benefit from substantial additional support, as opposed to mothers who choose to formula feed.

As Nicole (who worked as a WIC support counselor for several years) points out, despite the public messaging, breastfeeding is essentially discouraged by WIC because an increase in the number of breastfeeding women is viewed as lost revenue for the publicly funded agency. Subsidies for formula (in the form of "competitive bidding" and corporate rebates) allow WIC to provide formula vouchers at well below market price (Carlson et al., 2017), keeping the overall cost of providing formula to mothers and their children as a relatively cost-effective option to covering the caloric needs of breastfeeding women. Nicole's choice to breastfeed meant that she had to work that much harder to meet the nutritional needs of her baby.

Working from the age of 13, Nicole was no stranger to providing for her own needs, but providing for a child obviously pus an added financial burden on the family. Given their young ages and relative lack of education or trade experience, the early years were financially tight for Nicole and her husband. With the completion of her high school degree, and higher wages, Nicole was eventually able to contribute a bit more to the family budget. And in time, her husband was able to work his way up professionally so that when Nicole's second child was born, she was able to afford to take some time off of work. But over time, they started to assume some of the financial responsibilities of Nicole's mother, who was not always financially stable, and her siblings, who on various occasions were coming in and out of their custody.

That said, Nicole does not appear to see their financial struggles as her greatest burden as a teen mother. As she explains, she has spent the majority of the past 20 years

worrying about *messing up.* The fear that she could make a simple mistake and someone could come and take her children away from her has been an incessant worry on her mind. In the end, a fear that her mother's irresponsibility in leaving her brother to freeze in Nicole's cold garage over night was the final straw that led Nicole to push her mother out of her life and distance her children from their grandmother for the foreseeable future.

Overall Perceptions of Support

In reviewing 64 pages of transcript data, little was found to indicate a sense of generalized support for Nicole. What little support she received through the federally funded WIC program she used to fuel her support of other mothers. She did express profound gratitude for the one educator who stepped up and pushed her to earn her high school degree, but over the grand course of her young mothering years, that type of direct support was fleeting. And while there were some instances of support by employers (allowing for pumping breaks and flexible work scheduling), Nicole's story leaves the listener believing that Nicole beat the odds *despite a lack of* any type of ongoing systems of support. In that regard, it seems that the one thing that carried her through on a positive trajectory was a strong bond with her husband and a concerted effort on both of their parts to support each other over the years.

Intimate Relationships: Marriage, Divorce, and/or Dating

The irony of Nicole's story is that of all the women interviewed, Nicole's relationship with her child's father was, statistically speaking, most likely to fail, but in the end, the only one that endured. Nicole and her husband were married at the young ages of 16 and 17, and have now been married for nearly 20 years. When asked what she

thought helped them stay together through all the years, her son, listening to the interview from the sidelines, chimed in, "charisma" and laughed. Nicole laughed, but then added,

> I can't say that it was easy and perfect every…year…I think my faith in God and what that's supposed to look like in a marriage really concreted what I wanted from a marriage. And so, if we ran into problems, or we just weren't seeing eye to eye on a lot of things, I would just kind of revert back to that. And then along the way, he kind of started to build that faith as well.

Of course, religious faith was not the only thing that held the two together. As explained by some of the other mothers in this study, sometimes even strong faith is not enough to override the challenges associated with young marriage and parenthood. But as Nicole says, having seen the profound impact that divorce and dysfunction had on both of their families of origin, Nicole and her husband committed themselves to open communication and compromise. Essentially, neither one of them wanted to end up like their own parents and so they committed themselves to do everything in their power to prevent that being their own eventuality.

Over the years, Nicole and her husband have moved around in furtherance of his career. While this has left Nicole to have to reinvent herself a few times, her commitment to serving her community has always given her a starting place for doing so, and she has not expressed any regrets over being the one to always follow, rather than lead. She says she often gets calls from "random people" who introduce themselves by saying "your husband said that you would help me." She laughed at this idea that her husband is always offering up her services to random strangers that he comes in contact with, but it

also seems that this intimate knowledge and understanding of each other is what has kept their bond so strong.

Given the overwhelming value that a strong marital relationship has brought to Nicole's otherwise tumultuous life—helping break generational cycles of dysfunction for her children—it seems that creating a system that helps nourish positive intimate relationships would be a valuable investment for communities looking to address teen pregnancy-related concerns.

Maria

Resonant Quote

> In sharing her memories of when she first found out she was pregnant:
>
> Before I found out I was pregnant with him, in high school, being a senior, I had my life planned. I decided I wanted to finish high school. I am going to college. I am going to live the college life…like I said—he was not planned. But he was still God-sent. I would never say, "Oh, you were a mistake." I would never have said that about him. Because, I mean, now that I am older, it's kind of like, you know…people see me…like my classmates that didn't know that I was pregnant at that time. They say, "That's your son?" And I'm like, "yeah." And they are like, "how old?" And I'm like, "Nineteen. He already graduated." And they're like, "Oh my God!"

Family Background and Relationships

Maria comes from a deeply religious, Hispanic Catholic family. She grew up in the Southwest in a community that was strongly influenced by Hispanic culture and practices. In this way, it was no surprise that when Maria learned that she was pregnant at

19, her family would urge her to marry the baby's father and that she would comply with their wishes.

Maria was raised in a tight-knit family, where family members rally together to support one another when times are tough. While Maria had to work full-time to cover the expenses of caring for a baby, she was happy to have her mother's support with pick-ups and drop-offs from daycare. When her mom was off work, she would also help take care of the baby while Maria was in school or working the night-shift at the county sheriff's office.

Maria did not share too many other specific details about her family, but noted that in her family, it was customary for parents to show favoritism, and everyone knew that Maria was "Daddy's Favorite." While her family was disappointed that her early pregnancy would derail Maria's plans for living the college life, Maria never felt that they stopped loving or supporting her.

Maria also noted that her brother worked for the local sheriff's office, which is how she came to work there, and eventually how she would meet her future husband (after divorcing the father of her child). Maria's family has remained close for generations, both emotionally and physically, and her pregnancy at an early age did not impact that reality in any way.

Experiences Surrounding Pregnancy & Early Parenting Years

Reviewing Maria's narrative of her first labor and delivery was emotionally challenging. Although she was young when her first child was born, Maria tried to prepare adequately—taking Lamaze classes at the local hospital and reading up on what to expect for the labor process. As her due-date neared, she went to her doctor for a

routine check-up and was told that her cervix was starting to dilate and that the baby would be coming soon.

What she was not told initially, was that despite the fact that Maria was not past her due date, and there were no medical complications with the pregnancy, the doctor decided to "sweep" or strip Maria's amniotic membrane from the cervical wall in an attempt to speed along the labor process. Unfortunately this is an all-too-common practice that has not been shown to significantly shorten labor duration and which carries an increased risk of premature rupture of membranes, postpartum infections, and vaginal bleeding (Kahanian et al., 2006).

After the process was completed, the doctor informed Maria of what had been done to her, and told her that labor should be starting shortly. As Maria explains, she was like "Oh—ok," because she was young and "didn't know any better." What she says resulted from that procedure was an unbearable pain that she was unable to cope with, but which did nothing to change cervical dilatation. After only 45 minutes of intense pain, she was told by the doctor that, "I guess you're part of the percentage that just don't go into labor," and was sent home to pack her bags for the hospital.

Nicole recalls that by the time she got home, she was clammy and shaky and that her mother was concerned about her pallid color. Nicole lay down for a short rest to see if it would make her feel better, but contractions started to come on strong and she started to spike a fever. By the time she got to the hospital, her temperature was 102 and the medical team was expressing concerns regarding declines in the baby's heart-rate on the fetal monitor. The doctor ruptured Maria's membranes, which allowed Maria to reach the 10 cm of dilatation needed to deliver her baby, but by that time she was feeling so sick

and depleted of energy that the doctor decided to do an emergency caesarian-section (or c-section for short).

Because by this time, the procedure was determined to be an emergency, general anesthesia was opted for over local pain-relief for the surgery. This means that Maria was unconscious for the actual delivery of her baby, and as she recalls, so scared and depleted of energy once she awoke, that the doctor wound up staying through the night to monitor her.

This is not an uncommon story. It is one that is told in mothering circles quite frequently. Unfortunately, what seems to be brushed off by some doctors as "just another woman who didn't go into labor", results in trauma and a sense of helplessness that can impact a mother for years (Cook & Loomis, 2012). And as in Maria's case, one c-section often results in a repeat surgical delivery for subsequent births as more and more doctors are hesitant to assist women in planned V-BACs (vaginal birth after c-section). In Maria's situation, the doctor who oversaw her first pregnancy and delivery has since left obstetrics and transitioned to pediatrics, and although she had hoped to do a V-Bac for the birth of her second child years later—a process that is strongly supported by research in places like Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands (Lundgren et al., 2015)—the new doctor that she switched to strongly urged her to do a planned c-section for her second delivery and she complied.

What is possibly most infuriating is not that an unnecessary medical intervention led to numerous, otherwise avoidable, medical complications, but that that intervention was done without Maria's informed consent. It is impossible to know whether this type of process was used on other women in the practice regularly, or if the doctor felt more at

liberty to do things to Maria's body without her consent because of her young age, but it goes without saying that every female—regardless of age or educational status—should have a right to bodily autonomy and the opportunity to make informed medical decisions for herself.

Experiences with Education Before & After Baby

As Maria points out, she had her whole life planned before becoming pregnant. She knew that her path in life involved going away to college and then embarking on a lucrative career. But when she found out that she was pregnant in her senior year of high school, she realized that many of those plans were going to have to change. As she shares, she was close enough to graduation when she learned of the pregnancy that it did not impact her ability to graduate, and since the baby was born after graduation, many of her classmates did not even know that she had had a baby.

When the new semester started, Maria did what she could to hold firm to her plans to get a college degree. She started working full-time to make sure that she could provide for herself and her child, but she also took on a full-time course-load at the local community college. With the help of her parents, she started off managing the requirements of both work and school adequately, but in time, her grades started to slip. She found that while she was able to manage the class and work schedules, she could not keep up with the homework requirements. In the end, she managed to accrue 1 year's worth of college credits, but then decided to drop-out so that she could focus more on her son.

Over the years, Maria focused on work and her family, thinking about ways that she might somehow return to school, but the timing never seemed right. Now, 18 years

later, her son is taking college classes and they have talked about trying to support each other through the college process. At the time of the interview, Maria had just finished struggling through a College Algebra course with her son, noting that the transition to an online learning platform (as the result of Covid restrictions put in place during the spring of 2020) made it that much more difficult for her to work through the concepts, but she eventually passed with a "low A", which she attributes to her son's ongoing inspiration. He would tell her things like, "it's never too late to go back," and share his confidence in her that she can do it! Maria is now thinking about future options, once she completes her associate's degree. She would eventually like to get her bachelor's degree in business administration.

Balancing Success and Stigma

Maria explains that she spent a lot of time in the early days worrying about her son's ability to lead a successful life in the absence of a male father-figure. While she did not speak directly about feeling stigmatized, she expressed concerns related to stereotypes of young Hispanic boys raised by single mothers. After divorcing his father just 6-months into their marriage, Maria's ex-husband became increasingly distant, and eventually transitioned out of their lives completely. Maria worried that a lack of positive male role model would leave her son unable to stay on a healthy track through high school.

But for 2 years, Maria managed quite well to raise her son alone—juggling the responsibilities of full-time employment and raising a young child. She says that she sees that in itself as success. She then met her current husband and let him know that she and her son "were a package deal", which she says, he accepted enthusiastically. Eventually

they got married, and then moved to a town about 45 minutes away from where she had been living near her family. She says that the transition to being a bit further from her parents made it more challenging to cover things like field trips and school events, but the two would take turns with leave-requests from work so that someone could always be there for her son. Maria says that the ticket to fitting everything in and being able to stay actively engaged in her son's schooling was establishing a routine early on and sticking to the schedule with fidelity.

When identifying specifically what it means to be successful, Maria stated that having a strong family unit, that now includes her adolescent daughter from her second marriage, and raising her son to get him to "where he is today" is a "big success." She also points out that they are financially stable, and were able to buy her son a new Jeep for his high school graduation present—something she is considerably proud of.

Her son is now thinking of going into law-enforcement, following in his step-dad and uncle's footsteps. She is happy that her husband has had such a positive influence on her son, and is happy that her son seems to have a vision for his future, but she worries about the dangers of working in law-enforcement and says that she is frequently encouraging him to "aim higher" and "not sell himself short." Her son is 19 and just 1 credit shy of his associate's degree—something that Maria is extremely proud of—but she feels that he needs to keep pushing, and would love to see him get his bachelor's degree.

Responsibilities & Challenges

When Maria first learned that she was pregnant, she agreed to marry the father of her baby, in accordance with her parents' wishes, knowing that he was not a man she

wanted to spend the rest of her life with. After only 6 months of marriage, she decided to divorce him and pave her own path forward. Her baby's father did not hold a job while they were married, and failed to contribute at all financially following the divorce. Maria cites concerns of finances and health insurance as practical worries that kept her up at night during those early years. She was able to get her son on Medicaid, but she did not have insurance for herself once she dropped out of college, and worried about her ability to keep both herself and her child healthy and safe.

Maria eventually petitioned her son's father for full custody of the child, and in time he complied. When she remarried several years down the road, this left the opportunity open for her husband to adopt her son, which he gladly did, alleviating Maria's worries about being an incomplete family unit. Marrying a man with a solid career path and financial stability also allowed Maria to let go of some of the financial worries that plagued her earlier years as a young mother.

She has expressed a worry that her own kids might fall into the trap of young parenthood and says that she has many open conversations with them about using protection and avoiding an unwanted pregnancy. She is happy that her son has graduated high school without becoming a dad himself, and reminds her daughter (who is now 12) that she can always come to her if she is in trouble. While worry in the teenage years of parenting is not uncommon, it seems reasonable that someone who has lived through the challenges of young parenting themselves would be that much more committed to helping their own children avoid the struggles of this particular path to adulthood.

Overall Perceptions of Support

As Maria explains, her family was instrumental in helping her get through the early years of parenting. They helped provide childcare in hours where traditional daycare was not available, and assisted with things like pick-ups and drop-offs for her son while Maria worked.

When asked if there were any type of childcare options that were available to her at the community college, she explained that there were not any and that she likely would have benefitted had there been some, but she also acknowledged that holding a night-shift position made it challenging for her to keep up with parenting and school work during the day, so she is not sure that she would have been able to continue with her program anyway. She does think that campus programs that facilitate campus employment and childcare options are critical for helping keep young mothers in school.

Intimate Relationships: Marriage, Divorce, and/or Dating

As Maria explains it, her relationship with her first husband, the father of her first child, was destined to fail. She knew going into the marriage that she didn't not want to spend a life with that man, but she felt it was her duty to honor her family's wishes when she got pregnant. Fortunately, when things proved to not be working early on, Maria had the courage to file for divorce and pave a pathway for herself and her child independently. Although her son's father initially took on some responsibility caring for their son, watching him on intermittent weekends, Maria points out that such an arrangement didn't last long.

Around the time that Maria's son turned 2, she says he became quite resistant to going off with his dad. The two had not formed a solid relationship which made for

strained visits. Her son would leave for visits crying, and her ex-husband would call complaining that the child was not listening to him. At one point they tried an arrangement where visitation could be arranged over the summer months, with her son staying with his father for up to a month at a time, but that did not seem to go much better. As Maria explains, she got a phone call one day from a babysitter that her ex-husband had hired to care for their son. The babysitter had no idea how to contact the father and said that she had been directed to call Maria in case of emergency. Maria and her new husband were "livid" that her ex-husband would leave her son with a strange caretaker without leaving any information about where he was going, when he would be back, or how he could be contacted. Shortly after that, Maria petitioned to have her ex-husband relinquish all rights to their son, and eventually her new husband signed paperwork for adoption.

Maria describes her life with her new husband as "blessed" and is profoundly grateful that he came into their lives. She says that her son "looked up to [her] husband as God from the get go," and that the two have had a solid bond from the day they met. Maria talks about her current marriage as a true partnership and explains that her relationship with him has been critical in raising her son to be the responsible young man he is today. Of course it is possible that Maria is selling herself short. Her commitment to raising her son to value education and family is irrefutable, and it was the researcher's perception that Maria's son would have turned out to be a fine young man under her guidance alone. That said, Maria is right to acknowledge that a strong family unit, with two stable parents, increases the chances of success for children in the family, and it is wonderful that she has secured that for herself and her son.

Generalized Answers to Research Questions

Research Question 1: How is "success" defined and measured by women who had their first child during their adolescent years?

Unlike the answers to the other research questions, the answer to question 1 is somewhat highlighted through the thematic above. It does, however, seem prudent to take a moment to summarize the generalized findings in response to this question. Although each woman had a different way of expressing this idea, there was a common emphasis on *sense of purpose* when the women in this study discussed their perception of *successfulness.* For example, Mary holds an advanced position at a community-based nonprofit and values her ability to not only provide financially for her family but contribute to the betterment of her community. Alani works as a paraprofessional, serving students with severe behavioral needs, and is planning to return to school for a degree in social work. Maria provides emergency response services to her community through the local sheriff's office, and Nicole offers a combination of paid and volunteer support to pregnant and breastfeeding women in her local community. Additionally, when asked why they decided to participate in the study, more than one of the women indicated a desire to somehow contribute to research that could improve outcomes for adolescent mothers and their children.

In addition to valuing a sense of purpose, all five of the women also stressed the importance of maintaining a strong family unit and positive ties with their children as a significant factor in their perception of *success.* Likewise, all five of the participants indicated that financial independence was an important factor in their sense of self-worth

and that positive educational outcomes for their children also contributed to their overall sense of accomplishment.

Research Question 2: What are the similarities and differences across program models that might inform how best to meet the literacy needs of adolescent mothers and their children?

When initially embarking on this research, it was anticipated that at least a few of the volunteers would have had the experience of navigating high school (or possibly middle school) as a teen mother. In the end, only one participant, Nicole, was immersed in a high school level program when she became pregnant. Of the other mothers, two were 18 and had recently graduated high school, one was in her final semester of her senior year, and one was just starting out in college. It seems reasonable to assume that mothers who were older at the time birth would be more likely to self-identify as "successful" than girls who got pregnant in middle to early high school, leading to the disproportion of older participants in this study, but a separate, quantitative measure would be needed to effectively test this theory—something that was out of the scope of this current study. While the lack of younger-at-birth participants made answering this particular research question somewhat challenging to answer, there were some common threads that emerged in the mothers' stories that warrant consideration—especially in regard to educating the children of young mothers.

While Nicole (the youngest mother with the least positive experience with public education) chose to homeschool, the four other mothers all spoke about the specialized support programs that their children's schools offered that they feel were instrumental in their childrens academic success. Although the specific programming models were

different, each were specialized to offer concentrated support for children who might otherwise have fallen through the cracks in a traditional program.

For example, while Mary had technically graduated high school, and might otherwise be in a position to successfully guide her own children through a general K-12 program, she explains that her experiences growing up in a small isolated community, where authority figures were shunned and children were homeschooled as a means of keeping them out of "the system", left her feeling deficient as a parent to children in the public school system. She states that she often felt like an "immigrant" in a foreign country. As she explains, raising her own children in a diverse community, with strong supports for immigrant children and their families provided her with the support she and her children needed to feel successful. She also noted that her own children did not have to feel stigmatized by their mother's lack of informed participation in the system, as many of the other parents were learning the ropes as they went as well.

Similarly, Tina talks about the night-and-day difference in educational experience when she switched her son's schools. Before the switch she had been struggling with the challenge of advocating for a child with ADHD, living under the threat of having him kicked out of school for "bad behavior." For second grade, she had her son switched to a new, smaller school that seemed better equipped to manage learning differences, and had him put on ADHD medication. While she recognizes that the medication played a part in changing his overall experience, she says, "you also have to have people who are knowledgeable about working with students with ADHD as opposed to it." She points out that the staff at the new school knew how to effectively work with "fidgety" children, and

"gave them other work that would keep them interested. So the teachers in that smaller school knew how to deal with it right."

It seems worth noting that Tina thanks her aunt, who was on the school's PTA board, with facilitating the transition. She indicates that had her aunt not pointed her in that direction, she might not have known that such a program existed, and her son's overall educational experience might have been quite different.

Research Question 3: Can a cosmopolitan perspective on literacy instruction, with the application of a sociocultural lens, help provide a foundation for programming that meets the educational and emotional needs of young mothers while satisfying curriculum oversite boards?

In order to answer this question, one must consider both the defining characteristics of a cosmopolitan approach to literary instruction and the underlying principles of sociocultural theory. According to Bean & Dunkerly-Bean (2015), cosmopolitan literacy practitioners seek to find ways in which literacy instruction can improve the lives of the participants while also offering avenues for individual learners to improve the world around them through their literacy practice. In terms of the recent study, both Mary and Nicole explicitly stated their motivation for participating in the research as a desire to do something purposeful with their own lived experiences. Mary stated that she was "passionate about supporting teen moms", and Nicole shared that it was important for her to feel like she was doing something with her story to help others—that it "[didn't] have to be a huge impact. Just something."

Alani expressed a similar calling to find ways to connect with others in meaningful ways in response to her own experiences with being misjudged by others.

Alani came to the research because she had heard about it from the researcher's daughter (her former co-worker). She explained that she had heard others at work talk about the researcher's daughter as shy and reserved, and that many had the impression that "she never spoke." Alani recalled telling them that she and the researcher's daughter always had a wonderful time working together and that they had a lot to talk about together. She added, "some people just don't know how to ask the right questions." These words seemed as much a commentary on the researcher's daughter as they were a reflection of the sentiment Alani had expressed earlier in the interview—that she didn't realize how shaken she would be telling her story because no one had ever asked before.

Similar to a contemporary approach to literacy instruction, sociocultural theory recognizes the impact that lived experiences have in influencing the education and development of an individual and how important it is to be mindful of how the social and cultural context set by the educator sets the stage for either a positive or negative learning experience (Nasir & Hand, 2006). With such a framework in mind, one can look to the experiences shared by the two younger mothers, Alani and Nicole, both of whom were unable to graduate from the high schools that they were attending when they became pregnant, to consider ways in which the learning context might have been altered to see them through to completion of their programs. Both young women describe themselves as ambitious learners prior to pregnancy, with Nicole carving out a customized learning plan with an alternative high school after being bounced around between the foster care system and various family members, and Alani pointing out that she had doubled up on classes in the fall of her senior year, when she found out she was pregnant, to ensure that she would be able to walk at graduation with her class. Ultimately however, both young

mothers expressed feeling unsupported in their existing programs and forced to leave without following through to graduation.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Summary: Interpretation of Results

Although the women in this study did not refer to industry jargon such as PBIS (Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports), MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support), or RTI (Response to Intervention), the supports that they identified as critical to the academic success of their children certainly fell under these banners. Tina described behavioral supports that were instrumental in turning around a previously negative educational experience for her son with ADHD (Attention Deficit, Hyperactivity Disorder), and Mary identified systems for building the school-family partnership in a diverse community with a large immigrant population. Alani referred to phone-based applications which facilitate communication between parents and teachers to help reinforce consistency of behavior-intervention efforts, and Maria talked about programming at both the elementary and secondary levels to help increase the likelihood of first-generation college attendance for students whose parents do not have college degrees. Only Nicole, who recounted multiple breakdowns in school-based support systems, opted to homeschool her children.

Each of the positive support strategies identified by the women in this study fall under 1 or more of the following umbrellas: PBIS, RTI, and/or MTSS. PBIS, a behavior-based intervention model, finds its origins in the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) and efforts to improve services for students with disabilities (Sugai & Horner, 2019). As with RTI and MTSS, PBIS emphasizes a tier-based system of intervention with Tier I designed to address the needs of all learners while promoting a positive school culture, Tier II designed to provide a tailored,

evidence-based, educational program for students who are starting to show signs of struggle, and Tier III focused on individualized instruction for the smallest group of learners who have failed to respond to previous interventions (Weingarten et al., 2020). What sets PBIS apart from the other intervention models is its emphasis on positive behavioral supports as a means of minimizing disciplinary action for students who have traditionally been identified as "behavior problems" (Pinkelman et al., 2015).

As McIntosh and Goodman (2016) explain, it is no coincidence that there are so many shared attributes between PBIS and RTI program models. Just as PBIS was born of the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA and efforts at the time to address the needs of students with special needs, RTI emerged with the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, reflecting research that came out of PBIS implementation in schools across the country. The distinct difference between PBIS and RTI is that whereas PBIS strategies are designed to target the needs of the school community in relation to student behavior, RTI focuses its efforts on the academic needs of students—specifically in relation to math and literacy.

Although, as McIntosh and Goodman suggest, previous school reform efforts have generally resulted in an out-with-the-old, in-with-the-new, practice of program replacement that has proven frustrating and often counter-productive for educators, RTI was designed to serve as a compliment to PBIS (rather than as a replacement), offering a supplemental model for addressing the academic needs of struggling students. This new complimentary approach came out of the research and resulting recognition that student behavior and academic struggle are often directly correlated, where support in one area, helps improve performance in the other.

As more schools started to apply an integrated approach to supporting students behaviorally and academically, efforts were made to integrate the two systems, eventually resulting in a more streamlined MTSS or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support model (Mcintosh & Goodman, 2016). It should be noted that in its best iteration of itself, MTSS is designed to address the academic and behavioral needs of *all* learners—not just those who are struggling. In other words, some schools, like one that this researcher has worked at, incorporated enrichment programming (formerly referred to at GT or "Gifted and Talented") into their tiered levels of intervention.

Reflected in the narratives of this study's participants is the fact that MTSS programming is a continuously evolving process, with implementation and effectiveness of MTSS-related measures varying over time and space. Whereas the women in this study did not identify themselves as recipients of such services during their own schooling years (which stands to reason given their ages in relation to the chronology of PBIS, RTI, and MTSS roll-outs), they did identify MTSS-related programming measures as instrumental in supporting their children's academic success.

Implications for Action

In terms of how the supports identified by the mothers in this study relate to both pedagogically-aligned support paradigms (PBIS, RTI, and MTSS) and sociocultural theory, it is important remember that sociocultural theorists emphasize learning as a social construct, influenced by environmental contexts, systems of power and marginalization, and student perceptions of autonomy (Nasir & Hand, 2006). In this regard, interventional models can only prove as effective as they are responsive to the sociocultural dynamic of the given learning environment. Intervention strategies that

work in one school setting quite possibly will prove ineffective in another. It is for this reason that Michael Orosco (2008), in his dissertation research addressing the academic needs of Latino students, calls on those responsible for RTI implementation to apply a sociocultural framework with emphasis on sociocultural theory informed staff-development and program training. With such a specialized approach, he argues, intervention strategies can be tailored to build upon students' existing background knowledge, apply culturally-responsive practices, and effectively support school-family partnerships with non-dominant communities. When such a lens is not applied during program design, such critical components are often overlooked. This is especially critical when considering how the *intersectionality* (Cresnshaw, 2018) of lived experiences and identities outlined by the mothers in this study would impact their ability (and their children's ability) to effectively access such supports.

In a similar fashion, school districts should be mindful when turning toward large private technology firms for assistance with the design and implementation of PBIS, RTI, or MTSS programs for their local schools. A look through the "About Us" or "Careers" pages for such companies reveals that a large portion of the staff at these firms come from backgrounds in sales, marketing, or business development as opposed to education or community leadership. And while their software programs may afford schools with *reliable,* evidence-based platforms for monitoring ongoing student response to interventions, it is difficult to imagine that such large, nation-based firms are taking a small-scale, socioculturally informed approach to tailoring intervention models to the needs of each individual community. Of course, a separate, formal analysis of staff

makeup and program implementation measures across ed-tech companies would be needed in order to confirm this theory.

In terms of what teachers and school staff can do to address the needs of adolescent mothers and their children, Nicole's story highlights the importance of caring about student outcomes. After dropping out of high school in California and traveling half-way across the country with her husband and baby to start a new life in Nebraska, Nicole finally reenrolled in school and earned her degree because other people in her life wanted that for her more than she even did. Her managers believed in her ability to serve in a management role and encouraged her to get her degree so she could be promoted. The vice principal who happened to find himself in her checkout line at Target overheard about Nicole's promotion dilemma and cared enough to help her earn her degree. Nicole had all but given up caring about whether or not she earned her diploma by the time these people came into her life; but they all cared enough about her future to give her the push she needed to go back to school.

Through Andrew Spires' (2017) dissertation exploring the elements of *caring* mathematical instruction, educators are called upon to think about their own responsibility to care for their students, and more specifically, how much or how little they should care in relation to their students' level of investment. As Spires points out, many educators live by the mantra that "you can't care more than the students do." In other words, teachers often operate under the assumption that students have to be invested in their own learning in order for teachers to be able to educate them. But Spires (and arguably the mothers in this study) challenges this belief, calling on educators to be willing to care *more.* As he suggests, for the most vulnerable students—those who are

coping with very real day-to-day challenges such as food and housing insecurity, domestic violence, or childcare responsibilities (common threads across the narratives in this study)—survival most certainly is prioritized over education. One need only look to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (McLeod, 2018) to realize that where there are unmet basic and psychological needs (as in the case of those who lack adequate access to food, shelter, and a safe home environment), self-fulfillment needs cannot possibly be prioritized by the student.

As Spires (2017) demonstrates through his own research into *caring* mathematics instruction, and as the mothers in this study have vocalized in their own recounting of their experiences with caring or uncaring teachers, the emotional investment of educators matters significantly to the most vulnerable students. When educators take it upon themselves to help address students' logistical and safety concerns ("Basic Needs") and students' self-esteem and intimacy needs ("Psychological Needs") (McLeod, 2018), they can help free up mental space for students' self-actualizaton efforts. This sentiment is mirrored across the studies reviewed in Chapter 2 (Bermea et al., 2018; Luttrell, 2013; Pillow, 2004; SmithBattle, 2007; Watson & Vogel, 2017).

Limitations

One of the greatest limitations to this study was having to conduct the interviews remotely. Speaking to women about something as intimate as pregnancy and birth, especially when tied to the vulnerable time period of adolescence, requires the utmost sensitivity and compassion. While several of the women in this study expressed frustration at how cruel women can be to one another, this researcher has also witnessed, first-hand, the ability of women to lift-up and support each other when brought together

under conditions of shared experience. Alani's outpouring of emotion demonstrated how powerful it can be for someone to just take the time to ask a young mother about her lived experience.

The participants in this study have spent years constructing emotional walls to protect themselves from what they view as a harsh, judgmental world, but as a former childbirth educator, doula and lactation consultant, the researcher has repeatedly experienced the healing power of a compassionate hug. The fact that this study had to be conducted under the somewhat sterile and emotionally disconnected structure of video conferencing, where no hug could be offered, is regretful.

Another shortcoming of the research relates to the small sample size that is characteristic of narrative inquiry. While the use of an oral history interview process (D. Jean Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) yielded rich dialogue and the sharing of intimate story details that might otherwise have been missed, reliance on this method limited time available to broaden the participant pool and seek out women who were younger in age at the time of their pregnancies. This limitation made it difficult to investigate the effectiveness and/or wide-spread existence of programming supports aimed at adolescent mothers at the middle and early high-school levels.

A third limitation of this study relates to the restriction of the research to a qualitative-only study. Whereas a focus on narrative inquiry allowed for a thorough investigation into the depths of each woman's lived experience as a teen mother, a mixed-methods study would have opened up opportunities to gather data from a broader audience and would have allowed for analysis of the pervasiveness and overall

effectiveness of supports specifically designed to address the needs of adolescent mothers and their children.

Finally, it is important to note that 4 of the 5 women in this study started their journeys as teen moms nearly 20 years ago. Over the past two decades, much has been done to expand MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support), RTI (Response to Intervention), and PBIS (Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports) designed to tailor instruction and support vulnerable student populations. As a result, the current impact of these efforts on adolescent mothers and their children was unable to be investigated through the present study.

Implications for Future Research

Although implementation of MTSS, RTI, and/or PBIS programming across districts has been inconsistent at best (Braun et al., 2020), there is certainly room for investigation into the effectiveness of such measures in areas where implementation and monitoring are being conducted with fidelity. Although teacher confusion and lack of staff buy-in has been cited as reasons why teachers fail to implement the types of supports identified by the participants in this current study as invaluable to their children's academic success (Braun et al., 2020; Pinkelman et al., 2015), research has found that when teachers are presented with evidence that such programming is working, they are more likely to embrace program implementation (Pinkelman et al., 2015). For this reason, it is critical that future research into the effectiveness of MTSS efforts (and sub-level RTI/PBIS programming) be structured to specifically analyze the impact of such programming on adolescent mothers and their children.

Implications for Future Practice

As with anything, success breeds positivity. Likewise, a lack of perceived effectiveness can quickly dismantle efforts to improve targeted systems of support. It is for this reason that the focus of this research was to challenge negative perceptions in relation to the academic potential of adolescent mothers and their children. Building effective systems of support is an iterative process. It requires starting with a small group of individuals who believe in the potential of their most vulnerable students and who are willing to put concerted time and energy into implementing targeted systems of support and ongoing practices for diagnostic monitoring with fidelity. Analysis of programming outcomes can then be used to expand effective practices and inform protocol adjustments as needed. As systems improve, and data analysis accumulates to prove effectiveness, the likelihood of teacher buy-in, and thus consistent implementation of program measures, increases.

APPENDIX A

IRB approval

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - **IRB-FY2020-466** *At the Crossroads of Studenthood and Motherhood Revised*

Dear Erin Hayden-Baldauf:

The St John's University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *At the Crossroads of Studenthood and Motherhood Revised*. The approval is effective from February 25, 2020 through February 23, 2021

Decision: Approved

PLEASE NOTE: If you have collected any data prior to this approval date, the data must be discarded.

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,

Raymond DiGiuseppe, PhD, ABPP
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Professor of Psychology

Marie Nitopi, Ed.D.
IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX B

Sample Interview Questions for Mothers who Self-Identify as "Successful"

Mother Interview:

1. Tell me about your memories surrounding when you first found out you were pregnant.
2. How did you react when you first found out you were pregnant?
3. How long did you wait until you told others your news, and how did you go about doing that?
4. How did your family and friends respond to your news?
5. How did teachers and administrators at your school respond to your news?
6. What types of support (if any) did your family and friends provide during your pregnancy?
7. What types of support (if any) did your school provide during your pregnancy?
8. What types of support (if any) did your family and friends provide once your son/daughter arrived?
9. What types of support (if any) did your school provide once your son/daughter arrived?
10. How do you think your mothering experience differed from other mothers who had their first child after completing school (or your own experiences having other children later in life)? Please feel free to include information about choices to breast/bottle feed, child care options, ability to advocate for your child during medical visits, etc.
11. Talk about your decision to stay in school or drop out at any time during your pregnancy or early postpartum period.
12. You've identified yourself as "successful." What does that term mean to you and what do you think were the factors that contributed to that success?
13. You've indicated that you see your child as "successful" and that you feel you've contributed to his/her success. What does academic "success" look like for your child and what do you think are the factors that contribute to that success?
14. Outside of becoming a parent at a young age, are there things that you wish you or others had done differently during your pregnancy or early postpartum period?
15. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me about being pregnant and mothering at a young age?
16. What made you decide to participate in this study?

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