

12-1-2014

# Educational resiliency in teen mothers

Linnea Lynne Watson

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

EDUCATIONAL RESILIENCY IN TEEN MOTHERS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

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College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
Department of Leadership, Policy, and Development  
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (P-12)

December, 2014

This Dissertation by: Linnea Lynne Watson

Entitled: *Educational Resiliency in Teen Mothers*

Has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Education in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in School of Leadership, Policy, and Development, Program of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

Watson, Linnea Lynne. *Educational Resiliency in Teen Mothers*. Published Doctor of Education dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, December, 2014.

Teen pregnancy has been heralded as a social issue that affects families for generations. While recent research has shown the long-term effects are not as devastating as once predicted, more than 40 years after the passage of Title IX, legislation mandating equal educational opportunities for pregnant and parenting teens, only 50% of teen parents graduate high school, lagging far behind their non-parenting peers. Additionally, most of the research on this at-risk population comes from the social science field rather than the educational arena, leaving a research gap on the educational opportunities teen parents receive from within the field of education itself. The purpose of this study was to close the research gap and answer the following central question: What factors contribute to teen mothers' educational resiliency? Additionally, three sub-questions were asked:

- Q1     What factors of the various school environments encourage motivation and support resiliency in teen mothers?
- Q2     What are the teen mothers' perceptions of stigma within the various educational settings?
- Q3     What are teen mothers' perceptions of the opportunities and support services available in each educational setting?

This qualitative case study examined six parenting teen mothers attending three different educational settings, a young parent program, an alternative school, and a traditional school, to discover what factors contributed to their educational resiliency and helped them graduate from

high school. The portraiture method was used to create life stories and their voices resonate throughout the study to paint a portrait of the struggles and triumphs they faced as they navigated life as a high school mother. Five themes emerged, struggle, support, hope, perseverance, and transformation. An in-depth look at how these themes played into their educational resiliency is explored and several implications for working with pregnant and parenting teens are discussed. Strategies for educators and policymakers to better meet the needs of this at-risk population, increase their graduation rates, and the importance of reorienting teen pregnancy and parenthood as an educational issue rather than a social issue are also explored.

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing family, for whom this endeavor would not have been possible without their love and support, to my friends who supported and encouraged me the whole way, and to the brave young women who shared their lives and their stories and made it all possible.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **EDUCATIONAL RESILIENCY IN TEEN MOTHERS**

Teen pregnancy is viewed as a social issue that impacts families for generations. Although the teen pregnancy rate has been declining over the past few decades, the United States still has the highest teen pregnancy rate among developed nations (Card, 1999; Key, Gebregziabher, Marsh, & O'Rourke, 2008). As a nation, in 2010, there were 34.2 per 1,000 live births to teenage mothers age 15-19. The state of Colorado is slightly below the national average at 33.4 per 1,000 live births (Martin, et al, 2012), and in the county where this research will take place, the teen birth rate typically sits above the state average and well above the national average at just above 40 per 1,000 teen births (Teen Sexual Health & Pregnancy Prevention Coalition, 2010).

Historically, the research on teen pregnancy has focused primarily on the negative consequences of teen mothering. As a result of the focus on those negative consequences, research in the 1970s focused on how to care for teen mothers and their children, the 1980s research focused on pregnancy prevention and welfare reform, and the 1990s provided an eclectic research range from STDs, abstinence, positive views of sexuality, and community, state, and national campaigns (Card, 1999). Currently, researchers (Card, 1999; Furstenberg, 2007; SmithBattle, 2005, 2007a, 2007b) are finding that while there are immediate consequences to the teen mother and child, the long-term effects once postulated, fortunately, fell short of their generational doomsday predictions. In fact, most long-term effects of teen pregnancy can be attributed to pre-existing factors in the teen's life prior to the pregnancy; however, the immediate

consequences for mother and child are still challenging. Teen mothers are less likely to receive prenatal care, more likely to live in poverty, have more than one child before age 20, and their children are more prone to behavioral issues (Spear, 2001). As a result, current researchers are interested in learning structures and strategies that could be utilized within social, health, societal, occupational, and educational environments to effectively help teen mothers navigate this difficult time more smoothly.

### **Economic Costs**

Nationally, teen mothering produces extensive social and economic costs, accounting for almost \$11 billion per year to taxpayers for “increased health care and foster care, increased incarceration rates among children of teen parents, and lost tax revenue because of lower educational attainment and income among teen mothers” (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012, p. 1). In addition to the cost to society, failure to graduate from high school has significant social and economic implications for individuals (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009). In 2010, only about 50% of teen mothers graduated high school compared to 90% for their non-parenting peers (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). This is significant because according to the Center for Labor Market Studies (2009):

High school dropouts earn \$12,028 less per year on average than those who graduate. Research has shown that Americans without a high school diploma have considerably lower earning power and job opportunities in today’s workforce. Over a working lifetime, high school dropouts are estimated to earn \$400,000 less than those that graduated from high school. (p. 4)

The economic cost to society and families of teen mothers is one valid reason why teen pregnancy is still a huge issue of concern in the United States.

## Educational Issues

There are a variety of issues teen mothers encounter as they attempt to navigate high school. With a 50% graduation rate, the odds are not favorable for young mothers. In addition to the challenge of completing high school, two major barriers, stigma and segregation, often complicate the already daunting task of graduating while parenting.

**Stigma.** One of the challenges teen mothers face when attempting to complete high school is the stigma attached to being a teen mom. Although it is no surprise that teen moms are going to receive some unwanted attention, many people fail to realize the impact this has on young women. According to *Pregnant and Parenting Teens* (2007) “Those young women who do find themselves pregnant (and 40 percent of all young women in the United States become pregnant before they turn 20) are likely to feel blamed and shamed” (para. 13). Springs and Fertman (2011) shared the following excerpt from an autobiography written by a teen mother, who portrays the difficult realities these young girls face: “I was a freshman in high school. The other kids didn't say anything to me, but I could feel them staring and hear them whispering things like, ‘Look at her! She must be pregnant!’ and ‘She'll never have a life now’” (p. 77). Unfortunately, this stigma not only comes from peers, but from educators and society in general.

According to Pillow (2006), teen pregnancy must be “re-politicized” from a societal issue to an educational issue if there is to be any real progress towards equalizing the environment for these young mothers. She states the following four viewpoints that consistently impact education policy and practice for teen mothers:

- 1) Contamination Discourse – which places blame on teen mothers for their sexuality and tries to force segregation into different classrooms or buildings.
- 2) Discourse of Education and Responsibility – this viewpoint teaches that education is not a right, but a responsibility of teen mothers to better themselves and not be a burden to society.

- 3) Pregnancy as a Cold – this viewpoint views pregnancy as a cold; a limited issue, which requires no special services or provisions.
- 4) Pregnancy as a Disease – this viewpoint sees teen pregnancy as a life-long condition that portrays the teen mother as deficient. (pp. 67-68)

These viewpoints significantly impact where teen mothers are educated and what type of education they receive.

**Segregation.** In addition to stigma, another barrier teen mothers face is segregation. Schools have traditionally excluded pregnant and parenting mothers from the mainstream setting. At the beginning of the twentieth century, pregnant women were excluded because they were thought to increase the likelihood of sexual behavior (contamination discourse) (Pillow, 2006). There was an obvious gender bias against women, as teen fathers were rarely excluded. After parents and community action groups filed several lawsuits, the 1971 landmark Supreme Court Case, *Ordway v. Hargraves*, made it illegal to expel pregnant teens from traditional school settings. In addition, Congress passed Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which took effect in 1975. Title IX expressly prohibits the exclusion of students from their “education program” or “any extracurricular activity” on the basis of pregnancy (Pregnant and Parenting Teens, 2007, para. 7). Although it is illegal to exclude teen mothers from public education, a form of *de facto* segregation occurs as many teen mothers are placed into alternative programs, often located off-site of the traditional high school. These programs increase the likelihood of graduation due to offering parenting classes and daycare for their children, but often at the expense of rigorous curriculum (SmithBattle, 2006; Usher & Kober, 2012).

In an effort to meet the diverse needs of students at-risk of not graduating high school, alternative schools are on the rise (Knutson, 1995-1996). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), as of 2010, the United States has over 13,500 alternative school programs, which includes alternative, special education, charters, and one-teacher schools. Of

those, 6,293 are identified as alternative. Colorado alone has 95 alternative schools (NCES, 2010). Raywid (1994) remarked:

Despite the ambiguities and the emergence of multiple alternatives, two enduring consistencies have characterized alternative schools from the start: they have been designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program, and, consequently have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization, programs and environments. (p. 26).

While alternative schools are designed to meet the unique skills and interests of students, such as pregnant and parenting teens, who are often not successful in traditional settings, there are a wide variety of alternative programs offered and some are more effective than others.

Due to the lower than average graduation rate among teen mothers, understanding which factors help those that do succeed is critical. Natriello, McDill, and Pallas (1990) suggested that one of the main factors associated with school failure is a mismatch between student skills and interests and the academic program of the school. A meta-analysis of the research compiled by Lange and Sletten (2002) found several key elements readily available within alternative schools that help eliminate this mismatch such as, “individualized flexible programs with high expectations, an emphasis on care and concern, and small school size are considered to be key dropout prevention strategies” (p. 10). In addition, Morrisette (2011) interviewed alternative school students and found the following:

There are several advantages to alternative education . . . much more was gained than simply obtaining a high school diploma. Perhaps most importantly, the alternative program engaged learners and provided them with opportunities to become introspective while feeling accepted and valued. (p. 187)

These strategies, coupled with on-site daycare, render alternative schools a viable option for many teen mothers.

### **Motivation and Resiliency in Teen Mothers**

Researchers have discovered that many teen mothers have experienced several



educational challenges prior to becoming pregnant (Card, 1999; Furstenberg, 2007; SmithBattle, 2005, 2007a, 2007b). Failing grades and disengagement from school are common among teen mothers. One characteristic that plays a critical role in engaging struggling students is motivation. Motivation is a critical component of increasing academic achievement, conceptual understanding, school satisfaction, self-esteem, social adjustment, and school completion. A 2004 survey by the National Research Council found that 40% of high school students felt unmotivated and disengaged from school. It is important for educators to determine what factors increase motivation in teen mothers because, “In a 2006 survey exploring why students dropped out of school, 70% of high school dropouts said they were unmotivated” (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006, p. iii). Of the teen mothers who do graduate high school, motivation is heralded as a primary cause. It is imperative that researchers discover what factors contribute to graduating teen mothers’ resiliency in order to help them be successful.

In a society where economic standing plays a critical role in the education and future of its children, high school graduation is viewed not just as a priority but also a necessity for survival. In order to fully understand the dynamics impacting teen mothers’ graduation, a thorough review of the literature on teen pregnancy and parenting, dropout and graduation data, the importance of Title IX, alternative schools, and resiliency and motivation will be explored in Chapter Two.

### **Significance of the Problem**

In 2010, there were 367,678 babies born in the United States to teen mothers age 15 – 19 (Martin et al., 2012). Of those mothers still in school, only half can anticipate earning a diploma. Research over the past 50 years has brought about several initiatives that have proven quite successful in improving the lives of teen mothers and their children and also helped

decrease the teen pregnancy rate. However, there has been virtually no research done from within the educational field, rather, most teen pregnancy and parenting research comes from the health, psychological, sociological, social welfare, and public policy arenas (Pillow, 2006).

When considering the implications dropping out of high school has on individuals and society, it is alarming that practitioners within the field of education have had so little input on affecting the policies that govern pregnant and parenting teens.

According to Pillow (2006), there is a general lack of understanding on how to effectively educate pregnant and parenting teens. In fact, she stated that there is no research that identifies and answers the following basic questions:

How many pregnant and mothering teens are in schools? Where and how are pregnant and mothering students receiving an education? How many pregnant and mothering students graduate? How many pregnant and mothering students return to school to receive their high school diplomas? What types of education are pregnant and mothering students receiving? What is the purpose of education for the pregnant and mothering student? What are the educational histories and experiences of pregnant and mothering students? What are indicators of success for pregnant and mothering students – are they graduation, economic independence, morality training, marriage, no repeat pregnancy? What educational programs for pregnant and mothering students are effective and why? Are there different educational needs for the pregnant students from the mothering student, and how can these differing needs be addressed? What does equal education look like for pregnant and mothering students? What is a comparable education for pregnant and mothering students? What makes a placement voluntary? What is the impact and possibilities brought about by de facto single-sex education many pregnant and mothering students are receiving? (pp. 64-65)

This overwhelming list exemplifies the huge knowledge deficit from within the educational arena on how to best meet the needs of pregnant and mothering students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

While there is ample research on teen pregnancy and the hardships associated with parenting (Mangino, 2008; Rumberger, 1987; SmithBattle, 2006; Springs & Fertman, 2011), further research needs to be done from within the educational arena on teen mothers who are

resilient in overcoming graduation obstacles, specifically those related to their educational setting. Research has shown that student motivation is a key component to resiliency (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Marzano & Pickering, 2011; Skinner, Kindermann, Connell, & Wellborn, 2009; Usher & Kober, 2012). For the purpose of this study, resiliency was defined as overcoming obstacles to graduation in such a way as to graduate high school with their non-parenting peers. This study examined the motivating factors contributing to teen mothers' resiliency and discovered the different experiences and perceptions of teen mothers attending a variety of educational settings, including a young parent program, an alternative high school, and a traditional high school. One of the goals of this study was to help narrow the research gap and give insight into a few of Pillow's (2006) questions: 1) Where and how are pregnant and mothering students receiving an education? 2) What types of education are pregnant and mothering students receiving? 3) What is the purpose of education for the pregnant and mothering student? 4) What are the educational histories and experiences of pregnant and mothering students? 5) What does equal education look like for pregnant and mothering students? Specifically, the purpose of this study was to fill the research gap from an educational viewpoint and research the perspectives of teen mothers on their educational experiences and environment. This qualitative case study aimed to answer the question; what factors contribute to teen mothers' educational resiliency?

### **Research Questions**

The central question of this narrative case study was: what factors contribute to teen mothers' educational resiliency? In addition, Creswell (2013) recommended identifying several sub-questions to further analyze the central phenomenon. This narrative case study asked:

- Q1     What factors of the various school environments encourage motivation and support resiliency in teen mothers?

Q2 What are the teen mothers' perceptions of stigma within the various educational settings?

Q3 What are teen mothers' perceptions of the opportunities and support services available in each educational setting?

## **Study Overview**

This study took place in the following three types of high school programs: a young parent program, the alternative school, and the traditional school. The schools are located in the same city so that the opportunity to attend any school is available to each participant.

Additionally, the researcher has a personal relationship with each school program, as a teacher in the young parent program, which is located within the alternative school, and collegiality with staff at the traditional school, which provided easy access and immediate rapport with staff and students, a vital component in narrative case study. Full Internal Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained, and district and school leadership were fully aware and supportive of the study.

The study originally sought to include nine students who would be purposefully selected based upon the following criteria: 1) they must be parenting, not pregnant, 2) they must be in their senior year and on-track to graduate. Three of the participants were to be selected from the young parent program, three from the alternative school – but NOT in the young parent program so that their opportunity for daycare matched those in the traditional high school, and three were to be selected from the traditional high school. Finding nine participants was difficult. After contacting each of the four traditional high schools in the area via counselors and principals, all were unsure of any young mothers in their schools that fit the study's criteria. As a teacher in the Young Parent's Program, I knew there were several young mothers attending traditional schools because several of my students had friends attending each of these schools. Also, I received new students into my program throughout the school year that came from the traditional schools but

were not identified by their staff. Additionally, two participants were identified during the second semester at a school that previously had said they had no young moms that fit the criteria. Pillow (2006) stated that there is no research that identifies how many pregnant and mothering teens are in schools (p. 64), however, this oversight by local schools was a shocking confirmation of the inadequate data kept on young mothers.

Once participants were selected, they were asked to participate in two semi-structured interviews, one at the beginning of the research process, and one at the end of the research process to ask any clarifying questions or help with interpreting any emerging themes. Creswell (2013) explains that, in addition to interviews, field texts can be utilized to help gather the story. With this in mind, participants were asked to participate in the research in the following ways: record their experiences, including photographs, in a journal, and have documents gathered on their educational/social-emotional background. Using this collaborative model, the participants were actively involved throughout the entire research process. Originally, the study was to include focus group discussions to clarify emerging themes, however, once the first two individual interviews were completed, it was determined that a point of saturation had been reached in which similar ideas and themes were repeatedly found in each interview, therefore, the focus group was deemed unnecessary. Data were compiled and analyzed for themes and then the portraiture method utilized to portray a picture of life as a resilient teen mother in three varied educational settings. Creswell (2013) described this as *restorying*, a process of gathering stories, analyzing key elements, and then rewriting in chronological order.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations**

As a researcher, my biases include perceptions and assumptions gained from childhood, personal experience, and work history. I grew up as an only child finding success in school from

an early age. The daughter of teenage parents, I was instilled with the belief that school was a key to future opportunities and that it was vital for me to get good grades so that I could go to college. I worked hard and got good grades and everyone told me that I was smart and college was definitely in my future – until I got pregnant the end of my junior year. Immediately, the positive, encouraging voices transformed, saying that I had ruined my life and that my hopes and dreams were now as good as shattered. This caused something inside of me to snap, and I set out to prove them all wrong. This experience produced compassion for disadvantaged students, a deep-seated belief that everyone can accomplish their goals and dreams with hard work and determination, and a passion for social justice.

My experience as a teacher working with teen mothers has reinforced my personal ideologies and created a passion for helping teen mothers succeed. I understand, first hand, how many obstacles teen mothers juggle and how many challenges they face. In addition, working at an alternative school has given me some bias as to the opportunities afforded to students by participating in alternative school settings. Utilizing the strategies of member checking and triangulation of data, the goal of this study was to minimize bias as much as possible in order to increase the study's reliability and transferability.

### **Definitions of Terms**

The following terms are defined in the context of this study.

*Teen parents.* For the purpose of this study, this term will mean teen mothers only. It will also be used to describe teens that are already parenting, *not* pregnant at the time of the study. Parenting is important since once the baby arrives, there are more obstacles for teen mothers to handle such as illness, doctor appointments, and daycare.

*Resiliency.* There are several synonyms in the literature for resiliency; motivation, engagement, attention, interest, effort, enthusiasm, participation, and involvement. However, once outside the scope of the literature review, resiliency in teen mothers will be defined as being on track to graduate with their non-parenting peers.

### **Summary**

Teenage mothering has been established as an issue of concern, specifically within the educational arena. Unfortunately, few studies have been done to learn how to help teen mothers navigate their educational environment through specific supports or strategies. Several issues facing teenage mothers, such as economic hardships, graduation and dropout, stigma, and segregation have been introduced. The significance of the problem and the purpose of the study were introduced, along with research questions to be addressed, limitations of the study, and terms identified and defined.

The following chapter will contain an extensive review of the literature concerning the history of teen pregnancy and parenting including, dropout and graduation data, political and societal viewpoints and policies, and the resulting stigma and segregation. These topics are reviewed with a focus on their implications for mothering teens. Additionally, three teen mothers were purposefully selected to share their experiences of teen motherhood in hopes of comparing and contrasting an actual experience with the literature. Gaps in the literature are also identified to highlight the need for this study.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW: A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME**

Although the phrase(s) teen pregnancy and teen parenting are commonly understood to be great societal issues (Card, 1999; Furstenberg, 2007; Kelly, 1996, 2007; Perrin & Dorman, 2003; Gebregziabher, Marsh, & O'Rourke, 2008; Ruhul, Browne, Ahmed, & Sato, 2006; Spear, 2001; Young, Turner, Denny, & Young, 2004), prior to the mid-1970s, the term teen pregnancy/parenting was largely unknown. Prior to the large influx of the Baby Boomers entering their teenage years, "the 1960 Bureau of Census reports show a teen-age population in the United States of 20 million, with an expected increase of more than one third by the year 1970" (Semmens, 1966, p. 308), society was more concerned with issues related to unwed mothers. Typically, if a teenager got pregnant, she got married and the family blended into American society. It was only the unwed mother that was viewed as having difficulty caring for herself and her children and needed help. One of the most influential institutions geared towards helping unwed mothers were the Florence Crittenton Homes for Unwed Mothers (F.C.). In addition to redefining unwed mothers from "wanton vixens" or juvenile delinquents to women finding themselves in helpless situations often out of their control, the F.C. homes "not only participated in defining and locating the problem of unwed motherhood, but also influenced public opinion and established treatment patterns for unwed mothers" (Pillow, 2004, p. 20). A paper written on the 1970s trend of teenage out-of wedlock pregnancy by Cobliner (1970) described the prior attitudes towards this behavior, "traditionally teen-age out-of-wedlock



pregnancy and sexual activity in unmarried teen-agers have been associated with the terms juvenile delinquency and acting out...both connote maladjustment of the individual” (p. 439).

While the F.C. Homes helped shape public opinion of unwed mothers as worthy of help and support, prior to the mid-1970s that help and support was offered in separate institutions according to race. Typically, Caucasian women were viewed as victims in need of support to get them back on their feet. These women were “rehabilitated” in their moral thinking and judgment and then provided training to enter a career field suited to their status, such as secretary or house cleaner. Although the F. C. Homes claimed to support all unwed mothers, their views of the black mother mimicked the predominant racism of the time. Pillow (2004) explained, “thus while white unwed mothers were capable and worthy of rehabilitation, black women were rendered untreatable because their problems of unwed pregnancy were inherent and instilled in their culture and community” (p. 24). It was during this charged political climate that the idea of teen pregnancy as a societal issue made its debut.

### **Our Girls: Teen Mothers of the 1970s**

Although the teen pregnancy rate was actually declining during the 1970s, the large increase in the number of teenagers in the United States gave the impression of disproportionately high numbers of teens having children. In addition, unwed births were rising at a rapid rate.

Of primary concern during this time period was *who* was getting pregnant. Lawson and Rhode (1993) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1984) identified an increase in white teens participating in sexually active relationships outside of marriage, unplanned pregnancies among white teens, single parenting of white women, and an increase in abortions among white women.

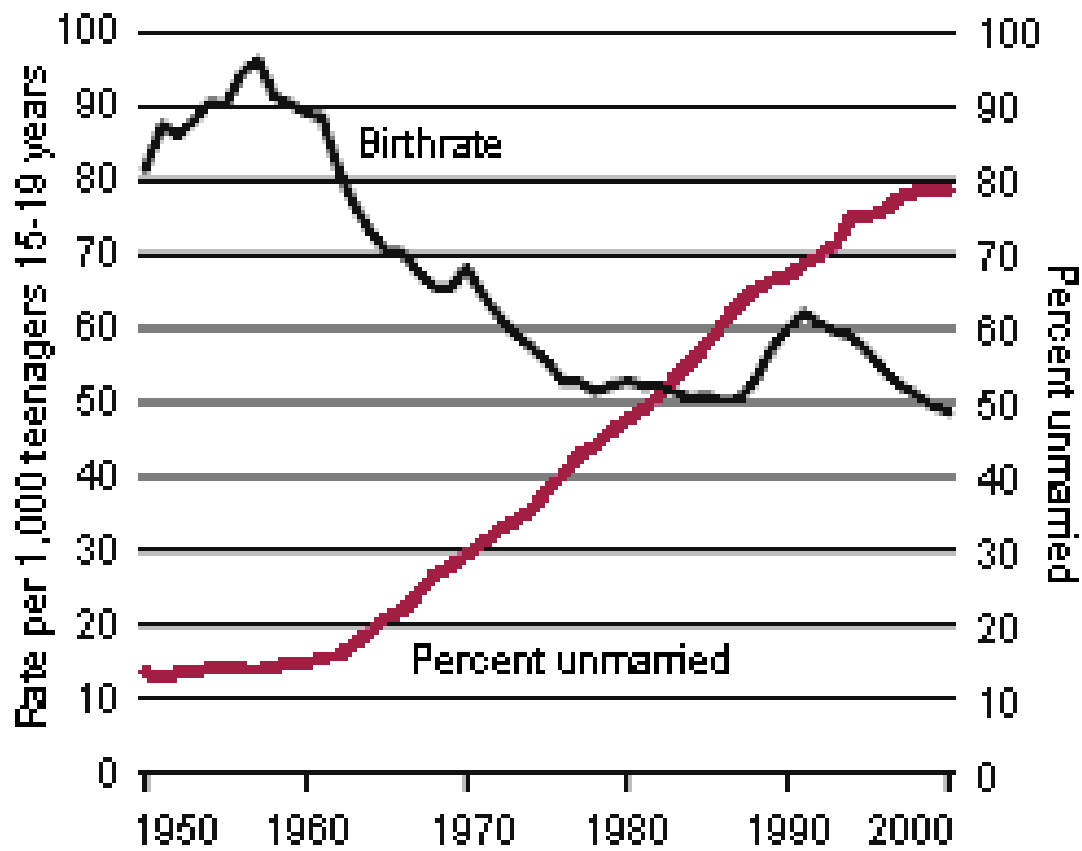


Figure 1. Birth rate for teenagers 15–19 years and percent of teenage births to unmarried teenagers: United States, 1950–2000. (Ventura, Matthews, & Hamilton, 2001, p. 2). Permission granted for use.

The emergence of the “epidemic” of white teenagers being affected by pregnancy created the climate for political discourse on the importance of teen pregnancy and public policy began to help eliminate this societal issue affecting “our girls,” (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1976). In addition to the concern over *who* was getting pregnant, a report published by the Alan Guttmacher Institute in 1976 titled *11 Million Teenagers: What Can be Done about the Epidemic of Adolescent Pregnancies in the United States* warned of the negative health, social, and economic problems teen parents faced.

During the 1970s, roughly 14-15% of all females dropped out of high school (U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, 2011). Sadly, however, that statistic jumped to 80% for females who found themselves mothers by age 17 (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1976). Public education policy may have played a major role in the high dropout rate for teen mothers. According to Pillow (2004) “one of the primary conditions that needed changing in the 1970s was the middle-class white pregnant girl’s access to a public school education” (p. 31-32). Pregnant and parenting teens were routinely excluded from participating in school at this time and policy makers set out to ensure educational opportunities for “our girls” by passing Title IX in 1972.

## **Title IX**

Prior to the mid-1970s, it was common for pregnant teens to be excluded from their traditional educational institutions. Many pregnant or mothering teens had to complete their education at home, in night school, or alternative settings because it was a common belief that their “condition” might be contagious, tempting other teenage girls into premarital sex (Stamm, 1998). Mittelstadt (1997) stated “the combination of widespread political and social pressure, both formal and informal, and changing educational and economic realities forced general issues related to girls’ education onto the political agenda, including those of the teen parent” (p. 329). In response to the increase in “our girls” needing educational protection, in 1972, Congress passed Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act. Title IX explicitly prohibits educational discrimination on the basis of pregnancy:

*Pregnancy and related conditions.* (1) A recipient shall not discriminate against any student, or exclude any student from its education program or activity, including any class or extracurricular activity, on the basis of such student's pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, termination of pregnancy, or recovery therefrom, unless the student requests voluntarily to participate in a separate portion of the program or activity of the recipient. 106.40(b)

Title IX was the first important step in educating teen mothers. Unfortunately, Pillow (2004) admonished, “Presently, forbidding expulsion, there is *no* case law to enforce or guide the provision of educational services for teen mothers at the local or state level” (p. 57). Although Title IX mandates an equal education for pregnant and parenting teens, how to execute these mandates have been left up to the interpretation of the state and local districts.

### **Debra: One of Our Girls?**

Debra became a teen mother in 1970. Although, nationally, teen pregnancy was viewed as an issue affecting “our girls,” a highly concerning problem impacting young women worthy of our help and support to make it during this difficult time, this empathetic climate was nonexistent for Debra. A resident of a small, rural Midwestern town, the social and political culture of women’s rights, civil rights, and the sexual revolution had completely escaped the residents of this tiny farming community. More attuned to Mayberry than Kent State, the townsfolk prided themselves on their quiet little community, free from the corruption of the big cities.

Debra had lived in this small community her whole life. Friendships were deep, everyone knew everyone else’s business, and they liked it that way. Debra had a circle of tight friends that grew up together. They went to grade school, junior high, and high school together. “We did everything together. We were over at each other’s houses, spent the night, one to two times a week. We were very close-knit; I guess you could call it cliquish.”

As a student, Debra describes herself as someone who liked school. “I was pretty lucky. I didn’t really have to study - it was pretty easy for me. I was a good student. I got along well with all of my teachers.” She stated that she found it funny that no one emphasized the importance of education. “The funny thing is, like parents today saying, ‘you have to finish school,’ my parents never said that. I don’t think any of the parents said that. I don’t think

anybody stressed the importance of school.” When asked about her post high school plans, what her dreams were, she just shrugged and said, “I don’t know. I just wanted to finish school and get out of that town.” Her response to why she wanted to get out was, “I didn’t like the small town. Everybody knew everybody’s business. They were judgmental.” As Debra paused, the look of someone remembering a not-so-fond memory crossed her face and the image of “Mayberry” faded from my imagination. When I asked Debra to describe what she meant by judgmental, she said she would describe her community as a little “Peyton Place.” *Peyton Place* was a popular novel about secrets, sex, and hypocrisy in a small town. A striking contradiction to the charming farming community first envisioned.

Debra stated that no one talked about sex when she was a teenager. “I was sixteen when I got pregnant, going into my junior year. There were no sex education classes - my family didn’t talk about it. Nobody talked about it. When I found out I was pregnant, I had to get married. That’s what you did back then. We got married at a justice of the peace. My mother was the only one there. I guess the word got around. After that, everyone, all my girlfriends, just dropped me. They wouldn’t even speak to me.” Debra said that they called the school and were told, “You can go, but *if* you graduate, you can’t walk.” I guess it’s pretty amazing that a small community allowed a pregnant girl to attend school prior to the passing of Title IX— maybe they did not have any other options. They were small, they didn’t have an alternative school, and there probably weren’t night classes available. Their attitude on the subject, however, was a far cry from the concern and support described in the literature for this time.

Debra stated that she was lucky because she “didn’t even show that much, but everybody knew.” As she described her year as a pregnant teen, my heart went out to this courageous

young woman who fought for her education despite a lack of support from family, friends, or even school personnel. She remembered:

So basically, I went to classes. Nobody spoke to me. Even my mom didn't encourage me or say I was doing a great thing. None of the teachers approached me. I mean, I could have been just . . . I felt invisible. I would leave and go outside for lunch because nobody would speak to me or sit with me; my girlfriends, from elementary school – it was awful. Teachers didn't come forward and say 'Wow, we really admire you.' Nobody spoke to me. I was invisible. One of the teachers was a family member but even my family avoided me. I felt like I had committed murder or I had the plague or something.

Debra continued to speak of the experience as a nightmare. She said she really had no idea about anything. After the baby was born in the hospital and the after-birth came, she thought, "Oh my God, am I having another baby?" She described taking the baby home and realizing that she didn't know how to change a diaper or take care of a baby. The baby's dad wasn't any help. "Our school didn't have any parenting classes. We had home economics but we learned knitting and a little bit of cooking, but nothing on taking care of a baby. I didn't know what to do." As Debra described this experience, I thought about a seventeen-year-old girl, scared and alone, not knowing what to do. All of her support systems gone, and anyone she could have asked for help and advice had basically shunned her. It is absolutely amazing that she continued her schooling and earned a diploma. When I asked about how she made it, she said she knew that education was important if you wanted to leave that town – and she was determined to leave and never come back. I asked Debra if she could think of a metaphor to describe her experience as a teen mother. After a brief pause, she reflected, "It was probably the darkest time of my life...I thought at the time...like hell" (personal communication, June 20, 2013).

Debra's story of life as a teen mother in 1970 paints a far different picture than the literature implies. The sexual revolution and women's rights apparently had not made it to her

tiny hometown. The general belief that these were “our girls” was not embraced by the school faculty or apparently even Debra’s family. Left to figure out how to complete high school and raise a baby on her own, Debra is an example of how far removed the life of a teen mother was from the political and social policy that was supposed to impact her life.

### **The Other Girl: Teen Mothers of the 1980s**

As the 1970s were the era of “our girls” arguing for public policy to aid teen mothers and support their right to education, the 1980s made a dramatic shift towards teen mothers as the “other girl” which later became synonymous with “welfare mothers.” This public shift in perception took place at a critical time in history, just when teenage pregnancy was being discussed as an “epidemic” issue of concern and politicians were creating policy for how to handle and support this crisis situation (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1976; Vinovskis, 1981). In 1978, President Jimmy Carter and his administration deemed teenage pregnancy as one of their “top priorities” with the number of births to unwed mothers doubling since 1970 (see figure 1). As a result, Carter passed the Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention Care Act (AHSPPCA) providing an additional \$60 million to provide services to pregnant and mothering teens (Vinovskis, 1981). One of the main reasons why policymakers threw so much financial support at preventing and providing support for teen pregnancy was a growing concern over the rising cost of welfare programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Vinovskis (1981) states “Kirsten Moore of the Urban Institute calculated that the federal government disbursed 4.65 billion dollars through AFDC in 1975 to households containing women who bore their first child while teenagers” (p. 212). Unfortunately, those large-scale services and funding came to a halt in 1980 when Reagan became president.

President Reagan was elected under the premise of cutting federal spending. That ideology, combined with his conservative pro-life stance, caused him to cut the budget in half for teen pregnancy services and replace AHSPPCA with the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFL) in 1981. Pillow (2004) admonished:

Teen pregnancy during the 1980s was again described as an epidemic, not, however, as a sympathetic epidemic but one redefined as a social ill, linked with poverty, immorality, and promiscuity...correspondingly, the image of the teen pregnant girl shifted in the political and public mind. She was no longer “our girl next door” but the “other girl...In this portrait of welfare dependency, the teen mother became the welfare dependent mother, the “welfare queen” as President Ronald Reagan dubbed her. (pp. 34-35)

This drastic shift in perception of teen mothers played a crucial role in the way in which support services were provided.

In a series of hearings over welfare issues including the rising costs, public outcry at the expenses and fear of creating “welfare dependent” individuals, the notion that welfare mothers should have to work for their benefits became popular. The fear of creating welfare dependent teen mothers was often discussed alongside the discussion on poverty. Vinovskis (1981) stated:

There are considerable racial differences in the proportion of out-of-wedlock births among teenagers. While only one in four births to white teenagers was out-of-wedlock in 1977, almost eight out of ten births to nonwhite adolescents were out-of-wedlock. (p. 11)

As a result of this racial discrepancy, black unwed mothers became synonymous with the term “welfare queen” popularized by Ronald Reagan. According to Lesko (1995):

The problem with teenage pregnancy, as constructed in the mid-80s by the U.S. conservative movement, draws on fears about the changing U.S. population and our related economic viability to reassert the idealized, white middle-class nuclear family as the bedrock of social order and economic success. (p. 181)

The term “culture of poverty” also became associated with teenage pregnancy and thus associated with minority populations (Vinovskis, 1981). The racialized context of teen pregnancy is discussed by Pillow (2004), “the teen mother was represented not as the “[white]



girl next door” but as the “[black] welfare mother” and this phenomenon was linked with ‘the decline of the black family’” (p. 35). *Ebony* magazine ran a special issue in 1986 titled, *The Crisis of the Black Family*. The editors of *Ebony* questioned, “What can be done about children having children? How can we stop the alarming increase of female headed households?” (p. 33). One result of this racialized view of teen mothers was that policymakers assumed that teen mothers would not want to get an education of their own accord (Pillow, 2004). In response to that assumption, they mandated educational requirements as stipulations to receiving welfare benefits. According to Mittelstadt (1997):

The legislative outcome of the 1987 welfare reform hearings was the Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988. It waived the existing work requirement exemption for teen mothers with young children and created an eligibility requirement that made teen mothers specific targets of the federal program called Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS). The JOBS program was both an education and job-training program that linked receipt of welfare benefits to mandatory participation...the very purpose of education was reconfigured from a guaranteed entitlement to an enforced requirement. (pp. 337-338)

As a result of this legislation, teen mothers faced the societal stigma of welfare dependency. This shift in public thinking also affected teen mother’s experiences in their educational settings.

### **Educational Opportunities – or Not**

In April 1983, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared the United States to be a “nation at risk...(whose) educational foundations... are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people” (p. 9). At a time when education began to be viewed through the same “epidemic” lens as teen pregnancy, rather than viewing the two as intertwined or their influences upon one another, the political discourse on teen pregnancy drove a wedge between teen mothers and education. Mittelstadt (1997) admonished that, “the shift in the locus of federally funded education programs to welfare programs altered the type of education offered to teenage

mothers” (p. 338). Often, when the education of teen mothers was discussed, the General Education Diploma (GED) seemed to provide an adequate education to many policymakers. By 1991, Maryland reported that, of the 900 teen parents in the JOBS program, 700 of them enrolled in the GED program (Mittelstadt, 1997). When teen parents did enroll in traditional schools, they were faced with the Reagan administration’s philosophical stance on “abstinence only” education. This ideology was used as a method for deterring teen pregnancy and enhanced the “contagion” fears of many school officials. As a result, teen mothers were often “encouraged” to complete their education in alternative settings. While the reason often given for sending teen mothers to alternative settings was “for their own safety,” Stamm (1998) admonished, “with disturbing regularity, exclusion was legally validated on a range of justifications, including similar sexual behavior based on a concern that pregnancy is ‘contagious’” (p. 1227). Pillow (2004) labeled this ideology as *discourses of contamination* and claims that the fear of “infection” is one reason so many teen mothers were “encouraged” to complete their education outside of the traditional high schools.

According to Lange and Sletten (2002), as early as the 1960s, alternative schools began to make an appearance in public education as a way to meet the diverse needs of students. These alternative placements were often heralded as the best option for pregnant and mothering teens because they were better equipped to deal with the myriad of issues faced by this population: health issues, attendance concerns, social service supports, etc. Guerin & Denti (1999) admonished, “Youth in alternative settings either have been strongly encouraged to leave the standard campus or officially excluded from mainstream education” (p. 76). Unfortunately, there were a wide variety of alternative programs offered and some were more effective than others. Although alternative schools were a great environment for promoting small class sizes,

individualized supports, and student-teacher relationships, during the 1980s there were a growing number of back-to-basics alternative programs that used “such instructional strategies as drill, recitation, and rote learning and...tended to deemphasize cognitive learning” (Raywid, 1981, p. 552). However, Morrisette, (2011) interviewed alternative school students and found:

There are several advantages to alternative education . . . much more was gained than simply obtaining a high school diploma. Perhaps most importantly, the alternative program engaged learners and provided them with opportunities to become introspective while feeling accepted and valued. (p. 187)

Title IX mandated an equal education for teen parents. Unfortunately, due to the lack of consistency among alternative programs, researchers questioned the equal educational experiences that teen mothers encountered (Lesko, 1995).

In addition to the possibility of receiving an unequal education, teen mothers also faced the daunting risk of dropping out altogether. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1984):

The educational attainment of teenage mothers is rather limited, as would be expected. Among teenage mothers 15-17 years of age giving birth in 1981, only 10 percent had completed high school. Even among older teenage mothers 18-19 years, just 54 percent had completed at least 12 years of schooling. By comparison, 65 percent of all women of these ages had completed high school. (p. 2)

The 1980s were a time of intense stigma and separation for teen mothers. They were regarded as “welfare queens” draining the American economy. Politicians, society, and educators viewed them as irresponsible and in need of an enforced education - possibly not rigorous enough for a high paying career, but enough to get a low paying job to help them take care of their responsibilities. Their futures and their children’s futures were seen as bleak and doomed to a cycle of poverty.

## **My Story as the Other Girl**

My high school was a large school, about 1,600 students. It was the typical high school portrayed on TV – big, boisterous, kids involved in sports, assemblies, clubs, partying, etc. I thought my high school was the best place ever. It was fun and exciting, and there was always something going on. I was a cheerleader – super involved in all the sports, events, and excitement of high school life. As a cheerleader, I was all too familiar with the rumor mill – who was out partying, who was sleeping around, etc. Lots of girls slept with boys, but they were all considered “sluts;” good girls just didn’t do that. But I didn’t know of anyone who had gotten pregnant – that was completely taboo! I remember a poster hanging in my home economics class like it was yesterday. A picture of a teenager, blonde, 1980’s hair up to the sky but looking shell shocked and holding a baby with the caption, “It’s like being grounded for 18 years.” The commonly held belief at the time that teenage mothers would end up as high school dropouts, living on welfare, was exemplified through that poster. That poster terrified me. I thought, “I don’t ever want to get pregnant in high school and end up like that.” The daughter of divorced teenage parents, I’d seen first-hand how difficult being a teen mother was.

I was a good student. I always got A’s and B’s and was on the honor roll. My parents always told me, “You’re smart. You can go to college.” I knew this meant that my grades were my ticket to a great future – I could be anything I wanted, the possibilities were limitless. I loved school and all of my teachers. I felt well connected and involved. I thought I had the world at my fingertips...then I found out I was pregnant at the end of my junior year. It was devastating. I felt alone and ashamed. When I told my friends, they were shocked but supportive. My teachers, who I thought believed in me, basically ignored me and gave off the impression that they bought in to the commonly held belief of the time that I had ruined my life. My future, once

bright and hopeful, immediately became a black hole, sucking in all possibilities once open to me. I would be lucky to graduate high school; college was completely out of the picture.

I finished that year up just trying to keep my head down and get through it. I felt everyone staring at me and whispering as I walked by. People, who I thought were my friends, just stared and laughed as I walked by. I went to class, kept my head down, did my work, and left as quickly as possible. I didn't have a single teacher approach me and ask what was wrong. I definitely wasn't going to announce my pregnancy to them, but they had to notice the dramatic change in my personality. I *knew* that everyone knew and was talking about me. One day, I put my things on my desk before class and went to use the restroom. Something happened in the hall, and I came in sobbing. I grabbed my books and left class, but the teacher never asked about it. I guess I thought they cared more. Their lack of acknowledgement or support confirmed my worst fears, that I had ruined my life; I was condemned to a life of struggle and poverty - 18 years of being grounded - punished for my terrible deeds.

Fortunately, my family moved to Washington DC where no one knew me. My mom was adamant that I finish high school and, with her support, I took a couple of summer school classes and graduated. I didn't know what my future would hold, but I was bound determined to prove everyone wrong about my future.

I think being a teen parent is like a salmon swimming upstream. You know where you need to go and what you need to do, but the journey is treacherous. Besides swimming upstream for thousands of miles, there are obstacles all along the way trying to keep you from reaching your goals. It feels like everything is against you, and you have to fight for every inch of progress you make. There are so many naysayers who remind you throughout your journey that, statistically, you're probably not going to make it. They remind you that less than 50% of

teen mothers graduate high school and less than 2% graduate college. They remind you that 90% of teen marriages end in divorce. The list goes on and on. However, if you set your mind to the prize, the goal, the future you dreamed for yourself before embarking on this impossible journey, with a lot of hard work, dedication, focus, and luck, you just may be one of the lucky ones who reach their dreams.

### **The Burden of Responsibility: Teen Mothers of the 1990s**

The drastic shift in ideology of teen mothers from “our girls” to “welfare queens” during the 1980s firmly situated teen pregnancy as a social service issue rather than an educational issue.

This political ideology stigmatizing teen mothers remained the prevalent thinking during the 1990s. Although new research was emerging that stated the devastating effects of teen pregnancy may not be as bad as once thought, (Furstenberg, 2007; SmithBattle, 2005, 2006, 2007) in the public eye, teen pregnancy remained a “crisis” that must be dealt with. Teen pregnancy became associated with all kinds of social ills including high school dropout, welfare dependency, the cycle of poverty, and premature or low birth weight babies. *Education as a right*, as guaranteed by Title IX, quickly evolved into *education as a responsibility* in policymakers’, educators’, and society’s eyes. Vobejda (1996) quoted President Bill Clinton in a weekly radio address as saying, “We have to make it clear that a baby doesn't give you a right and won't give you the money to leave home and drop out of school” (p. A.01). In his State of the Union address the same year, Clinton also named teen pregnancy as one of the seven great challenges facing our nation (Clinton, 1996). Pillow (2004) reprimanded:

The emphasis and linkage of teen pregnancy with welfare reform led to dramatically decreased funding and attention to educational policy and educational programs for school-age mothers and further supported the practice of legislators, policy makers, and

policy analysts *outside* the field of education to be the ones developing policy determining the purpose of education for school age mothers. (p. 46)

While Title IX's guarantee of an education led to increased graduation rates for teen mothers, unfortunately, according to Hofferth, Reid, and Mott (2001) teen mothers' graduation rates still lag behind their non-parenting peers:

Early childbearers are less likely to complete high school than later childbearers...Among early childbearers, rates of high school completion rose in the 1960s, then leveled off in the 1970s and 1980s, and declined in the 1990s. (p.266)

Teen mothers face a host of obstacles to high school completion including attendance issues related to pregnancy and parenting, daycare issues, and transportation issues (Lesko, 1995). Sadly, after more than 20 years after the passage of Title IX, many teen mothers still faced opposition to earning their high school diploma.

Another issue stigmatizing teenage mothers was the association of teen pregnancy with race. Although the teenage birthrate continued to decline among the white population, policymakers were concerned with the increasing numbers of Black and Latino birthrates. This crisis was termed the "browning of America" by a 1990 *Time* magazine article. Pillow (2004) stated:

The *Time* story went further noting that given present trends in lower birthrates to white middle-class mothers and higher birthrates to black mothers, U.S. society would move from *white* to *brown* to *black*. As black mothers and the black community were assumed to be impoverished, culturally and economically, a "browning" of America raised fears about a creation of a predominant lower-class in the United States. (p. 36)

Pillow (2006) broadened this idea, "Black teen mothers were constructed not only as immoral and irresponsible but also as welfare mothers. For these teen mothers, education certainly was not viewed as a right but came to be constructed as their responsibility" (p. 72). While race is not the focus of this study, it is impossible to separate the prominent discourses on teen pregnancy without mentioning the role race has played in the dominant views of society.

### **Maria: A Teen Mother's Story of Responsibility**

Maria became a teen mother in 1997. Nationally, there was a lot of focus on education being a responsibility that would help minimize welfare and prevent the cycle of poverty. Maria, however, felt isolated from this viewpoint and focused more on becoming the best mother she possibly could be.

Maria was born and raised in a border city between the US and Mexico. She was a good student, earning mostly A's and B's. She attended school, got along well with her teachers, "except for Algebra," she laughed, "I hated Algebra." She claimed that she knew a lot of people, but was more on the outside. "I knew a lot of people, but I wasn't constantly with the same group." Maria admitted that she more or less kept to herself. She had one best friend, but she didn't share private, personal things even with her.

In an era when abstinence and pregnancy prevention was paramount, Maria was left to figure this out on her own. Reminiscing, she recalled:

I met my boyfriend (now husband) at 13 going on 14. We dated a whole year before anything happened. Then, I was about to turn 15. My mother never really even talked to me about my period. She took me to a best friend of hers, and she explained it to me. She was never very open . . . she never talked to me about sex and boys. So to me it was basically what you would see on tv . . . so when I think back on it, it was like a blur because it was just a relationship, or, I don't know what I thought it was? It was just an experience, I guess, that I chose to do with him.

As she related her story of being a teen mother, Maria's mother's behavior of avoiding difficult or uncomfortable conversations seemed to carry over into her daughter's response to becoming pregnant.

Maria was 15 when she thought she might be pregnant. When asked how her parents responded, she stated:

I was very smart about it. I went to my doctor myself without my mother. My weight always fluctuated, so I went in and was like, "I need a pregnancy test." He was like, "No



way you're pregnant." So he didn't do a pregnancy test at that time, so I kind of left it alone. I put it in the back of my mind. I told my boyfriend (now husband) that I thought I was pregnant, and so basically what happened is we got married in June.

Maria got married at age 15, moved into her boyfriend's parents' house, and never told her parents she was pregnant. She said they went out of town for the summer to work. "By the time they got back, I was already huge, so that's obviously how they found out. I never once said, 'I'm pregnant.'"

Maria had the same avoidance behavior at school. She said she got married in June and then went to an alternative school for pregnant girls through her pregnancy. She returned to the traditional high school for a short time after her son was born, but due to the baby's health issues, she dropped out to take care of him. Maria never told anyone she was pregnant. When asked about experiences of stigma, she stated, "People tell me, 'you live in a bubble.' Why should I care about what people say or who they talk about? Who cares what they say or who they talk about? Honestly, I didn't suffer. I wasn't aware of it." By getting married and changing schools, Maria avoided the common stigma associated with teen pregnancy. She never even told any of her friends that she was pregnant. Although she may have "lived in a bubble" where her peers were concerned, she was fully aware of the stigma and segregation stance of the educational system. When asked about why she switched schools, Maria said that, in the traditional school, she experienced the following treatment:

(They) wanted us separate. The reason for the girls having their own little school, the way they explained it, they didn't want them to get hurt or other kids to bully them because of their status. So they kept everyone separate – us from them.

Pillow (2004) called this *discourses of contamination*, stating that many teen moms are asked to continue their education outside of the traditional school for fear that others will get pregnant.

When asked if she could have went to the traditional school but maybe kept in a separate class,

Maria responded:

No. If I would have gone to the traditional school, then fine, but they would have really, really tried to talk me into going to the alternative school. In their little mind, “we’re trying to protect you,” but the stigma was like, “we don’t need that type of (behavior) around other kids.” Even though it was the 90’s, honest to God, I was the type of person who really didn’t notice the discrimination thing. But it didn’t really happen until I had my kid that I started to notice small things like that. Like really? We can’t be with other kids?

While schools often state that changing schools is “for the mom’s safety,” Stamm (1998)

admonishes, “with disturbing regularity, exclusion was legally validated on a range of justifications, including similar sexual behavior based on a concern that pregnancy is ‘contagious’” (p. 1227).

Although Maria didn’t have a lot of interaction with her teachers during her pregnancy, she owned the 1990’s belief system that it was her responsibility to step into motherhood and take care of her child. Although typically school would be seen as the means to do that, Maria dropped out of school to step into that role. Maria stayed home for several years and gave birth to two more children. After the birth of her three children, she earned her GED several years later. When asked to give an analogy of what being a teen mom in high school was like, Maria said:

In my life, I think it happened the way it needed to happen . . . It’s going to sound bad, but I had a good experience because of the support of his parents. They’ve always helped us. That’s the only reason why I think it was good. I was blessed by how it all happened.

### **The Struggle Continues: Teen Mothers of the New Millennium**

The treatment of teen mothers has not changed much since its rise to “a national crisis” in the 1960s and 1970s. More than 40 years after the passage of Title IX, teen mothers still face stigma and segregation. While teen pregnancy has recently become a media sensation with full

length movies like *Juno*, and *The Pregnancy Pact*, television shows such as *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and news media on Bristol Palin and *The Pregnancy Project*, the fame and popularity experienced in the media is a far cry from the real life experiences of teen mothers (Furstenberg, 2007; Kelly, 1996, 2007; Key et al., 2008; SmithBattle 2003, 2006, 2007; Young et al., 2004). In fact, although there is ample research debunking the myth that teen pregnancy is a sure ticket to a life of poverty, the popular beliefs among policymakers, educators, and society still stigmatizes teen mothers (Furstenberg, 2007; Lesko, 1995; SmithBattle, 2005, 2006, 2007; Stamm, 1998). Furstenberg (2007) stated, “the latest findings contribute to a growing consensus among scholars that women are only slightly disadvantaged, if at all, by having a child as a teen compared to older mothers from similar backgrounds” (p. 15). In fact, SmithBattle (2006) stated, “the demands and responsibilities of caring for a child inspire many teens to recommit to education to improve their life chances and long-term success” (p. 135). While recent research indicates a much brighter future for teen mothers than previously predicted, many scholarly articles still begin by stating stigmatized views of teen mothering (Card, 1999; Perrin & Dorman, 2003; Spear, 2001; Young et al., 2004). This stigmatized view of teen pregnancy as the nexus for a variety of social ills illegitimizes pregnant and parenting teens as deserving of rights.

While the graduation rates for teen mothers have continued to increase, they still lag far behind their non-parenting peers. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2012) only about 50% of teen mothers receive a high school diploma by 22 years of age, versus approximately 90% of women who had not given birth during adolescence. There are a host of reasons why the graduation rates of pregnant and parenting teens are so inferior to their peers including the demands of parenting and student obligations, lack of childcare and transportation, stigma and discrimination of school personnel, and harsh attendance policies (Lesko, 1995;

Mittelstadt, 1997; Title IX at 40, 2012). One of the biggest concerns however, is the lack of research on the educational needs of teen mothers from educational professionals. Stamm (1998) stated, “The education of pregnant teens has been substantially overlooked” (pp. 1205-1206). In fact, according to Pillow (2004):

There are only a handful of education scholars in the United States who have researched and published on the educational experiences of teen mothers and most mention that their research is confounded by the lack of basic data on teen mothers at the school level, data such as school attendance and dropout rates. (p. 80)

Without adequate data, educators buy into the rhetoric of the time and spend their time discussing the problems with teen pregnancy and how to prevent it rather than figuring out how to close the achievement gap for teen mothers. Pillow (2004) provided evidence to the confusion on the education of teen mothers by educators:

At present most states continue to have *no* comprehensive policy for educating the pregnant or parenting teen. When state educational policies do exist “they can be divided into two general categories: rules excluding or segregating pregnant girls and mothers and rules restricting their participation in extracurricular activities.” Further, while school personnel often name teen pregnancy as one of the worst problems they face, at the same time, they have little knowledge about the legal rights of teen mothers or about effective educational models. This means that the education of school-age mothers remains open to local interpretation and implementation and thus programs for teen mothers vary widely in availability, size, services, administration policies, and goals. (p 88)

This basic lack of knowledge leads to continued educational problems for pregnant and parenting teens. Hoping Colorado had policies in place for educating our pregnant and parenting teens, I contacted the Colorado Department of Education to see if there were any state policies for parenting teens besides Title IX. The Director of State Board Relations, C. T. Markel (personal communication, October 16, 2013) stated, “I am not aware of any resources specific to CDE.”

Although it is more common for teen mothers to receive their education at the traditional high school than in the past, most teen mothers still receive educational services segregated from

their non-parenting peers (Stamm, 1998; Title IX at 40, 2012). According to Lesko (1995) “Often these programs are self-contained, geographically separated from a secondary school” (p. 190). Of additional concern is that according to Pillow (2004):

At present, there is *no* case law addressing implementation issues under Title IX...the absence of case law on the education of school-age mothers speaks loudly about the status of education for teen mothers and means that decisions on what to do with pregnant/mothering students continue to be left up to individual school districts. (p. 62)

While Title IX mandates that attending alternative programs must be voluntary for teen mothers, research including teen mothers’ perspectives indicates that this is often not the case (Mittelstadt, 1997; Pillow, 2004, 2006; Stamm, 1998). The lack of case law implies that teen mothers lack adequate support systems required to take on the educational system in a court of law. One important piece of legislation introduced in May 2013 is a bill titled the *Pregnant and Parenting Students Access to Education Act*. This act would provide necessary resources to ensure pregnant and parenting teens access to education, college/career readiness, professional development for educators, establishment of a state coordinator, and required academic supports such as transportation and childcare services. While this act is a positive step in the right direction, Govtrack.us, the government website that tracks progress of all introduced legislature, gives this act a 1% chance of getting past committee and a 0% chance of being enacted (HR 1845, 2013). Unfortunately, it appears that pregnant and mothering teens will continue to struggle for equal educational rights for many years to come.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past forty years, teen mothers have faced a host of issues related to their education. Their image in the public eye has shifted from “our girls” to “the other girl” or “welfare queens.” Political and societal perceptions of their educational rights have shifted from Title IX’s mandates of a *right* to a *responsibility*. They face intense stigma from peers,

educators, policymakers, and society. They have been segregated from their traditional schools and programs. They face overwhelming obstacles to high school completion including strict attendance policies, transportation and daycare issues, and possibly even unequal educational opportunities, depending on where they receive their schooling. Teen mothers lag far behind their non-parenting peers in high school graduation rates. There is a general lack of knowledge about how or even what their educational needs are. Teen pregnancy and parenting has been relegated to a social welfare issue rather than the educational issue it should be. Yet, despite all of these obstacles, half of all teen mothers still find the strength, courage, and sheer will to graduate high school and try to make a life for themselves and their children. The purpose of this study was to examine the educational experiences of a few of these educationally resilient teen mothers to determine how they do it.

### **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Chapter Two reviewed the need for research within the educational arena on teen mothers. Chapter Three reviews the epistemology, theoretical framework, methodologies, and qualitative methods utilized in this study to discover educational factors associated with teen mothers' educational resiliency in three school settings. Additionally, participant selection, research setting, data analysis, and trustworthiness of this study will also be discussed. In response to the research gap on teen mothers' educational experiences, the central question of this narrative case study was: What factors contribute to teen mothers' educational resiliency? Additionally, three sub-questions were explored to further analyze the central phenomenon:

- Q1     What factors of the various school environments encourage motivation and support resiliency in teen mothers?
- Q2     What are the teen mothers' perceptions of stigma within the various educational settings?
- Q3     What are teen mothers' perceptions of the opportunities and support services available in each educational setting?

These questions helped determine the methodology, data collection, and analysis of this study.

#### **Qualitative Paradigm**

Understanding the perceptions teen mothers have of their educational setting and the structures and supports made available in those settings is critical in determining the future of education for teen mothers. Although Title IX mandates equal education for pregnant and parenting teens, before policymakers can determine educational equality, they must hear teen

mothers' voices on which factors contribute to their educational resiliency. This study utilized qualitative methods to give voice to teen mothers.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) defined qualitative research as, “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world . . . qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). In addition, Merriam (2009) stated, “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). There is a gap in the literature on studies that examine the educational opportunities available to teen mothers. Although a quantitative study could have provided raw data on the numbers of teen mothers in various programs, I believed that by talking to the teen mothers about their experiences, a richer, more complex understanding would develop. Therefore, in order to bring insight into teen mothers' perceptions, I determined qualitative case study was the best method for this inquiry.

### **Epistemology: Constructionism**

Understanding a researcher's philosophical framework is critical in identifying bias and perspective. Briggs, Coleman, and Morrison (2012) and Crotty (1998) described the importance of a researcher's philosophical stance as it determines the way in which we frame and interpret our research. Schwandt (2001) defined epistemology as, “the study of the nature of knowledge and justification” (p. 71). My epistemological stance is constructionism; therefore, this narrative case study was analyzed using that frame. Crotty (1998) defined constructionism:

*The view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context. (p. 42)*



As a constructionist, I believe that that meaning is constructed from lived experiences rather than discovered, so individuals can make different meanings from the same phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). Believing the constructionist view that peoples' perspectives are based upon their lived experiences, it was critical that this study include teen mothers' experiences within their context and frame of reference.

### **Theoretical Framework: Critical Theory**

Critical theorists want to empower disenfranchised people to rise above their experiences (Crotty, 1998). Schwandt (2001) declared the purpose of critical theorists is "to integrate theory and practice in such a way that individuals and groups become aware of the contradictions and distortions in their belief systems and social practices and are then inspired to change those beliefs and practices" (p. 45). In short, critical theorists are interested in perpetuating the ideal of social justice. The online Business Dictionary (2013) defines social justice as: the fair and proper administration of laws conforming to the natural law that all persons, irrespective of ethnic origin, gender, possessions, race, religion, etc., are to be treated equally and without prejudice. Social justice demands that disenfranchised populations such as teen mothers, have the opportunity to give voice to their lived experiences as a way to battle the stigmatization of "othering" prevalent in current research and society in general (Fine, 1994). Fine (1994) described "othering" as writing about the differences of a disenfranchised group of individuals in such a way as to imply that *we* are different from *them*. As a researcher, it was my goal to utilize a critical theorist's stance in presenting the findings of this narrative case study in the hopes that "walking a mile in another's shoes" will increase awareness and change societal perceptions, as well as influence further research on the educational experiences of teen mothers.

### **Methodologies: Narrative Case Study and Portraiture**

In addition to epistemology, Briggs et al. (2012) stated the importance of the research methodology, "Methodology . . . is critical since it is through methodological rationale to explain the reasons for using specific strategies and methods in order to construct, collect, and develop particular kinds of knowledge about educational phenomena" (p. 15). This qualitative study utilized case study design. According to Creswell (2013):

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g.; observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case themes. (p. 97)

Merriam (2009) confirmed, "This design is chosen precisely because researchers are interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation" (p. 42). More specifically, Merriam (2009) and Briggs et al. (2012) described narrative case study as taking the qualities of case study one step further by using the data collected to tell the participants' "story." Briggs et al. (2012) stated that narrative case studies are, "particularly suited to studies whose research questions are based around exploring perceived, subjective experiences of individuals or groups of individuals" (p. 224). Pillow (2004) emphasized the need for this type of research, by explaining, "I cannot overemphasize the problem caused by the lack of basic data collected on the educational experiences of teen mothers" (p. 92). Creswell (2012) stated, "The narrative researcher provides a voice for seldom-heard individuals in educational research" (p. 505). This inquiry used narrative case study as its methodology, drawing from the insights of portraiture, a relatively new design in social science created by Lawrence-Lightfoot and described by Creswell (2012) as, "drawing portraits of individuals and documenting their voices and their visions within a social

and cultural context” (p.503). The use of portraiture helps fully tell the story of teen mothers’ resiliency experiences within a variety of educational settings.

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) "Portraiture is a genre whose methods are shaped by empirical and aesthetic dimensions, whose descriptions are often penetrating and personal, whose goals include generous and tough scrutiny" (p. 369). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) extrapolated, [portraiture] “capture(s) the richness, complexity and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences” (p. 3). The purpose of this study was to discover what factors contribute to teen mothers’ educational resiliency and provide deep, rich descriptions of life within a variety of educational settings.

### **Methods**

Crotty (1998) defined methods as “the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data related to some research question or hypothesis” (p. 3). The researcher then determines what type of data is collected, how it is collected, and how it will be analyzed. As a portraitist, it is vital to collect as much information about individuals’ stories to “inform and inspire readers” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 10). In addition, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) admonished, “the portraitist insists that the only way to interpret people’s actions, perspectives, and talk is to see them in context” (p. 11). Based upon this premise, a thorough description of the methods utilized in this study follows.

### **Context**

Context is a critical component for narrative researchers. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) extrapolated, “the narrative then, is always embedded in a particular context, including physical settings, cultural rituals, norms, and values, and historical periods. The context is rich in clues

about how the actors or subjects negotiate and understand their experience” (p. 12). The context of this narrative case study was to utilize portraiture as a means to construct a picture of what life as a resilient teen mother is like. This study focused on the student perspective, giving voice to disenfranchised youth.

## **Data Collection**

### **Research Setting**

In a narrative case study, determining the research setting is critical because the setting provides the context for individual experiences. Lawrence - Lightfoot (1983) described the importance of observing setting as well as behavior:

In recognizing goodness as a quality that refers to the complex whole, we also see it as situationally determined, not abstracted from context. In the search for goodness, it is essential to look within the particular setting that offers unique constraints, inhibitions, and opportunities for its expression. We have little understanding of how to interpret a behavior, an attitude, and a value unless we see it embedded in a context and have some idea of the history and evolution of the ideals and norms of that setting. (p. 23)

This study took place in the following three types of Colorado high school program: a young parent program, an alternative high school, and a traditional high school. These schools were chosen because they are conveniently located near the researcher, provide easy accessibility to teen mothers, and participants have the opportunity to attend any of the programs. The research took place at the participants’ school not only to provide the context for the research but also a familiar environment to help participants feel more comfortable. Additionally, the researcher has a personal relationship with the schools, as a teacher in the young parent program, which is located within the alternative school, and collegiality with staff at the traditional school, which provided easy access and immediate rapport with staff and students, a vital component in narrative case study. Full Internal Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained (see appendix A), and district and school leadership were fully aware and supportive of the study.

## Research Subjects

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling, described by Creswell (2013) as selecting individuals based upon their ability to “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 156). Patton (2002) stated the value of purposeful sampling is “selecting *information-rich* cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (p. 230). Based on this recommendation, participants were purposely selected as to provide information-rich data. This study utilized homogeneous sampling, described by Creswell (2012) where “the researcher purposefully samples individuals or sites based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics” (p. 208). Additionally, Merriam (2009) stated the importance of determining specific criteria for selecting participants. This study utilized purposeful, homogeneous sampling to select participants that matched the following criteria: 1) participants must be teen mothers, 2) they must be parenting – not pregnant, 3) they must be in their senior year, on-track to graduate, and 4) they must attend either the young parent program, a traditional high school, or an alternative high school.

Once purposefully selected, participants were informed of the purpose, methods, and analysis procedures for the study. Participants were told that participation was voluntary and those agreeing to participate were given a parental consent form and a minor assent form if under age 18. Students who were already 18 were given consent forms. Once all forms were signed, they were sent to the research advisor to be kept in a locked file drawer in a locked room for safe keeping.

In addition to sampling methods, determining sample size is crucial. Creswell (2013, 2012) stated that qualitative research often consists of few individuals so that the researcher can

adequately provide enough in-depth detail. With this in mind, it was determined that nine teen mothers should be chosen to participate in this study. Three participants from the young parent program, three from the alternative school – but NOT in the young parent program so that their opportunity for daycare matched those in the traditional high school, and three selected from the traditional high school. The students were to be selected based upon meeting the criteria of the study, recommendations by school counselors, principals, and/or teachers, their availability, and reliability for follow-through during the research process, and their interest and agreement to participate in the research study. However, only eight participants were identified as meeting all of the criteria to participate; three from the young parent program, three from the alternative program, and two from the traditional program, as it was more difficult to locate three participants within the traditional setting. In addition, two of the participants, one from the young parent program and one from the traditional program dropped out of the research prior to completing the second interview. The traditional school participant did not have time to complete the research process but she did graduate high school on time with her peers. The young parent program participant had some personal issues, which put her behind in her classes and she did not graduate but is enrolled and planning on completing this year.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Data Collection/Analysis Methods**

Two semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data from participants. Semi-structured interviews contain a mix of specific questions that all participants answer and allow additional questions to be asked of individual participants. This format allowed the researcher flexibility to investigate variations within individual experiences. Merriam (2009) insisted:

The largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time.

This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic. (p. 90)

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews allowed participants to share their experiences “unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings” (Creswell, 2012, p. 218). Participants were asked to participate in two one-on-one, semi-structured interviews; one at the beginning of the research process and one at the end of the research process to ask any clarifying questions or help with interpreting any emerging themes. Interview protocols were utilized to help the researcher stay focused (Creswell, 2012). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher for accuracy. Additionally, as a former teen mother, trust and rapport between the researcher and participants increased due to our shared experiences. Since stigma associated with teen pregnancy is still relevant, this commonality helped the participants feel more comfortable sharing their experiences with me.

Creswell (2013) explained that, in addition to interviews, field texts can be utilized to help gather the story. With this in mind, participants were asked to participate in the following: record their experiences, including photographs, in a journal, and have documents reviewed on their educational backgrounds. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), portraitists seek to capture “the essence and resonance of the actors’ experience and perspective through the details of action and thought revealed in context” (p. 12). In order to fully understand the perspectives of teen mothers, journal writings and pictures were used to help build the context of their lives. Although experiences within the educational setting is the focal point of this study, some way of grasping their “motherhood” is at the heart of comprehending their experience. One of the participants from the alternative school did not turn in a journal at the end of the research, but since she participated in both interviews and school data was utilized, it was determined that her responses could be included in the compiling of themes, but her “life-story” is slightly less

developed as there was not enough data to compile a rich portrayal. This study utilized a collaborative model, where participants were actively involved throughout the entire research process to check for reliability of interpretation of the researcher. This was done by asking clarifying questions about their interview responses, checking in with them between interviews, clarifying responses made in their journals, and getting feedback on their “stories” which will be presented in chapter four.

Originally, a focus group of participants from the same educational setting was planned to clarify emerging themes; however, by the end of the second interview, I determined that the focus group was unnecessary due to the commonality of responses and the time constraints that participants were feeling in regards to completing all graduation requirements on time. As previously mentioned, rapport is critical in case study research, and I determined that it was in the best interest of the participants to eliminate the focus group and focus on the interviews and field texts for the purpose of this study.

Data were compiled and analyzed using open coding to identify common emerging themes (Merriam, 2009). All data were compiled and similar responses were identified and coded and organized into common themes. Moreover, I looked for convergence and contrast of themes by searching for repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, institutional and cultural rituals, triangulation of data, and revealing patterns based upon the recommendations of Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997). Additionally, the analysis includes a chronological “life history” of each teen mother to help construct the contexts of their perceptions. Special attention was given to the similarities and differences experienced within three unique educational settings. Creswell (2012) stated that coding for themes “provides the complexity of a story and adds depth to the insight about understanding individual experiences” (p. 511). Creswell (2013) identified themes



as “broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (p. 186). Once the emerging themes were identified, the portraiture method was utilized to portray a picture of life as a resilient teen mother in three varied educational settings. Creswell (2013) described this as *restorying*, a process of gathering stories, analyzing key elements, and then rewriting in chronological order. One important exception of portraiture is that it relies upon the “central and creative role of the *self* of the portraitist” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, P. 13). In fact, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) stated “the person of the researcher – even when vigorously controlled – is more evident and more visible than in any other research form” (p. 13). As such, the researcher will co-construct the portrait alongside the participants. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) described this phenomenon:

The portraitist’s voice, then, is everywhere – overarching and undergirding the text, framing the piece, naming the metaphors, and echoing through the central themes. But her voice is also a premeditated one, restrained, disciplined, and carefully controlled. Her voice never overshadows the actors’ voices (though it is sometimes heard in duet, in harmony and counterpoint). The actors sing the solo lines, the portraitist supporting their efforts at articulation, insight, and expressiveness. (p. 85)

In order to effectively create their portraits, I had to continually implement several strategies to ensure trustworthiness of the study.

### **Trustworthiness**

In order to be reliable and valid, ethics is fundamental for qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). This study utilized several strategies for ensuring ethical procedures were followed throughout the entire research process including: confidentiality, full disclosure of rights, benefits, and potential hazards to participation, obtaining advice from colleagues, and maintaining data collection boundaries.

As a way to further increase reliability and validity to my research, multiple strategies were employed. One strategy this study employed was triangulation. According to Briggs et al.

(2012) “Triangulation means comparing many sources of evidence in order to determine the accuracy of information or phenomena” (p. 84). Both interviews and field texts including journals and school data were utilized to increase triangulation of data, improving reliability.

Another vital strategy for determining reliability and validity that was utilized throughout the research process was member checking. Member checking involves reporting findings and interpretations to participants and getting their feedback and approval. Jones (2002) stated, “One of the ways in which researchers can check their own subjectivity and ensure the trustworthiness of their findings, as well as tell a story that resonates for all involved, is through member checking” (p. 469). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) described this process by stating, “The portraitist seeks a portrayal that is believable, that makes sense, that causes that ‘click of recognition.’ We refer to this ‘yes, of course’ experience as resonance” (p. 247). Member checking was done throughout the research process by asking each participant clarifying questions about their responses and their journal entries, as well as sending them their story interpretations for feedback. This strategy, coupled with rich, thick descriptions in the restorying (Merriam, 2009) increases the transferability of this study. This method allows individuals outside of the research study to assess similarities between the research contexts and their own.

Finally, my position or bias was exposed to, “allow the reader to better understand how the individual researcher might have arrived at the particular interpretation of the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). Creswell (2013) stated the researcher must disclose their personal and political background as it shapes the restorying of the data. As a researcher, my biases include perceptions and assumptions gained from childhood, personal experience, and work history. I grew up as an only child finding success in school from an early age. The daughter of teenage parents, I was instilled with the belief that school was a key to future opportunities and that it

was vital for me to get good grades so that I could go to college. I worked hard and got good grades and everyone told me that I was smart and college was definitely in my future – until I got pregnant the end of my junior year. Immediately, the positive, encouraging voices transformed, saying that I ruined my life and that my hopes and dreams were as good as shattered. This caused something inside of me to snap and I set out to prove them all wrong. This experience produced compassion for disadvantaged students, a deep-seated belief that everyone can accomplish their goals and dreams with hard work and determination, and a passion for social justice.

My experience as a teacher working with teen mothers has reinforced my personal ideologies and created a passion for helping teen mothers succeed. I understand, first hand, how many obstacles they juggle. In addition, working at an alternative school has given me some bias as to the opportunities afforded to students by participating in alternative school settings. Utilizing the strategies of member checking and triangulation of data, the goal for this study was to minimize bias as much as possible in order to increase the study's reliability and transferability.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **THROUGH THEIR EYES: PARTICIPANTS AND SETTINGS IN CONTEXT**

There were six participants who completed the research process who are included in this qualitative study's data. This narrative case study was focused on answering the central question: what factors contribute to teen mothers' educational resiliency? Additionally, three sub-questions were investigated to determine:

- Q1     What factors of the various school environments encourage motivation and support resiliency in teen mothers?
- Q2     What are the teen mothers' perceptions of stigma within the various educational settings?
- Q3     What are teen mothers' perceptions of the opportunities and support services available in each educational setting?

The participants were purposely selected based upon a set of qualifiers including, being mothers, not pregnant, graduating at the end of the 2013-2014 school year, and attendance at one of three different school environments. Two of the participants attended the young parent program, three attended the alternative school, and one attended the traditional school. They experienced motherhood at a variety of different ages and with a diversity of background and level of support. Included in Table 1 is a list of each participant's characteristics pertinent to the study; name, race, age of motherhood, graduation timeframe, and school attended. Their names have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

Table 1

*Participant's Pertinent Characteristics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Age of motherhood</b>	<b>Graduated on time (4 years)</b>	<b>School attended</b>
Zoe	Latina	17	Yes	Young Parent Program
Zianna	Latina	16	Yes	Young Parent Program
Charlee	Caucasian	16	Yes	Alternative
Ashley	Caucasian	15	Yes	Alternative
Hannah	Caucasian	17	No	Alternative
Maddie	Caucasian	16	Yes	Traditional

Several themes emerged during the research process, each one building upon the last, and intertwining throughout: struggle, hope, support, perseverance, and transformation. Each struggled with the difficulties of teenage motherhood, including stigma and segregation. Yet, each one found the inner strength and resiliency to overcome those obstacles and find a place of belonging. Once they felt secure in their respective environments, they began to work on school and were able to beat the odds against them and graduate. These young mothers experienced a vast amount of life crisis that would deter most. However, they all managed to navigate the complexities of their lives to successfully graduate high school and begin working towards accomplishing their dreams. As a portraitist, it was my goal to write to “inform and inspire readers” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 10). The portraits presented in this chapter provide insight into each of these young women’s lives and the battles they faced. Their stories provide

context for making meaning of the research. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) stated that, “the portraitist insists that the only way to interpret people’s actions, perspectives, and talk is to see them in context” (p. 11). Their personal battles and the settings where they fought those battles are included to help the reader gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of teen motherhood. Each participant created a metaphor for what being a teen mother in high school was like. These metaphors are included because Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) suggested including resonant metaphors because, “They embody values and perspectives *and* they give them shape and meaning” (p. 198). Additionally, each participant included photographs in their journals, which highlight their lives as teen mothers. Some of the photos were chosen to be included in their portraits to add depth. To maintain confidentiality, a program was used to modify the photographs into artistic renditions, which distorted the photos in such a way as to make them unidentifiable. Furthermore, each participant reviewed the photos and gave permission for their use. It is anticipated that these insights will help the reader understand and make meaning of the themes which emerged throughout the research process and build connectivity with the young moms themselves.

## **Settings and Stories**

### **The Young Parent Program**

The young parent program functions like an incubator, nurturing and supporting young mothers in their struggle to complete their high school diplomas. Located in a small building on the campus of the alternative school, this program hosts a variety of young mothers coming from all across the area. For girls who are used to the stigma and judgments that typically come along with teen pregnancy, the program offers a safe haven where everyone involved is going through the same issues. One student reflected on this by stating, “My counselor at the traditional high

school actually told me about the young parent program. She got me enrolled, and I got right in. That pretty much saved my life . . . being somewhere where I was accepted. I didn't want to go to regular high school, because I kind of did feel ashamed you know, because I didn't expect myself to get pregnant." Another mother confirms, "Schools like YPP, so many places don't have schools like this. They (moms) need to feel safe."

Although the mothers take several of their content classes next door at the alternative school, between half and two-thirds of their day is housed within the young parent program itself. There is a daycare located next door to the moms' classroom for babies up to eighteen months old. This allows the girls to work and be able to take care of their young children at the same time. This close proximity is especially beneficial for nursing mothers. Charlee said, "(we) need more places like the young parent program...with daycare. You're close to them, and they're young, they need their mother."

In addition to working on content classes, the program teaches parenting skills, introduces the mothers to a variety of community resources and offers the ability to earn college credit in early childhood education. "YPP is so helpful" stated Charlee, "they have the daycare and the help they give you through CCCAP [Colorado Child Care Assistance Program], child support, and all that. Helping you get through all those documents. Family First, Young Life." Students enjoy the wealth of information these organizations bring to their classroom and also benefit from their ongoing donations of baby clothes, diapers, toys, and other items. The moms also learn to interact with their babies through weekly rhythm, music, and early literacy skills. Zianna said, "We do lots of activities with our babies. We do research and learn about pregnancy and all that."

Young moms from the area's traditional schools and from the alternative school enroll to be able to bring their babies to school with them. There is often a waiting list since it is the only program with an on-site daycare. When asked about the program, students talked about enjoying the flexibility and support the program offers. A major issue students complained about is that there is no daycare for children over eighteen months, so, if students have not graduated by the time their child is this age, they must find daycare elsewhere. This causes a lot of tension and stress for the moms and can be a point of contention among the students. Unfortunately, moms occasionally drop out if their babies age out and they are unable to locate adequate daycare. Zianna struggled with this issue first-hand. Three months short of graduation, her daughter became ineligible to attend the program. The mom struggled with attending for the next month and a half until adequate daycare was located. This almost caused her to not be able to graduate on time. When asked about this, she said, "Not being able to take my daughter with me to school kills me."

The program helps eighteen to twenty-three young moms annually. Due to the extensive support services offered, an average of 90% of young mothers who enter the young parent program will graduate from high school.





*Figure 2. Young Parent Program*

### **Zoe's Story (Young Parent Program)**

Zoe is a 17-year-old Latina mother attending the Young Parent Program with her 7-month-old son, Jack. Her long dark hair, big brown eyes, and contagious smile brighten the room when she walks in. She is fun, boisterous, and a little “edgy.” Zoe is a bright girl, who, if not for the more than her fair share of life’s blows, could easily have been the quintessential head cheerleader/prom queen of her class.

Zoe started high school with all the makings of a perfect life: great looks, great grades, popular, and enrolled in an advanced program that offered a full-ride scholarship to college if she passed. Opportunity was at her fingertips until her sophomore year. Although she never mentioned exactly what force entered her life, something had changed. Her grades went from A’s and B’s to D’s and F’s. She talks about heartache and addiction and longing to make the pain go away. She found a prince charming to sweep away her tears, but he ended up being less than charming. She found herself pregnant and mostly alone. Zoe enrolled in the young parent

program to escape the rumors and condemnation she felt at her traditional school and to prove that she would not end up a statistic. She would beat the odds and graduate high school and make a good life for herself and her son.

Whenever we met, Zoe always seemed at odds within herself. She was spunky and friendly and almost always had a giant smile on her face, yet there was sadness when you looked into her eyes. It was obvious she was dealing with a lot – motherhood, school, getting kicked out of her home, often living on friends' couches, trying to get a job, never-ending problems with her boyfriend; but it was the responses in her interviews and her journal that revealed a deep internal struggle that she concealed so well.

Zoe spoke of how becoming a mother had saved her life. Jack, her son, gave her a reason to be better. Although she often fantasized about having the perfect life: fun, friends, sports, prom, and college, without him, she believes she would probably be hooked on drugs, settling for her GED, and a life without meaning. Jack changed all that. He gave her the strength she needed to make the tough choices every day to go to school, work hard, and graduate with a diploma. This excerpt from her journal, which she titled, “Phases” enlightens us to the deep wrestling within her soul:

Does every teenage mom go through this phase? Phase of rebellion and running away from life's problems? Does anyone else ask should I give up or keep going another day? Is this just a phase? Can I fight through the pain? Does anyone look back and remember what used to be? Back before diapers, bottles, and daycare. Back before make-up, boyfriends, and prom dates. Even before middle school, homework, and volleyball. Back when all the trouble you got in didn't affect the future. Is the way that I'm thinking just a part of this phase? Will I come out of the hole I am sinking in? How can I fight through this pain?

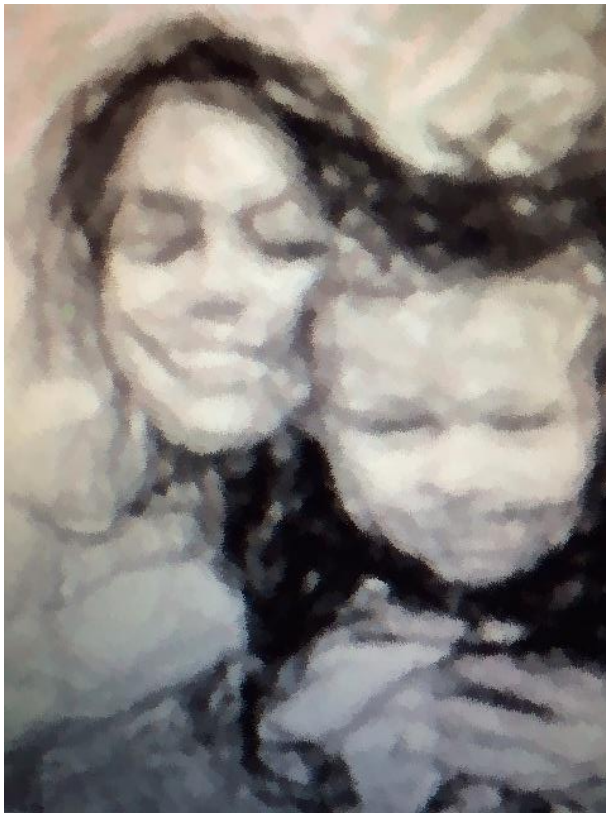
I WILL get through this phase. I WILL get through this pain. I CAN do it all by myself with a positive mindset. I won't do it for myself. Instead, I'll do it for my boy. I'll get through school. I'll let Jack know he can do the same. Even though it's hard, I'll make it every day.

(Signed) – Positive thoughts

Zoe talked a lot about the struggles of being a teen mother, trying to “juggle all of the homework, bottles, and chores.” When asked about obstacles or regrets, Zoe’s cheerful countenance would cloud over and a deep sorrow would wash over her face like the changing tide. The internal conflict of loving her son so much and the yearning for a normal, carefree life of a teenager were apparent in all of her responses. More than any of the other participants, Zoe’s struggle with being a teen mother was not about finding daycare or doing homework; her struggle was dealing with the enormous weight of responsibility that she felt to do everything she possibly could to give Jack the best life possible. Her dream was to create and provide security for Jack. Every decision she made was towards that goal.

By the end of the school year, Zoe was struggling to attend school. Dealing with homelessness for the last six months of the school year, she had finally gotten a job at a fast food restaurant and had gotten her own place. While this provided the stability Zoe and Jack needed, it made attending school that much more difficult. Zoe did not finish in time to walk with her class, but completed her work by the end of the school year and graduated in four years with her class. She was offered a full ride scholarship to massage therapy school but ended up turning it down to continue providing financially for her son. She believed, as so many teen mothers do, that the responsibilities of today outweigh the promises of tomorrow.

Fortunately, Zoe did not give up on her dreams. She moved out of town and is attending the local college majoring in psychology.



*Figure 3. Zoe and Jack*

When asked what metaphor she would use to describe being a teen mother in high school,

Zoe stated:

Being a young parent is like being forced to fly when you don't have the tools or knowledge on how to do so. It's a slap to reality and out of dreamland, a loss of gravity and nothing to hold on to. I feel as if I am Christopher Columbus and parenting is the unmarked, unknown territory of being a parent.



*Figure 4. Zoe's metaphore.*

### **Zianna's Story (Young Parent Program)**

Zianna is a 17-year-old Latina mother who attends the young parent program with her 1-year-old daughter, Audrina. Zianna is a sweet, hard-working girl whose life revolves around her daughter like the earth revolves around the sun. She is an excellent mother and is consistently making decisions based upon what she believes is best for Audrina; you never see one without the other. All decisions seem to run through the filter of, "How will this affect Audrina?" Her dedication is both admirable and inspiring.

Zianna is also a good student. She has good attendance and a work ethic that makes her stand out among her peers. Zianna has a learning disability, but her caliber of work far exceeds what teachers might expect. She possesses a rare tenacity to never give up. As I worked with Zianna, I was often reminded of the tortoise in the tortoise and the hare fable. She steadily made progress every single day, working with the same determination and methodical plodding of someone determined to finish a race that others think is impossible.

Zianna described herself as a good student who ditched a lot prior to becoming pregnant. She states that she wished she had listened to her mother about not going out with boys. However, once she found out she was pregnant, her behaviors changed. She became increasingly determined to finish high school and prove everyone wrong who said she is never going to make it. About one month before graduation, her daughter became ineligible to attend the daycare in the young parent program due to her age. Zianna's attendance went from stellar to abysmal overnight. She wrote about this stressful time in her journal:

Not being able to take my daughter with me to school kills me. I don't know why they tell me when there's just a month left in school. I am so stressed, because I don't have a babysitter, I'm missing school, and it's hard to do homework at home because my daughter doesn't let me. She tries to get my attention, and I can't help but not play with her. I do homework when she's passed out, but that's once in awhile because she never

sleeps. I look at her when I do homework and think to myself, “This is all for you baby girl and once I graduate and go for my dreams, you’ll be proud of me.”

Despite the struggles and setbacks, Zianna found the strength to finish her work and was able to graduate on time with her class. In addition to this accomplishment, she was the first in her family to earn a high school diploma and was also voted the school’s outstanding senior student for her dedication and commitment to her future. In her journal, Zianna gives advice to other teen moms in a section titled, “10 Things I’ve Learned from Being a Teenage Mom – Being a Mom Ain’t Easy!” Her poignant words give us a glimpse into the struggles these young mothers face.

1. Don’t set expectations. My teenage self was expecting a fairytale ending. Needless to say, I got a big non-fairytale smack in the face.
2. With only 16 years of life experience, I was not mentally prepared to have a baby.
3. You are going to lose friends. A lot of them or all of them.
4. People are always waiting for you to mess up...just so they can say, “I told you so.”
5. No matter what happens in life, get your education! Be a good role model to your child.
6. Boys can make babies, but it takes a real man to raise one!
7. The judgments on teenage mother/teenage pregnancy are still harsh.
8. Adulthood and motherhood are very expensive. If it weren’t for my baby daddy, I would be struggling. (Zianna wanted me to make sure and report that her boyfriend was a constant support for her and her daughter. She was one of the lucky ones whose boyfriend took on the full responsibility of fatherhood, which allowed her to focus on finishing school).
9. I wasn’t okay with missing my youth, but now that I found my comfort zone in being a mom, it changed everything.
10. MTV doesn’t show you half of what you should expect from being a teen mom.





*Figure 5. Zianna and Audrina*

When asked to provide a metaphor of what being a teen mom in high school is like, Zianna said, “Being a mom and a student is just like a roller coaster – exciting, but then hard at times.”



*Figure 6. Zianna’s metaphor.*

### **The Alternative School**

With an average of around 150 students per year, the alternative school is a relatively small campus set right downtown, square in the middle of town. This is important because the school’s students, all at-risk for dropping out, come from all across the valley, misfits in their formal traditional high schools. While one might expect to see cliques, students from each high

school banding together with a common heritage, nearly the opposite is the case. Students at the alternative school came together in a way unique from other high schools. There were no real cliques here. No cowboys hanging out by their trucks making fun of the jocks playing hoops on the court, who are oblivious to the smokers hanging across the street. Rather, the alternative school is a place where the playing field has been leveled. All sorts of different people attend, ex-members of whatever clique they were forced into at the traditional school. Here, everyone is an alternative high student. When asked about stigma, most of the participants described hating cliques and the expectations of fitting in at the traditional school. Here, they don't have to. It's not perfect, but people don't judge them by what they wear or whom they hang out with. They accept you for who you are. Charlee stated, "In regular schools, there's cliques and you have to try and fit in, but here, you can be what you want to be."

There is an unspoken understanding at the alternative school that students were there due to some factor or issue that made traditional school not work for them. This understanding builds a camaraderie amongst the students that allows them to look beyond the issue and see the individual. One of the common issues students attending the alternative school face is pregnancy and parenthood. While the young parent program is located on site, several students not in that program are also parenting. When asked about stigma over their pregnancy, Charlee said, "I don't worry about people judging me that I have a child because it's not out of the ordinary (here). I mean it's not normal, but it's not out of the ordinary. People here are just more understanding about that, because they see the good statistic. They don't see the negative statistics like at traditional high school."

Another major difference noted between the alternative school and the traditional school is the interactions between students and their teachers. Charlee stated, "Everyone here really



wants to see everyone succeed. I think they're really what helps the most, because you can tell that the teachers are really trying to help you...they really pushed me to do my best – they believed in me when I didn't believe in myself.” Ashley confirmed, “Teachers and how they're so different from regular high school because they will actually try and not just be your teacher, but your friend. They want to be a part of your life, not just in school but to help you through your struggles.”

When asked about negative aspects of the alternative school, most students shrugged and shared the common belief that it was pretty good. They believed that teachers cared and were genuinely trying to help them. The students spoke about flexibility and understanding and second chances. Charlee reluctantly commented, “I feel like sometimes, I hate to say this, but sometimes the type of kids that go here, you know, sometimes I feel like the school is labeled as where the bad kids go or whatever.” It was obvious she felt like she was betraying her beloved school by voicing this sentiment. Unfortunately, she is correct. Working in this school district, it has been my experience that people in the area think of the alternative school as the school where all the bad kids go. Even a lot of school district employees hold this belief. If only they could see those kids who are so frequently in trouble at the traditional schools on campus at the alternative school. They would be so surprised. The loners and troublemakers there are the leadership team, the mock trial team, and the straight “A” students here. The alternative school is a place where these kids can finally bloom and grow.



*Figure 7. The Alternative School*

### **Charlee's Story (Alternative School)**

Charlee is an 18-year-old Caucasian mother who attends the alternative school while her two-year-old son, Wade, stays home with her father or her fiancée. She is hard working and determined. Her gentle, kind spirit exudes an air of peacefulness and calm wherever she goes. But do not let this gentleness fool you because, there is a dogged determination and inner warrior living within that quiet exterior. Once she determines her pathway, Charlee digs her feet in one day at a time, making forward momentum regardless of what life throws her way.

Charlee found out she was pregnant at age 15, at the end of her freshman year. She described herself as a horrible student who ditched all the time, however, her transcripts tell a different story. She received all passing grades her freshman year, except for one F in math. She did not think she would finish high school. She said she was probably going to drop out but her counselor told her about the young parent program at the alternative school. Charlee transferred

her sophomore year and her attendance and grades were always outstanding after that. She continued in the young parent program until Wade aged out and then her father and fiancée began taking care of him while she continued at the alternative school.

Charlee was a dedicated student and attended the local community college in addition to high school and earned her Certified Nursing Assistant license. Everything seemed to be going great, and she was expecting to finish up to a year ahead of schedule. Her dreams of being a doctor seemed to be within her grasp when life threw her another curve ball. Through a series of personal events, which included major relationship struggles with her boyfriend, miscarrying a child, and becoming homeless, she ended up missing a ton of school, took a temporary leave of absence, and then eventually dropped out for a brief period. Whenever she would come by the school, she spoke of her longing to finish and get back on track, but the stars just would not align. Although her sadness was apparent, she handled everything so gracefully. She always had a smile on her face and a resolve to get things straightened out and get back to school. When she did return, that resolve and determination were kicked into high gear and she blasted forward through her work.

Charlee came to school every single day, worked the entire time, and never complained; she always had a smile on her face. This is extraordinary for any high school student, but for a teen mom who has to find a ride every single day and has to leave her two-year-old home, it's extraordinary. Charlee however, did this while dealing with the additional burden of being homeless. She and her fiancée had gotten evicted and were living in a tent outside her father's house. Wade slept inside, but Charlee slept outside (in Colorado) all of March, April, and May. Although she never mentioned her hardships at school, her journal entries reveal the dichotomy of the hope for tomorrow and the struggles of the present. "Today I'm feeling held back. I have

4.5 credit left and three months to complete them. On top of that, I'm in debt with my housing... I feel like I get so far ahead just to be held back by something else.” Then she discusses the bright side, “I'm so happy now I bought a car! My first car! I've bought my son so much! You don't know how good it feels to buy him new things.” An entry later on states, “We're still struggling financially; we both haven't found jobs and our rent is over three months behind. I can't wait to get paid to go to school and to finish my degree and get a job. It's the worst feeling not being able to give my son whatever he wants. I wish life wasn't about the money.” Another ray of hope, “Exciting news: I received Student of the Month! It's a renewable \$500 scholarship to the university! My first scholarship – exciting!” Charlee's journal entries went back and forth between her highs and lows throughout the entire research process.

Graduation is close – I can taste it. I've been spending a lot of time away from my son and it is way hard because I worry about him like crazy. I love him so much and little does he know that everything that I do is for him and our success as a family. Someday we won't have to struggle. . . Ah! Stress! Trying to tie up all the loose ends and get credit done to graduate – but I'm procrastinating... My car broke down! It's a real bummer depending on my dad to babysit and drive me around... So tomorrow we might have a place to live! Ever since being evicted we've been sleeping in a tent outside my dad's house. Wade sleeps inside. Shortly after we got evicted, our name reached the top of the waiting list for housing, my fiancée got a job and things started looking up. So hopefully, we won't be sleeping in the tent much longer.

Her final entry spoke of her hope for the future, “I get my graduation announcements tomorrow, and I have to order my cap and gown so I will have them for graduation... I really want to speak out at graduation and show the staff how much they are appreciated and to show other students that if I can do it, if I can graduate, so can they!”

Charlee had every reason to give up, be grumpy, or be discouraged, but instead, she chose to be optimistic. She believed that finishing school was her ticket to a better future for herself and her family. This belief and her never-give-up attitude helped her accomplish her

dreams. She graduated on-time with her class, got married, moved into a new home, and is attending the university as a physics major.



*Figure 8.* Charlee and Wade at graduation.

When asked to give a metaphor of what being a teen mother in high school is like, Charlee eloquently stated:

Being a teen mom is like Charlie Brown's Christmas tree. They see this little Christmas tree and you know, it's little, it's like they doubt it, and they judge it. They're like, that's no Christmas tree. But then they put the decorations on it and it makes it nice, and they realize it's real potential.



*Figure 9. Charlee's metaphor.*

### **Ashley's Story (Alternative School)**

Ashley is an 18-year-old Caucasian mother who attends the alternative school while her 3-year-old son, Chase, attends daycare. In addition to school, Ashley works about 30 hours per week at the local bakery and lives on her own with Chase's dad, Zane.

Zane also attends the alternative school. He held jobs sporadically throughout the year; however, Ashley is the one who consistently provides financial stability for the family.

Ashley found out she was pregnant at the end of her eighth grade year. "I just knew I was pregnant. It was my first time and I just knew. I didn't sleep the whole night, and I thought about it that whole day." The stress of being pregnant so young caused tension in all of her relationships; family relationships were strained, the relationship with her eighth grade boyfriend faltered when he found out he was going to be a father, and friends and teachers disappeared.

I was concerned about what my parents would think and what my friends would think about me. The only thing I thought about school was, what was everybody going to think about me? That's when I thought, nobody is going to know, just my closest friends – and that's when the whole school found out. That's when I thought about where I was going

to go and what I was going to do. I probably thought I was never going to graduate because that's what everybody told me, that I wouldn't make it. . . My art teacher was the hardest thing. I looked at him as a father figure kind of because my parents got divorced. That was the hardest, he knew Zane . . . When he asked who the dad was and I told him, just the look on his face, it went blank and he was completely surprised and that's when I was like, everybody's disappointed in me. Everybody wouldn't expect this from me. That's what really broke me down a lot - was watching the people I looked up to the most looking at me like, "Oh my gosh! You're such a screw up."

Ashley spoke a lot about the hardships of being such a young mother. Her loss of friends and teachers were especially devastating to her. She had an inner sadness that was evident in every one of our conversations and throughout her journal. Although she was strong, and determined, and extremely proud of the fact that she was going to graduate, beat the statistics, and prove everyone wrong in the process, she was mourning the loss of her youth. "Pregnancy changes you. Having a child changes you – you become an adult. I've been an adult since I was 15 years old. I don't care what people say – I'm an adult." Ashley struggled with juggling all of the responsibilities of a high school student; homework, attendance, and getting work completed to graduate on time. She also dealt with the responsibilities of motherhood; daycare, bottles, diapers, and illness. These struggles were compounded by the responsibilities of adulthood; holding down a job, paying rent, paying bills, cleaning, cooking, and managing a young relationship. All of these responsibilities weighed her down like a millstone around her neck. Rather than being crushed beneath the weight, however, these responsibilities gave Ashley an inner strength and fortitude that helped her rise above the surmounting obstacles and soar:

Life just seems to get harder and harder. Mixed emotions, more challenges, more decisions. I just need a break from everything, a vacation to take my mind off of things. Juggling so many things at once is ridiculous! I need more help, more energy, something to take a weight off my shoulders! All I can do is keep praying and hope that I can make it through all of this . . . I see so many young women getting pregnant! I don't look down on them or despise them...it's sad, it makes me worry about how many people will stand up and fight to make it. It's not easy, but it's doable. My heart goes out to them. I know how it is being stared at, despised, being called names, and struggling. I could write my whole story, and people would feel sorry for me too, but I don't want that. I want people

to look at me as an example, so they can do what I have done; make themselves have goals, dreams, and want to be better for themselves and their children!

Ashley candidly spoke of her struggles and her hopes. She wrote:

Only 10 more days left of high school! I got .25 credits today in math – only .75 more to go. Still, the stress is on. Worrying about school, my son's attitude, and relationship. Struggle, struggle, struggle! Still having everything to do on my own, it kind of scares me about after high school. I won't feel like a child anymore. I'll actually be an adult, living life as no longer a teen mom, but a young one. I start college in the fall and I am actually very ready! New people, new friends, new possibilities!!!

Her determination and absolute refusal to give up on anything is inspiring and her desire for a better future for her family and for other teen mothers is admirable.

Throughout the research process, Ashley frequently offered sound advice for teachers and policymakers to help make the experience of trying to graduate high school better for young moms, such as the following:

I lost all of my teachers in 8<sup>th</sup> grade when I got pregnant, they just stopped talking to me...I see my favorite 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher today, and he doesn't even say a word to me, he doesn't talk to me. Maybe he doesn't recognize me, but I pretty much look the same. Seeing my teachers, how they treated me, and then I go back to show everyone who Chase is, my son, and that I'm still going (to school) but they all just kind of looked at me like, oh, you have a baby. So all of my teachers, they just kind of backed out. That's one thing that makes me sad is to watch teachers be like that to students because they don't know your story. . . One thing that motivates me to stay in school (at the alternative school) is teachers and how they are so different from regular school, because they will actually try and be not just your teacher, but your friend. They want to be a part of your life, not just in school, but to help you through your struggles...Don't feel sorry for me, just be there for me. . . All of the schools should put 100% to try to help teen moms get what they need to get through. Other schools don't have that – teen moms don't want to go to other schools. They need to provide a daycare, teachers that will be more understanding, a building to be with their babies but get to go to the other building to participate (with non-parenting students). It (teen mothering) needs to be respected – we're not terrible.

Ashley had a deep care and concern for helping other teen mothers succeed. She was striving to be not only better for herself and her son, but to be an example of how teen moms can make it



through, despite all the hardships. She spoke about this frequently and was quick to offer encouragement for them to hang in there:

Don't be afraid, you're going to get through it. . . don't be hard on yourself. Don't blame yourself for anything, because you lose everyone. I see it on Facebook all the time; I'm pregnant and none of my friends talk to me. I told a girl last night, it's ok, you'll get through it. You're going to find your true friends one day. College is right around the corner. I'm going to meet so many people from so many places. It's going to happen. Don't be scared. You're going to get through it . . . don't give up! Don't be afraid!

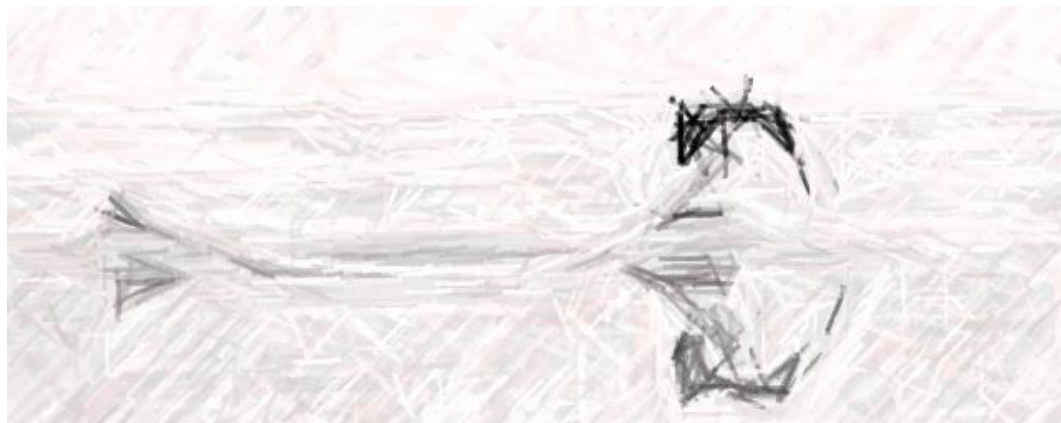
Ashley is a great example for others. Despite all odds, she graduated on time with her class. She and her boyfriend are working hard on providing a solid family environment for their son. Zane is working in construction and helping the family financially, while Ashley attends the local university where she is studying to become a doctor.



*Figure 10.* Ashley and Chase

When asked to give a metaphor of what being a teen parent in high school is like, Ashley said:

I feel like an ant, and I'm traveling the whole world. I have to get around the world by trying to get a boat to get across the water, trying to get some food so I don't fall over and die. That's how I feel going through school as a teen mom – it's the hardest battle you're ever going to face.



*Figure 11.* Ashley's metaphor.

### **Hannah's Story (Alternative School)**

Hannah is a 20-year-old Caucasian girl who attends the alternative school. She has a three-year-old daughter, Bree, who is taken care of by her mother or boyfriend when she attends school and works. Hannah is a beautiful girl who carries herself with confidence. She has an air of wholesomeness about her that continued to grow throughout the entire research process. Her genuine and heartfelt responses left me with the impression of someone trying to do the very best they can in life in order to make the lives of others better.

Hannah started attending the traditional school her freshman year, but, after attending private schools through middle school, she immediately felt lost inside its vast walls. This "culture shock," as she describes it, sent her looking for a different school. She ended up going to the alternative school her freshman year. She liked the smaller class sizes, independent pacing

of the curriculum, and the ability to go to school part-time and work part-time. She described herself as a pretty good student that never really ditched, but also didn't really do much work.

Hannah found out she was pregnant her sophomore year, and, although others encouraged her to get her GED, she felt like that would be settling. She believed that she owed it to her daughter to do more and be more. "I just wanted to be the best I could for my little girl . . . I think you should try, "It's not her fault." Although she did not complete in four years, Hannah continued to diligently plug away at working and attending school.

Hannah spoke about juggling being a mom, a student, an employee, and a girlfriend. However, she seemed to handle everything with such grace – although she stated that it was hard, she never gave the impression of being weighed down by the responsibility. Rather, she seemed to rise to the occasion and blossom under its pressures. Whether or not her age played into this sense of well-being, I don't know. Maybe early on in her pregnancy or motherhood she had felt more burdened, but by the time I got to know her, she walked securely in her role as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Hannah is a sweet girl that wished she had been "sweeter" in the past. She reflected on "being a brat" when she was younger and wishing she had known better. Her mature outlook on all of her relationships made her respected by her teachers and peers. She was working diligently to complete her high school requirements but had already far surpassed the high school mindset of dating, dances, and drama. It is really no surprise that Hannah chose not to walk in her graduation ceremony. She said she felt like it was for high school kids, and she was an adult just doing what she needed to do to move into the next phase of her life.

At our last meeting, Hannah was excited about her future. She had completed all of her requirements to graduate and got a job at an ophthalmology office where she would make \$4 an

hour more than she was currently making. She also started night school to earn her Certified Nursing Assistant's license. Her positive outlook and hard work seem to be paying off, with a bright, happy life for her and her family ahead.

When asked what being a teen mom in high school is like, Hannah stated, "It's like a puzzle because you can either fall apart or you can pick yourself up and put it all together. Then, once you're done, you can see the masterpiece that you've done."



*Figure 12.* Hannah's metaphor.

### **The Traditional School**

The traditional school looks like any ordinary American high school from the outside, but once inside, it is anything but typical. A maze of passageways meanders to and fro in every imaginable direction. There are more than 30 doors leading outside from the building and nearly as many dead end hallways. From inside, one can only imagine that the building is a series of additions, since there seems to be no real layout plan. Looking for a classroom is also slightly

amusing since room numbers can jump from one hallway to the next. There is almost a feeling of having entered Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry with its moving stairwells. New students and visitors need a guide to locate anything within its walls.

Maneuvering the jumble of mixed-up passageways through the school is a formidable task between classes, but once the bell rings over 1,600 students enter the maze, it's nearly impossible. Wherever you are located, when the swarm arrives, you are easily carried along with the crowd. It takes a lot of skill and determination to escape its powerful grasp. This is an activity reserved for natives only. One ill-timed visit was all it took for this researcher to plan more accordingly.

While the inside of the building is a mass of confusion and congestion, a jumbled up mixing pot of everyone who enters, the outside is very different. Although there is a similar swarm-like behavior in the parking lot before and after school, once the vehicles are parked, a very distinct pattern emerges. On one side of the lot, an array of late 1980's early 1990's Fords, Chevys, and other "beater" farm vehicles sit awaiting the end of school and ready to get back to the fields. Hay, hitches, cowboy hats, and a whole array of gear are found throughout. Occasionally, even a horse can be found delivering a student to school. These vehicles belong to the farm kids, roughly a third of the student body population. On the other side of the lot sit a host of newer, shinier vehicles. Mostly Hondas or Toyotas but also quite a few Mustangs, Lexus, and BMWs, these cars speak loudly of the family's income. These vehicles belong to the "rich kids" of the valley, attending the traditional school located closest to the wealthy part of town but right smack in the middle of the farming community. This is a place where the haves and the have-nots come together in a unique arrangement. This dichotomous mixture would

probably prove fairly volatile except that they have figured out how to turn their rivalry against the other traditional schools in the area instead of upon one another.

Most of the students who attend the traditional school are fiercely loyal, chanting its superiority above all of the other schools. There are a few students who struggle to fit into the mad, craziness inside and choose instead to learn in a small modular located out in the school parking lot. These students do not always fit into the main two groups within the high school, and somehow find themselves separate both socially and physically. These students are going against the flow and working on an alternate pathway to earn their diplomas. This alternative program is the brainchild of the school district to help the traditional schools hold onto more of their at-risk students, lightening the load of the alternative school. Students in this program can stay at their home school but work on requirements that will allow them to graduate much quicker than the traditional method. This program is reserved for those students who are more than one year behind in their credit earning. The students here more closely resemble the students at the alternative school, Maddie declared, "They're like the kids that have kids or are pregnant. They're not like the preppy (kids), so they understand...they've all been through different things so they're not judgmental." With fewer students, the teacher in the program also works more closely with her students than the traditional teachers can. "She just helps me with everything, but, if I ever have trouble with anything, she's really flexible with my schedule. I do most of my school at home. She made it seem like, 'well I understand you need a job but you have to finish school. I'm not letting you give up. You have to finish this and then I would.'" The program helps an average of 8-10 at-risk students who might otherwise dropout earn a regular high school diploma every year.



*Figure 13. The Traditional School*

### **Maddie's Story (Traditional School)**

Maddie is an 18-year-old Caucasian mother who attends the traditional school. She utilizes a variety of friends and family members to take care of her one and a half-year-old daughter, Kimmie, while she attends school and works. Maddie's resolve was evident from the moment she walked in to the first interview. She gave the impression of someone who was doing what needed to be done, no matter what anyone else thought, almost as if she could care less. Due to her matter-of-fact attitude, it appeared easy to predict what her responses to the interview questions would be, however, this proved not to be the case.

Maddie found out she was pregnant in the middle of her sophomore year. She claims to have not liked school, ditched a lot, and had bad grades. Her family encouraged her to have an abortion or give the baby up for adoption, but Maddie decided she would keep the baby. This decision made her determined to finish high school. She was worried about graduating, because she was way behind on credits. Fortunately, her school offered an alternative pathway to earn

her regular diploma but would allow her to have a more flexible schedule and be able to finish in less time. Maddie quickly switched into this program and continued attending the traditional school, but working in a modular on the school campus.

It appears that her “I don’t care” attitude was born out of extrinsic necessity rather than an intrinsic perspective. She stated that, when she got pregnant, she lost all of her friends, and had vicious rumors spread about her that were so bad that child protective services were called, only to find that there was no truth to the claims these high school girls made. Maddie said she avoided going into the main campus at all, because, “everybody in the school just stared at me. So I was like, ‘I hate all you guys.’ So I just didn’t talk to anybody.” She kept to herself and worked hard to finish her requirements to graduate. She stated that she liked the other students in her alternative program, because they were more understanding of her situation as they often had life circumstances they were dealing with as well.

Maddie talked candidly about her struggles with being a new mom, getting work done, finding rides to school, trying to get daycare set up for Kimmie, and working an almost full-time job, and her brother got sent to prison for a time. The struggles of being a teen mom paled in comparison to Maddie’s real tragedy - coping with the suicide of her mother her senior year. In her journal, she wrote a lot about the impact her mom’s death had on her:

October 17 was the hardest day of my life. I remember it like it was yesterday. My mom and me were supposed to go shopping after she got off work and go talk to the lawyer about the house being put in her name. She left work early and no one could find her and no one could get ahold of her. I ended up downloading an app to track her phone. It was at the Best Western. She was gone. I miss my mom so much. I can’t begin to explain how I’m living on my own with my daughter and boyfriend trying to make it through.

She also wrote a poignant poem about her mom:

She said, I can’t do this alone,  
This dark road where I yearn,  
I know I am loved,





I feel shoved.  
 Away from my family,  
 Away from life.  
 I'm in a dark place,  
 I have nowhere to hide.  
 I need to find a way out of this life,  
 A way out of this hell.  
 I need the Lord to help me move forward,  
 So this is the end.  
 She wrote, "I can't do this anymore, I love you."

*Figure 14.* Maddie and her mom.

Maddie's countenance was born out of a desperate need to complete this difficult chapter of her life and move forward into a better, safer future for her and her daughter. Her determination was both sorrowful and admirable.

Maddie's heart wrenching traumas gave her a grace for others battling hard circumstances. When asked about teen mothers who drop out, she spoke about how hard it is and how easy it would be to just give up. She believed that these mothers probably had to be far worse off than she was – no support, no other alternatives. She did not know what caused them to drop out, but she was absolutely unwilling to place any judgment on their decisions. She was extremely grateful to her friends and family for watching Kimmie and to a teacher who was both understanding and flexible, yet unwavering in her constant appeal for Maddie to graduate.

Maddie did find the strength to graduate on time with her class despite her incredible life tragedy. She moved out east to be with her father who offered her both support and stability. She had a full ride scholarship to the local university, which she turned down when she moved. Maddie plans on finding a good school out east and pursuing a degree in pharmacology.



*Figure 15.* Maddie and Kimmie

When asked what being a teen mother in high school is like, Maddie said, “being on a roller coaster. It has some good times and some bad times. Then you’re upside down most of the time.”



*Figure 16. Maddie's metaphor*

### **Summary**

The stories presented in this chapter, produce a deeper level of meaning for the reader. Their struggles, which were so generously shared by these young mothers, provided the framework for understanding the complexity of events experienced by this extraordinary group of young moms. These insights bring deeper meaning to the five themes, which emerged: struggle, hope, support, perseverance, and transformation. These themes are presented in detail in the next chapter along with what was learned in this study and recommendations for educators and policy makers as well as suggestions for further study.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **THEMES**

Chapter Four took an in-depth look into the lives of six teen mothers navigating three different educational environments. Their voices were utilized to tell their stories of educational resiliency, painting a portrait of what life as a teenage mother is like. Similarly, chapter five uses “snapshots” of each participant’s voice to develop the five themes that emerged in this study: struggle, hope, support, perseverance, and transformation.

### **OVERVIEW**

Although teenage pregnancy has been declining over the past several decades, it is still considered to be a social issue, which affects roughly 35 out of every 1,000 teenagers in the United States. Of great concern, is that more than 40 years after the passage of Title IX, which guarantees educational rights to teen mothers, presently, only about 50% of teen mothers graduate high school compared to 90% for their non-parenting peers (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). This is a huge discrepancy that must be eradicated. The economic costs to families and society are significant enough to validate this claim. The Center for Labor Market Studies (2009) stated, “Americans without a high school diploma have considerably lower earning power and job opportunities in today’s workforce. Over a working lifetime, high school dropouts are estimated to earn \$400,000 less than those that graduated from high school” (p. 4). Besides the economic costs, educators and policymakers have a moral and ethical obligation to increase graduation rates for teenage mothers. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) demanded that educators ensure equal educational opportunities for all students.

This piece of legislation has generated a plethora of research and resources aimed at closing the achievement gap for all categories of at risk students including special education and English Language Learners (ELL). Unfortunately, while research and resources have been funneled to help alternative schools, which often serve teen mothers, there has been relatively little research geared specifically towards increasing graduation rates for teen mothers. Raywid (1994)

remarked:

Despite the ambiguities and the emergence of multiple alternatives, two enduring consistencies have characterized alternative schools from the start: they have been designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program and consequently, they have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization, programs and environments. (p. 26)

In fact, according to Pillow, (2004) there is a general lack of understanding on how to effectively educate pregnant and parenting teens. She further declared:

Research that explicitly details the experiences of pregnant/mothering students in schools is necessary in order to begin to interrupt existing discursive structures defining the teen mother and her educational needs and to understand how teen mothers currently access and experience educational opportunity. (p. 221)

When considering the future implications dropping out of high school has, it should be considered malpractice that practitioners have had so little input on affecting the policies that govern the education of pregnant and parenting teens.

This qualitative case study aimed to fill that gap by utilizing portraiture as a means to give voice to six resilient teen mothers living the experience of graduating high school. Their portraits, presented in chapter four were, “designed to capture (the) richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 3). By interviewing six graduating teen mothers attending three different schools, this narrative case study also attempted to answer the central research question of this study, “What factors

contribute to teen mothers' educational resiliency?" Additionally, this study sought to answer several sub-questions:

- Q1     What factors of the various school environments encourage motivation and support resiliency in teen mothers?
- Q2     What are the teen mothers' perceptions of stigma within the various educational settings?
- Q3     What are teen mothers' perceptions of the opportunities and support services available in each educational setting?

Two one-on-one interviews per participant, field texts including journals with photographs, and review of records were used as the means for gathering the data. By analyzing the data through the lens of portraiture, I looked for convergence and contrast of themes by searching for repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, institutional and cultural rituals, triangulation of data, and revealing patterns. Utilizing the methodology of portraiture, triangulation, and member checking as a means to verify reliability, several themes emerged: struggle, hope, support, perseverance, and transformation. These themes will be presented in detail in this chapter along with multiple quotes from the participants to validate and highlight the inter-connectedness of each theme.

Additionally, a seventh voice, my own, resonates throughout the discussion as prescribed by portraiture. These themes provide insight into the research questions and lead to recommendations for educators and policy makers alike. Figure 17 is a visual representation of each of the themes and illustrates how they are connected.

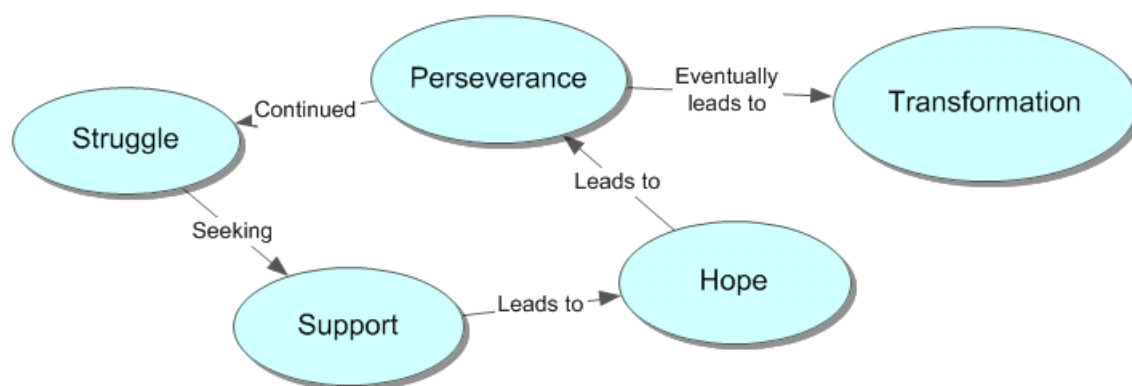


Figure 17. Relationship among the five themes.

### Themes Identified

Five themes emerged during the research process, struggle, hope, support, perseverance, and transformation. These themes resonated throughout the interviews and journal entries. They were present in every aspect of the young mothers' lives and were conveyed over and over again. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) suggested analyzing data by looking for repetitive refrains, "the ones that are clearly and persistently articulated by the actors... over and over again" (p. 193). Four of the themes struggle, hope, support, and perseverance fell clearly into this category of repetitive refrains. The fifth theme, transformation, was evident in each of the participants' lives, but they did not articulate it as clearly as the others. The fifth theme, transformation, is one that I, as the researcher, observed and determined to include in the aesthetic whole. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) described the aesthetic whole as, "the last and most comprehensive feature of portraiture" (p. 261). She stated:

The portraitist as artist is constructing and communicating her understanding for the reconstruction reinterpretation of the reader. This communicative expression of understanding relies on the creation of a unified whole. Without unity, without the parts fitting together into an intelligible articulation, there is no communication – no understanding to be shared or found . . . resonance after all is manifest as recognition – as "yes, of course." The "yes, but" response affirms a fragmented view of parts: "This part is true; this other is not." The overall "yes, of course" is a holistic response, the recognition of a portrayal that taken in all at once – appreciated in its entirety – rings true. (p. 261)

The theme of transformation helps bring unity to the stories presented and the insights gained from the research process.

## **Struggle**

Paramount to any discussion on teen motherhood is the theme of struggle. Teen mothers face a host of obstacles to high school completion including attendance issues related to pregnancy and parenting, daycare issues, and transportation issues (Lesko, 1995). Each of the teen mothers in this study talked about the massive amounts of obstacles they faced. Table 2 illustrates each of the sub-themes identified during the analysis of the data and how it was assembled into the theme of struggle.

Table 2

*Theme 1, Struggle, with Sub-themes*

<b>STRUGGLE</b>
Ashamed, challenges, cliques, concerns, difficult, disappointed, failure, fear, hard, ignored, judged, juggling, lonely, no motivation, not stable, pressure, responsibility, rumors, sad, stress, struggle, time management, worry

All six of the participants discussed a variety of struggles they faced as teen mothers. Their struggles fell into three categories: emotional, physical, and social. Table 3 illustrates the sub-themes arranged into their subsequent categories.



Table 3

*Theme of Struggle Broken into Categories with Corresponding Sub-themes*

Struggle Type	Sub-themes
Emotional Struggle	Ashamed, concerns, failure, fear, sad, worry
Physical Struggle	Challenges, difficult, hard, juggling, no motivation, not stable, pressure, responsibility, stress, struggle, time management
Social Struggle	Cliques, disappointed, ignored, judged, lonely, rumors

**Emotional struggle.** Many of the participants discussed their internal struggles with self-doubt. Marzano and Pickering (2011), found that students' emotional, cognitive and behavioral attitudes, and beliefs can be directly affected by one's self and others, and these beliefs have connections to motivation. Zoe, who struggled with a lot of emotional stressors, wrote an entry in her journal titled, "Senior Motivation:"

The closer it gets to graduation, the harder it is to go to school. I am so close to being done that it should motivate me to go to school but it doesn't. The only thing that motivates me is Jack. Without my boy, I probably wouldn't be going to school. The only reason I do, is because I want to give my boy a better life.

Ashley repeated that refrain:

I don't want to go to school. I'm too stressed out. I don't want to go to work today, I don't want to think about anything. I just want to stay home, but you can't. You just have to keep pushing and pushing. I want to be a better example for Chase; try to have a better relationship with my boyfriend, as hard as it is - we're *so* young - so that Chase doesn't have to go through everything that we went through. I want to be better for him.

The struggle of motivation was directly tied to a fear of failing or disappointing their babies, family, and teachers. Charlee spoke about her worries about leaving her son to attend school:

My son, you know it's hard leaving him every morning. He's like, "Wait, Mommy!" In the car, like, "Wait, Mommy! Don't go!" I don't want to leave him. "I'll be back." It's

hard leaving him and I miss him a lot. I miss a lot every single day. He's potty trained now, so I'm missing that. That's really a challenge.

The look on her face as she described this scene was sad and doubtful. A mother longing to be with her child, but hoping that in the long run, this choice would lead to a better future for her family.

Another struggle many of the teen moms faced was isolation. The stigma associated with teen pregnancy often left them feeling ignored, sad, and lonely. Ashley spoke extensively about the emotional struggles of being a teen mom.

I feel alone a lot. Lonely. I mean you have your baby, but they don't talk back to you. They don't understand exactly what you're saying. I have my boyfriend, but he's gone a lot or we fight a lot because we're so stressed out. So, I really do feel alone a lot of the time. You can call your parents, but they're just worried. They want to know what's going on with you, and how your job is going, if you're going to be able to pay rent, stuff like that. Then you have no friends. They don't want to hang out. You've got your baby. They're cranky, or super hungry, or pulling on you, "Talk to me. Talk to me. Don't talk to your friend." I get that a lot from Chase if I'm on the phone. He's like, "Talk to me, Mom. Don't talk to them." Everyone is like, "Oh, I'll just let you go." I just want everyone to be more understanding about it. It makes me sad.

More than any of the others, Ashley was very forthright about her longing for friendship and someone to talk to. Most of the participants mentioned losing their friends when they found out they were pregnant. Maddie also wrote about the emotional struggle of loss, by saying, "Let's just say I didn't have the best pregnancy. I lost all of my friends except three of them. I gained 73 pounds, and got very behind in school . . . My boyfriend ended up going to jail. That was really rough on me. He was in there for over a year." Later that year, she lost her mom, she explained this by saying, "I miss my mom so much. I can't begin to explain how I'm living on my own with my daughter and boyfriend, trying to make it through."

Emotional struggles frequented the teen mothers' discussions and journal reflections. All six struggled emotionally with the weight of being a teen mother. Additionally, they all faced physical struggles that compounded the issue.

**Physical struggle.** Teen mothers juggle a host of responsibilities that include parenting, growing up, completing high school, and possibly even caring for a household, both practically and financially. SmithBattle, (2006) confirmed, "Many teen mothers face the daunting challenge of combining school, work, and mothering with unreliable childcare and transportation" (p. 133). Zoe spoke frequently about her struggles with juggling all of the responsibilities of being a young mom in the following passage:

It is unfair for people to think just because young ladies become teen mothers that their life is ruined. They do not know the struggle that comes with being a full time student and a 24/7 mother. It isn't easy to juggle all of the homework, bottles, and chores, even if you are 25. Try adding all the struggles of still growing up and fighting with what is right vs. what I want. Not everyone understands that even though we are expected to grow up right away it is hard. The inner us wants to run away and numb all the hardships away. For most teen moms, that is exactly what they do. But what about the 50% of us who actually try to better ourselves? Where is our credit?

Maddie also struggled with competing responsibilities. She described this as, "People watching Kimmie, I have it figured out now, but rides out there (to the traditional school) because it's really far, work, juggling everything. Daycare is a day-by-day thing. Friends and family pitch in when they can. I was working 40 hours a week." Hannah also struggled with juggling parenting, school, and work. She stated:

I got a job interview where I would make like \$4.00 more, but I know a bunch of optical (her job field) so I'd only have to work four days a week, which is really good. I could be home with my little girl. I was working 35 hours a week and then going to school. I've been overwhelmed.

Not surprisingly, each of the participants mentioned their struggles with juggling all the competing responsibilities. As the mothers spoke about these emotional stressors, you could see

their countenances change. They literally dropped their shoulders and exhaled their breath, feeling the weight, a millstone around their necks.

**Social struggle.** Besides emotional and physical struggles, the six teen mothers in this study experienced social struggles. Pregnant and Parenting Teens (2007) declared, “Those young women who do find themselves pregnant (and 40 percent of all young women in the United States become pregnant before they turn 20) are likely to feel blamed and shamed” (para. 13). Each of the teen moms mentioned struggling with being judged by family, peers, teachers, and the public. Ashley remembered, “I probably thought I was never going to graduate because that’s what everyone told me, that I wouldn’t make it . . . my grandpa was the number one person who said, ‘You’re not going to make it.’” Zianna also expressed her frustration with the stigma of teen parenting by stating:

Don’t you hate being judged? Being judged for being a teenage mother. Everywhere I go, people just stare. Some people speak up and say I’m so young and some people think badly about you. Instead of people making you feel bad, they should be supportive. I think it’s stupid how people talk crap about teenage mothers.

Zoe also mentioned her struggles with stigma. She talked about the difference in stigma at the traditional school and why it led her to change schools. She said, “It’s bigger and there’s more cliques. I did not want to go back to (that) school being pregnant; people start too many rumors.” Hannah confirmed, “One of the reasons I left (the traditional school was) because it’s a less common thing (pregnancy) and knowing that people will quit going to regular school, it’s just something to talk about.”

In addition to stigma from peers their teachers judged a few of the teen moms as well.

Ashley described the pain of losing her teachers. She stated:

I lost all of my teachers in 8<sup>th</sup> grade when I got pregnant. They just stopped talking to me . . . It’s one of the saddest things for people to imagine that that would even happen. You

don't know how it would be for that person. When you come to school to get away and then your teachers . . . you come here to get away. It makes me sad to think about it.

All six of the study's participants struggled. They dealt with the emotional struggles of motivation, sadness, fear of failure, and of being able to overcome their challenges. They dealt with a multitude of physical struggles including the pressures and responsibilities associated with being a teen mom and a student. They dealt with the social struggles of stigma; being judged, dealing with rumors, and isolation. Although each of the participants' struggles were great, their hopes for something better gave them the courage they needed to endure and overcome.

## Hope

One of the defining themes that emerged in this study was hope. Table 4 illustrates each of the sub-themes identified during the analysis of the data and how it was assembled into the theme of hope.

Table 4

### *Theme 2, Hope, with Sub-themes*

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#### **Hope Sub-themes**

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Acceptance, beat the statistics, believe in self, be positive, better future, confidence, determined, encouragement, family, good job, happy, have to try, I can do it, motivated, optimistic, prove them wrong, respect, security, support, try to get help, want the best, work hard

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Spear (2001) asserted that, "for many, motherhood introduces significance and meaning and provides hope for a better future" (p. 574). SmithBattle (2005) concurred, "many studies have shown that motherhood becomes a catalyst for growth and encourages many teens to return to school or to become better students" (p. 13). Each of the teen mothers in this study had a strong hope for creating a better future for themselves and their children.

The participants wrote in their journals for approximately three months. Zoe's hope to provide a better future for herself and Jack was evident throughout. She wrote:

My baby saved my life; therefore, I must give him a better one than I had. Even though life didn't end up the way I planned, God doesn't put you in a situation that you are not strong enough to conquer. But He throws a curve ball at you because He knows you will knock it out of the park.

Jack was my saving point. An angel sent from above. Without him, there is no future in school, happiness, or life. He motivates me every day to do better, go to school, and create a better world for him . . . the day I have my diploma in my hands is the day I hold the key to freedom!

Thinking about the future also gave Zianna hope. She wrote, "I'm so proud of myself for graduating with my class, 2014; on time. I know my mom is going to be proud of me and I can't wait to see that beautiful smile of hers when I tell her, 'I made it!'"

In addition to the hopes and promises graduation holds, Ashley talked about her longing to be self-sufficient. She declared:

Chase is the one that makes me want to come (to school) and have a great life with him and have money. I think you go to school and graduate, and go to college, and graduate college, and be able to put food and everything on the table. I have food stamps, Medicaid – everything is paid for me. But one day, I want to be able to pay for everything by myself and not have to depend on anything. That's one thing that really pushes me, knowing that Chase is going to have a good life if I can do it. That's what I really, really, want. That's what I look forward to. It's exciting!

Although there is a commonly held belief among the public that teen mothers become dependent upon the welfare system, in reality, Kelly (1996) asserted, "researchers have not established that teen motherhood is a prime cause of welfare dependency" (p. 426). Ashley's comments confirm this assertion.

The hope to overcome and provide a better life became the anchor that stabilized the moms throughout the storms. Zianna, reflecting on her family said:

We do struggle at times with money, communication, and trust, but we work things out and try again. I want my family to reach for goals and dreams, to get stronger through

the years and to be happy. I want the best for my family and I can't wait for what the future holds!

Hope helped them overcome struggles, motivated them to seek out the support they needed to find success, gave them the courage to persevere, and was the seed that transformed each of them from scared, young, pregnant girls into confident, young mothers.

### **Support**

Support was a theme that was repeated over and over again. One of the goals of the study was to identify what educational factors encourage motivation and support resiliency for teen mothers to overcome obstacles and graduate high school. The research identifies several supports, which helped these teen mothers become resilient. Under the theme of support, two categories, educational support and family support, emerged. Additionally, four sub-categories arose under educational support; setting, teachers, services, and peers. Table 5 illustrates the categories and sub-categories with each of the sub-themes identified to create the overarching theme of support.

Table 5

*Theme 3, Support, with Categories, Sub-categories, and Sub-themes*

<b>Support</b>		
<b>Educational Categories</b>	<b>Educational Sub-themes</b>	<b>Family Sub-themes</b>
SETTING	Normalcy, no stigma, safe, understanding	Helpful, supportive, understanding
TEACHERS	Acceptance, advice, believed in me, encouragement, guidelines, helpful, knows me, listens, nurture, pushed me, recognition, respect, supportive, relationships, understanding	
SERVICES	Alternative classes, community supports, daycare, flexibility, goal setting, help, individualized pacing, life skills, small class size, structure	
PEERS	Acceptance, respect, supportive, relationships, understanding	

**Educational support.** The central question of this study was, “What factors contribute to teen mothers’ educational resiliency?” Of all of the themes identified, this theme, educational support, most closely answers that question. There were several educational support services identified by each of the teen mothers, regardless of where they attended school. As a researcher, this surprised me. I expected that the participants from the young parent program would discuss the daycare as a major support since they chose to attend there primarily for that service. I anticipated the alternative students would talk about flexibility of schedule and curriculum, and the traditional participant would highlight activities, clubs, and/or the variety of classes offered as the supports that kept them at the traditional school. While several of these



assumptions were correct, I found it interesting how similar each of the reported supports were, regardless of educational setting. When asked about how their school motivated them and helped support resiliency towards graduating high school, all of the moms mentioned four categories of supports; setting, teachers, services, and peers, that played a critical role in their success.

**Setting.** According to Mittelstadt (1997), “parenting teens often chose to leave school because of the difficulties imposed on them by their pregnancy and the refusal of schools to provide services they needed” (p. 331). As a result of this and the high dropout rate among teen mothers, alternative schools became a primary setting for young moms because they were better equipped to offer the services that are essential for at-risk populations, a supportive environment, small class sizes that emphasize one-on-one interactions between teachers and students, relevant programming, and teacher expectations (Gould, 2007; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Morrisette, 2011). This study, however, found that all of the participants were able to access these critical supports regardless of where they attended school.

Ashley, an alternative school student, spoke about her idea of a great educational setting for teen moms. She stated:

They need to feel safe. I don’t need to go to school (feeling) like, people are going to call me out and stare. They need to provide a daycare, teachers that will be more understanding, a building to be with babies, but get to go to the other building to participate. It (teen parenting) needs to be respected. We’re not terrible.

Maddie, a traditional student, was having difficulty with stigma at her school so she switched into a program at her school where she found a sense of safety and belonging. She described, “The kids in KPP, (Key Performance Program) they’ve all been through different things so they’re not judgmental.” Zoe, who attended the young parent program, agreed with their

sentiments by stating, “It’s (motherhood) like more normal. It’s something that happens and you just take responsibility.”

While most of the participants liked having a separate setting where they felt a sense of security, Zianna didn’t like that the young parent program was housed in a building outside of the alternative school. She wanted to be together. She declared, “it kind of seems like it’s divided. (It would be nice) to have it together; one whole school.”

In addition to a sense of safety and belonging, several of the moms mentioned wanting to attend a school where they were understood. Zoe, from the young parent program declared she wanted, “A chance. Just a chance . . . Help.” Charlee, from the alternative school, concurred, “The benefit of the doubt. I think a lot of times, schools look at a teen mom and are like, ‘Oh, you’re probably not going to graduate. You’re going to have a lot on your plate’ . . . Just give me the benefit of the doubt. That’s all we need.”

Each of the participants was able to find these supports within their own educational setting. In addition to the support of their educational setting, the support they received from their teachers helped the six moms in this study become resilient.

**Teachers.** According to the National Research Council (2004) engaging teachers, “promote a sense of belonging by personalizing instruction, showing an interest in students’ lives, and creating a supportive, caring social environment” (p. 3). Additionally, they stated, “Supportive personal relationships are critical in promoting and maintaining student engagement” (p. 6). Ashley, having experienced rejection from her traditional teachers when she found out she was pregnant, appreciated the support she received at the alternative school. She disclosed, “(the teachers) support you and don’t make you feel like just because you’re pregnant, you’re a walking mistake.” Additionally, she mentioned, “They want to be a part of your life,

not just in school, but to help you through your struggles. The teachers here talk with you, they're trying to help you."

Maddie, the traditional student, agreed that the supportive relationship with her teacher was essential. She remarked:

When my mom passed away, she came over to my house and no teacher would do that. She came over and offered, 'If you ever need a night alone, I can take Kimmie for the night.' Not every night. Trying to comfort me . . . She was like, "You can't just not do the work, but I can help you and come over to your house and help if you don't want to come to school" . . . she *knows* me.

In addition to a caring relationship, the teen moms in this study appreciated the guidance and encouragement their teachers provided.

Zianna said, "They push me a little bit. They know I can do it, but I need to know that I can do it too." Charlee agreed, "All the teachers, they really pushed me to do my best. They believed in me when I didn't believe in myself, . . . It would have definitely been a struggle to find that belief and that hope."

One of the surprising finds in this study was a generalized consensus for teachers to play a minor parental role for students. Ashley appreciated the flexibility her teachers gave her, but she wanted a little more accountability. She disclosed:

My teacher has put me on attendance contracts, but he's been flexible with me . . . He needs to be harder on me, honestly, because someone like me, without a mom or dad at home, he needs to be more like, "Hey you really do need to be here or you'll have to make it up." If he were to do that, it would push me a little more.

Zoe affirmed, "I think if schools and teachers don't have some sort of structure then kids will run all over the place. We need a guideline." Charlee also spoke about the importance of structure and boundaries, by stating, "There have to be some boundaries . . . if they give you too much leeway, you might not get done what you need to get done." All of these teen moms were living on their own, without a mother or father to parent them on a daily basis. It appears that in

addition to encouragement and support, they also longed for some measure of parental accountability.

Another interesting finding was that several of the moms mentioned wanting recognition for accomplishing the daunting task of graduating while parenting. Maddie declared:

Teen moms should get a better diploma! They (non-parenting students) have the opportunity to go to school every single day, all day long . . . Teen moms, they don't. Not all of us have that opportunity, so when we go to school, we work twice as hard as they do. Then when we leave school, they can maybe work at home. If I work at home, I work at like 2:00 in the morning. I'm not saying that they don't work hard, it's more like the stress level, I guess. I can't go from when school starts until it ends, I can't . . . If a teen mom graduates, it's like, "Wow" a really big deal . . . Not a better diploma, but something else too. When you see a teen mom graduate, you think, "Wow! She must have tried!"

Zianna agreed, "Just knowing you did it as a mom. Something that makes us feel more happy that we did it."

Teacher support was a critical factor in each of these teen mothers' resiliency. Regardless of educational setting, these moms found those teachers that offered the encouragement, guidance, and recognition that they needed to beat the odds and graduate high school.

**Services.** It's no surprise that teen mothers require extra support services to help them navigate the rocky waters of parenthood. Stamm (1998) stated, "Pregnant students would benefit from flexible scheduling, child care, counseling, coordination with community service providers, instruction in prenatal health and parenting, family planning services, school-based or school-linked health centers, specialized attention, and a supportive environment" (p. 1221). This study explored the setting and teacher supports significant in helping teen moms gain resiliency. Next, we will investigate which services were identified as beneficial to their success.

All of the teen mothers mentioned flexibility as a critical factor in their success. Ashley talked about why a flexible schedule was so important. She stated, “I have so much to do, cleaning and picking up, cooking, and paperwork. I’ll be here (at school) for as much of the period as I can, and if I don’t make it . . . I’ll find a way to make it up.” Hannah confirmed, “(They’re) really understanding with my schedule . . . I work at least 20 hours per week . . . if I’m not there, they still know I’m going to do school.”

While all of the students talked about the various services they received, participants from the young parent program specifically mentioned the specialty services of that program as integral to their success. Zoe remarked, “The YPP program. It offers the daycare for babies and help with CCCAP (Colorado Child Care Assistance Program), it’s a good environment to get stuff done, they work around your schedule . . . work at your own speed.” Zianna also talked about the services YPP provided. She admitted, “They let me bring my baby here while I attend school . . . Without it, I probably wouldn’t be here. The teachers will meet you halfway, they understand you more. You’re independent.”

In addition to specialty supports, several moms mentioned small class size as beneficial. Small class size enables teachers to work one-on-one with students, which increases motivation to graduate. Teachers can easily develop close, mentoring relationships with their students in smaller settings, which decreases dropout rates and increases attendance and school participation (Franklin, et al., 2007). Zianna enjoyed the smaller class size offered at the alternative school. She declared, “It’s a smaller school and there are less students, that’s why I like it . . . I don’t feel pressure. When there are a lot of students, I don’t like that.” Ashley agreed, “I like the smaller environment because I feel like there are so many kids in your class at regular school – some teachers only get close to half of their students, but here, we all become close.” Maddie

appreciated the smaller class size of her program at the traditional school because of the extra one-on-one help she got from her teacher. She remarked, “Sometimes I’m faster or slower . . . then you can deal with needing help or wanting to move forward.”

Another one of the services that participants enjoyed was access to some form of alternative curriculum. Maddie credited her alternative pathway to earning her diploma as the reason she was able to complete. She explained, “I went to my counselor and said, ‘There’s no way I’m going to be able to graduate with the credits I have (left),’ so they got me into the KPP program.” Hannah appreciated that she was able to get school credit for working. She said, “I quit going to the traditional school because it was too hard to do three things (school, work, and parenting). At the alternative school, you get credit for working.” Charlee appreciated the individual pacing of her curriculum; it allowed her to work at a pace she was comfortable with. She explained:

The way we get credit – get a syllabus full of work and do the credit all by yourself, turn it in, and you get the credit. It’s easy . . . I just got my math assignment two weeks ago. I was out for a week, (but worked at home); I almost have a quarter credit. That’s really helping.

Zianna liked the specialty classes offered through YPP. She said, “We do lots of activities with our babies. We do research and learn about pregnancy and all that.”

While most of the participants felt they received an alternative curriculum, Zoe talked about wishing there were more choices in the alternative curriculum. She discussed how difficult it was to do work that was all on the computer. She admitted, “On-line work is hard for me. Most of the stuff is on-line. Like all of the assignments, if I miss her (English) class, I have to get on-line. When I’m not at school, that’s a hard thing to do.”

All of the participants were thankful for the support services they received. When asked what they thought schools or policy makers could do to help more teen moms, they requested

increased supports available in all schools. Ashley dreamed, “making schools like YPP because so many places don’t have schools like this.” Hannah agreed, “More support. More places – having more alternative programs. Extra help.” They also wanted someone to help them navigate the social service system. Zianna said, “Helping people with food stamps and stuff like that.” Zoe added, “Help, so kids can apply for financial support.” Charlee also wanted help navigating the social service system. She had a lot of confusion on how to access the services she needed. She explained:

You can’t be a student and receive food stamps and be under the age of 18, I’m pretty sure. I went and applied. It was when I was out of school. They told me, “You can’t be a full time student or else you don’t qualify” . . . Here we are trying to do good for ourselves, but we can’t because we’re trying to go to school and get our education, but we need these other things too. So we have to choose between the two. It makes it hard. It’s not fair . . . Make it equal. Give us a chance!

Teen mothers do require extra services in order to be successful in school. Educators and policy makers need to pay extra attention to provide not only the services they need, but also the support to navigate those services effectively.

**Peers.** The final educational support identified by the participants in this study was peer acceptance. With the social stigma associated with teen pregnancy, is there any wonder that teen mothers would benefit from peer support? Ashley spoke about the peer support she received in the young parent program, by stating, “Those girls helped me out. We were pregnant together. We always had something to talk about. You have connections. You need that.” Maddie agreed that the students in her program helped her feel more comfortable. She declared, “They’ve all been through different things so they’re not judgmental.”

The participants spoke about their peers within their chosen educational settings as viewing teen pregnancy and motherhood with a sense of normalcy. Charlee stated, “I don’t worry about people judging me because I have a child because it’s not out of the ordinary. I

mean it's not *normal*, but it's not out of the ordinary." Zoe mentioned, "I feel like everybody pretty much does their own thing. Everybody here is just trying to get done. They do their own thing, mind their own business."

While peer support was o't explicitly mentioned a lot, all of the participants referred to a sense of belonging and safety that would not have been possible without a sense of acceptance from their peers. This acceptance, combined with a wide array of beneficial services, great teacher relationships, and a supportive setting merged to form a synergistic environment, conducive to educational resiliency.

**Family support.** Besides the massive amount of support participants received within their educational settings, the teen moms in this study also credit their families with support. Most of the participants in this study lived alone and received little or no financial support from their parents. Several dealt with major issues like homelessness, lack of childcare, and transportation to school. One participant even dealt with the suicide of her mother. Regardless of these obstacles, each participant received a level of support from their family that they attributed to their success.

Maddie, who lost her mother, spoke about the family support she received, "I have family here that can watch Kimmie sometimes. If I didn't have anyone here, I couldn't go to school." Charlee, although homeless for months, worked part-time for an aunt as her healthcare aide. She also relied on her father when she lost her transportation, "It's a real bummer depending on my dad to drive me around. Oh well. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger . . . Thank God for giving me an amazing family." Zianna, living at her boyfriend's parents' house while he worked out of town, was left to deal with his family's issues. Frustrated with her situation, she wrote, "I asked my dad if I could move back in, but of course, he said, 'no.' I don't know why if I'm his



daughter? I just need to move!” Later, she declared, “I love my dad very much and couldn’t ask for a better dad. I appreciate everything that he’s done.” Zoe, who also dealt with homelessness on and off throughout the entire last semester of her senior year wrote, “Thank you for my not-so-perfect mother, who will always be there to have my back, even through harsh words. I am most thankful for my siblings who always have my back and understand.”

When asked, the participants confirmed that family support was important. Personally, however, I struggled with my own biases in this area. As a researcher, teacher, and mother myself, I struggled with my *perceived* “lack of support” these young moms received from their parents. I fought to comprehend how parents could allow their daughters and grandchildren to be homeless for months. I wrestled with the knowledge that parents could allow their children to not attend school for long stretches at a time because no one, not even them, would take care of their babies. Honestly, I judged them for not taking care of them, for not doing everything they possibly could to help their daughters graduate high school. These moms, however, held a common belief that they had made their own choices and it was not their parents’ responsibility to take care of them, but their own. Ashley wrote, “I hate how it seems like I never have any help whatsoever, but I guess that’s what you get when you have a kid at the age of 15.” Fortunately for them, this ownership of responsibility worked on their behalf. It provided the nutrients required for the seed of hope to grow into perseverance.

### **Perseverance**

One of the defining characteristics of the six teen mothers who participated in this study was perseverance. Perseverance is defined as steadfastness in doing something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success. The teen moms in this study overcame seemingly insurmountable

obstacles to become one of only 50% of teen mothers who graduate high school. Table 6 describes the sub-themes that were identified within the theme of perseverance.

Table 6

*Theme 4, Perseverance, with Sub-themes*

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**PERSEVERANCE**

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Baby deserves better, believe in yourself, better decisions, dedication, determined, don't be afraid, don't give up, don't let others influence you, I did it, I want it, it gets easier, mindset, pressure, pride, prove them wrong, self-assured, self-motivation, show everyone, stay positive, strive, want the best, whatever it takes, work hard, you can do it

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**Hannah.** Each of the six teen moms participating in this study had their own perseverance story, some more dramatic than others. Hannah, the oldest participant in this study, seemed to have already overcome most of her struggles and challenges with motherhood. She was settled into her roles, confident and content with her life story. She did, however, hint at the struggles she had overcome, she confessed, “There’s so much more to do when you have a baby – there’s so much more to do, sometimes it seems like a lot.” When asked about her biggest challenge, Hannah replied, “Time. Not enough time in the day to do everything, work and school and being a mom.” She also confided that without the support of her family and teachers, “I don’t know if I would finish.” She offered some advice to other teen mothers struggling with completing high school. She advised:

I just think if you can get over the humps that it brings you, there is so much better stuff on the other side. That’s like anything, if you just get over the crappy little things, it’s so much better. If you tell yourself that you’re going to do good, you’re going to! If you tell yourself you can’t do it – after a while, you’re going to believe it. Be positive and have faith that you can do it!

Hannah persevered throughout high school and graduated. Reflecting on the experience she stated, “I wouldn’t really change it. I wouldn’t really change anything. Everything I’ve done, I learned from.”

**Zianna.** Zianna was also fairly confident in her role as a mother. She received a lot of support with completing school from her boyfriend. He worked out of town on the rigs to support his family. That support allowed Zianna to focus on her education more than any of the other participants. She was lucky enough not to have to work in addition to completing school and parenting. She did however, still fight battles that she had to overcome to graduate high school. Zianna spoke a lot about the challenge of completing school on time. She worried about getting her work done in time to walk with her class. One of her biggest challenges that affected completing was losing the daycare at school when her daughter aged out of the program. She wrote, “Not being able to take my daughter with me to school kills me . . . I’m so stressed because I don’t have a babysitter. I’m missing school.” She also discussed her struggle with getting work done at home. She wrote:

I’m so tired! It’s 11:00 in the night and I’m doing homework . . . It’s hard to do homework on the weekends because that’s when my babe comes and spends time with me and our mija. We do a lot on the weekend and of course I’d rather hang out with my family on the weekend instead of doing homework. But this is what I get, staying up late doing homework.

Despite these challenges, Zianna persevered and became the first one in her family to graduate. She stated, “My mom never finished high school or anything. I just want to make her proud because I’m the only one graduating school out of our family.”

**Ashley.** Ashley was the youngest teen mom that participated in this study. Getting pregnant in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, she dealt with the challenges of juggling everything throughout her entire

high school career. She spoke about her struggle with deciding if she had what it took to complete school. She confessed:

At first, I was like, “Yep, I’m not going to make it. I’m going to be a dropout and not go anywhere in life.” But you can’t do that, especially when you’re going to be a teen mom. You have to be able to take care of that child if you’re going to keep the child. School has to be an option. It can’t just be pushed aside, as hard as it is.

Ashley really struggled with isolation and loneliness. She lost all of her friends. She admitted, “You lose all of your friends. I don’t care who you are; you lose all your friends. You have nobody.” She lost the support of her teachers, “I lost all my teachers in 8<sup>th</sup> grade when I got pregnant; they just stopped talking to me.” She also lost the belief by others that she could make it. She said, “I probably thought I was never going to graduate because that’s what everybody told me.” She wrote extensively in her journal about meeting the conflicting demands of her roles as mother, girlfriend, breadwinner, and student. She admitted:

The last few days have been some of the longest of my life. I’ve moved into my apartment with my boyfriend and son, gone to work, and tomorrow have school and work. On top of all that, I have my food stamps, graduation, bills, money, sleep, my son, math work, and so much more on my mind. I have a never-ending list. It seems as if nothing will ever slow down, either. It’s been three and a half years now, and as fast as it has gone - the days seem to drag on because of how tired I am.

In spite of all the struggles, Ashley was absolutely determined to prove everyone who thought she couldn’t do it wrong. She declared:

I’m just *determined*. I’m not going to let people look at me and put me in that stereotype group, “There’s another mom that hasn’t made it.” I’m going to be in the other group that says, “Screw all you guys – I did it!” I want to shove it in peoples’ faces a little bit.

Ashley’s perseverance paid off. She graduated on time with her class – proving all the naysayers wrong.

**Charlee.** Besides the typical struggles of being a teen mom, Charlee lived in a tent in her dad's backyard the entire 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of her senior year. Besides dealing with this predicament, she had several other life struggles that complicated her completing high school. She wrote:

Today I'm feeling held back. I have 4.5 credits left, and three months to complete them. On top of that, I'm in debt with my housing, and my boyfriend had to be bailed out of jail last night, so I'm missing school today. I'm working so hard and I feel like I get so far ahead just to be held back by something else. I'm trying my hardest to finish school and to be the best mom and housewife I can be, but that's a lot to be on the shoulders of an eighteen year old.

It's very hard not to get discouraged, but I just have to keep doing the best I can, and pray that the Lord will give me strength and determination to get through this rough time, and believe that it will be done.

When asked what influenced her to stay in school, she remarked, "My son, because I see all those negative statistics and I want to beat them – you know? Also my whole family, I'll be the first one to graduate high school. I'm pretty excited about it." A model of perseverance, Charlee wrote, "I am graduating in May, and not a thing can stop me . . . I HAVE to GRADUATE! No ifs, ands, or buts."

**Maddie.** Maddie struggled with multiple issues throughout high school. She lost most of her friends when she got pregnant. She confessed, "Everybody in the school just stared at me, so I was like, 'I hate all you guys.' I just didn't talk to anybody." She dealt with vicious rumors as well. She remembered, "I used to hang out at (the corner store) and someone called CPS (Child Protective Services) on me saying I was sitting (at the corner store) with Kimmie smoking Meth." Of course, the rumors were unfounded, so Kimmie never got taken away. She struggled with daycare for Kimmie. She said, "Daycare is a day-by-day thing." The biggest test Maddie faced, however, was the death of her mother. She wrote several poems in her journal about her loss. She wrote:

My heart is cold,  
I have to stay bold.

I will make it through,  
 This crazy life like zoo.  
 All the pain and anger I feel,  
 I just want my mom here.  
 I feel jealous of happiness,  
 It never comes my way.  
 I ask why every day.  
 Still my pain won't fade.  
 Lord, help me,  
 Please stay.  
 I can't have you away.  
 I'm scared.  
 I'm cold.  
 But I will stay bold.

Somehow, Maddie found the strength to move forward. She completed all the requirements of her KPP program and graduated high school on time with her class. She exclaimed, "I'm proud that I'm graduating, it's a big deal! I'm excited!"

**Zoe.** Zoe was constantly getting kicked out of her home. She would move in, fail to meet the requirements placed upon her, and get kicked out again. She spoke about this throughout the research process. At the beginning of the year, Zoe talked about her biggest challenge to completing school. She admitted:

It's not really school that makes it hard to come to school, it's more like having to deal with everything . . . money, child support, job, money, taking care of my son. I live with my mom and she's like, "you need to get a job or you can't live here." That's the main thing. I'm looking for help, looking for work, and child support – I filed for it and then just step back and figure out everything.

When we spoke again at the end of the school year, she updated me on her status. She declared, "I had a birthday, got kicked out and live on my own now. I pay \$500 all by myself. I got a job. I have a roommate." Although it was obvious she was exhausted, Zoe spoke about the need to just buckle down, suck it up, and get it done. She said, "Sometimes it's hard when you've like worked all day, and then you get everything cleaned up and you're like, 'I have homework to do.' So you just have to bite the bullet on being tired." More than any of the other participants,

Zoe struggled with the weight and responsibilities with motherhood. She had little family support and carried the burden alone. Her son was her hope and her joy. He was the wind in her sails, the one who motivated her to keep moving forward; one hard day at a time. Almost every journal entry spoke about this and ended with a mantra encouraging her to keep moving forward. As I read her journal over and over, I could not help but think about the *Little Engine that Could*, constantly chanting her mantra:

I WILL prove everyone who says I can't do it, wrong. (*I think I can*) I will find a guy who loves me and my boy and treats us right. (*I think I can*) I'll make it through each day with the help of my son. (*I think I can*) I will take reality and make it work for me. (*I think I can*) This is MY story. It is not a perfect fairy tale, BUT it WILL have a happily ever after. (*I know I can*)

Zoe was completely forthright about the internal battle she was waging, her courage and determination an absolute inspiration; perseverance personified.

### **Transformation**

One of my goals as a portraitist was to inform and inspire others to look at the complex issue of teen motherhood differently. Unfortunately, according to Pillow (2004), "it is assumed that teen mothers in need of education would not seek it on their own, as they are irresponsible, and must be forced (through social welfare legislation) to get this education" (p. 73). By creating the portraits of six teen mothers with different ethnicities, who gave birth at different ages, who attended three different school settings, I hoped to dispel the idea that teen mothers are irresponsible and illuminate their reality. My hope, as a researcher, is that readers will not only be able to identify the transformation in these teen mothers' lives, but will transform their own stereotypes as well.

The final theme that emerged in this study was that of transformation. Each of the six participants in this study went from scared young girls, not knowing if they could handle being a

mom and finish school, to confident young women, ready to take on the challenges of life after high school. While they did not explicitly state transformation in their discourse, I, as the researcher, was able to discern its presence in each of the moms; their shifting belief systems evident when examining all of the data at once. Transformation is included as a theme to, “stitch the pieces together to create a whole cloth, recognizing that the gestalt is much more than the sum of its parts” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 243).

Table 7 describes the sub-themes that emerged within the theme of transformation and were categorized into the timeframes of “pregnancy” and “graduation.”

Table 7

*Theme 5, Transformation, Categorized into Timeframes, with Sub-themes*

<b>Transformation Timeframes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
Pregnancy	Ashamed, challenges, concerns, difficult, disappointed, failure, fear, hard, ignored, judged, lonely, not stable, pressure, responsibility, sad, stress, struggle, worry
Graduation	Acceptance, beat the statistics, believe in self, better future, confidence, determined, don't give up, encouragement, happy, I can do it, I did it, I want it, mindset, motivated, normalcy, optimistic, pride, prove them wrong, respect, safe, security, self-assured, self-motivation, show everyone, stay positive, strive, want the best, whatever it takes, work hard, you can do it

**Pregnancy.** At the time of their pregnancies, each of the teen mothers shared feelings of inadequacy and fear of the future. Several were afraid of telling others and experienced some form of rejection. Their thoughts on completing high school varied. Four of the participants felt an increased need to graduate. They immediately sought out the resources they needed to accomplish this goal.



**Zoe.** Zoe, shared her experiences about finding out she was pregnant. She shared, “My mentor person for STRIVE (a college-preparatory course, especially for students who might not otherwise be on a college track) was pretty upset about it because I stopped going because I was pregnant, I ruined the full ride (scholarship) to college . . . I didn’t want to go back to school being pregnant, people start too many rumors.” When asked how she felt about finishing high school, Zoe said, “I felt the need to do it more . . . they say that if a mom graduates, their kid is like 60% more likely to graduate too, and it just keeps raising with each generation.” Zoe stated that she immediately, “dropped (the traditional school) and enrolled at (the alternative school).”

**Zianna.** Zianna shared about the fear she felt. She said, “I was crazy in love and got pregnant. I didn’t know what to do and I was scared out of my mind. I think that’s when I disappointed my mom the most and it broke my heart.” When asked about finishing school, Zianna said, “I had to finish. There wasn’t a choice to drop out.” Zianna had a brother whose girlfriend had gotten pregnant so she knew about the young parent program and enrolled. She declared, “I came here because I knew you had YPP and I could bring my baby.”

**Hannah.** Hannah recalled trying to hide her pregnancy by stating, “It’s scary at first . . . I told my mom I was pregnant right away . . . my family would come over and I just wore a hoody because I was too scared to tell them. Like a month later, I had my little girl. I was too scared to tell everyone.” When asked how she felt about completing school, Hannah remarked, “I wanted to. I knew I’d figure it out. I just wanted to be the best I could for my little girl. Other people were like, ‘Maybe you should just get your GED,’ but I think that’s just settling. I think you should try. She deserves it. It’s not her fault.” A former small private school student, Hannah was already the alternative school half day and the traditional school the other half. When she found out she was pregnant, she said, “I quit going to (the traditional school), just (the

alternative school.) I already had a job and it was too much to do three things. You get credit for working, so I just quit (the traditional school) and did my own thing.”

**Maddie.** Maddie recalled feeling on display when she found out she was pregnant. She said, “I got pregnant. It was my sophomore year of high school. I was terrified . . . There was only like one teacher that was nice to me. Everybody in the school just stared at me.” When asked about how she felt about finishing school, Maddie said, “I thought, ‘If I’m keeping her, I have to stay in school.’” Maddie was behind and needed a lot of credits to graduate so she sought help. She remembered, “I went to my counselor and said, ‘There’s no way I’m going to be able to graduate with the credits I have.’ So they got me into the KPP program.”

Two of the teen moms originally didn’t think they could graduate. Probably not coincidental, they were two of the moms that got pregnant the youngest. The obstacles seemed so overwhelming that graduation seemed like a dream. Thanks to some outside support, however, they were able to find the resources they needed to start making that dream a reality.

**Ashley.** Ashley found out she was pregnant in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. She shared her traumatic experience, “I was like, ‘everybody’s disappointed in me and everybody wouldn’t expect this of me.’ That’s what really broke me down a lot is watching the people I looked up to most looking at me like, ‘Oh my gosh. You’re such a screw up.’” When asked about how she felt about completing school, Ashley stated, “I’m not going to make, I’m going to be a dropout, and not go anywhere in life.” Ashley’s mom had graduated from the alternative school so she promptly got her enrolled. Ashley discussed how the supports she received helped change her mindset. She remarked, “It’s not something that’s going to push you back (pregnancy). You can still do it, it’s just going to take a little bit longer.”

**Charlee.** Charlee felt ashamed about getting pregnant. She remembered, “I didn’t want to go to regular high school because I kind of did feel ashamed, you know? Because I didn’t expect myself to get pregnant . . . I got bullied a lot from girls.” When asked how she felt about finishing school, Charlee said, “I didn’t think I was going to finish, actually. Yea, I was probably going to drop out. I thought it was important, but I didn’t know how I was going to be able to finish high school and have a baby. You know, it’s hard.” Charlee remembered how things changed for her by stating, “My counselor at (the traditional school) actually told me about the program, YPP. She got me enrolled and I filled it out and got in. That pretty much saved my life. So I just found a way – found that resource.”

Each of the teen mothers in this study struggled with the weight of finding out they were pregnant at a young age. Each of them contemplated what that meant for their futures and all determined that graduating high school was the means to a better life for themselves and their children. They embarked on a long, arduous journey filled with struggle. They each dared to hope, and with support, they were able to finally reach their destination. They persevered and because of it, they were transformed.

**Graduation.** Graduation is considered a milestone in the life of all American teenagers. Unfortunately, only 50% of teenage mothers ever get to experience this rite of passage. The teen mothers who participated in this study were a few of the fortunate ones. Their journeys transformed them from frightened young girls, into confident young mothers, ready to take on the next set of challenges in their path. Of course there is always some fear of the unknown, but they had already overcome such daunting obstacles, that they had the confidence to try.

At the beginning of the research process, I asked each of the participants what their dreams were. Those dreams along with their plans for obtaining them are included in this section to highlight how far they had each come (transformed).

**Zoe.** Zoe dreamed of a secure future, she imagined, “to become professional and create a good life for my kid. Structure, so my kid doesn’t really go down the path I did, you know? Like high standards and give him stuff he wants or needs. Just make it without having to go pawn something. I want to make sure Jack is secure.” When asked how she would accomplish that, Zoe declared, “Push my way through school. Just getting it done. Working on myself as a person so that way I can help Jack with himself.” Zoe did “push her way through.” She completed high school and is now attending college studying psychology. In her words, “I am a strong, independent, and smart woman who can do good all by myself . . . This is MY story. It is not a perfect fairy tale, BUT it WILL have a happily ever after.”

**Zianna.** Zianna described her dreams of a great family life. She imagined, “Go to college and then whichever career (I choose), try to get a job that pays good. Get a house and everything. See Audrina grow up happy and go to school and everything.” Zianna was unsure about her transition after high school. Without definite college plans, she just wanted to live in the same town as her boyfriend and be a family. She said, “I can’t wait till we get our own place, that way, me and her dad can be around her 24/7. Watching her grow, teaching her right from wrong.” When asked how she would accomplish her dreams, she said, “A lot of steps, that’s for sure! I’m barely finishing high school.” Zianna moved to the city to be with her boyfriend, right after graduation. In her words, “I want my family to reach for goals and dreams; to get more stronger through the years and to be happy. I want the best for my family and I can’t wait for what the future holds.”

**Ashley.** Ashley dreamed of a great future for her family and for generations to come.

She declared:

I want to go into the medical field. That's my goal, to probably become a doctor. Build my own house with whatever I want in it. Watch Chase not have to struggle and go through the things I did. Have the best family, the best relationship I can have. Have money, a "butt load" of money, so I don't have to worry. Have the best job so Chase can have the best and see that if someone can go through what I've gone through and his dad has gone through, and if we can get through it, than he can see and teach it to his kids and all the grandkids that come through our family. Something can start now and carry through the line so it doesn't have to be a struggle.

In order to reach her lofty dreams, Ashley believed it would take hard work. She declared:

Dedication. Not listen to what people say to me. I get really affected by what people say. You can't listen to what other people say. You have to have your own mindset. You can't let their choices or their thoughts get into your head and mix everything up. You have to believe in what *you* believe in. As long as you do that, I think you'll be able to keep going.

Her belief helped her to overcome the tremendous weight and responsibility she felt as well as gave her the courage to keep moving forward. Right before graduation, she wrote about her success:

Well, two more school days and I'm graduated! I can't believe I'm finally going to graduate, and on time! I've finally showed everyone I have made it! Through all the doubts and disappointment, I'm here graduating and moving on to college! Not everyone that I wanted to see me make it will be there to see me walk across the stage, but everybody will know that I made it. Out of all the teen moms out there, I was one that did it!

Ashley made it. She graduated and gained the courage to strive for her dreams. She is attending the local university, pursuing her dream of becoming a doctor.

**Hannah.** When asked about her dreams, Hannah replied, "Most of all, I want to be a really good mom to Bree. I want to have a good job and be comfortable, not have to worry. (I want to) help people. Just be an overall good person . . . I want to (go into) nursing eventually . . . get my CNA or something." She believed she could accomplish her dreams if she would just,

“Keep doing what I’m doing . . . I feel like people look up to me, at least that’s what my teachers say,” she said. Her confidence in her abilities had grown over the course of completing high school. She had gained enough confidence in herself to have faith that she had what it took to succeed. Hannah didn’t wait for eventually, she enrolled in a program and began immediately working on her CNA.

**Charlee.** Charlee dreamed about a better life for her son. She said, “I see all those negative statistics and I want to beat them, you know? My whole family, I’ll be the first one to graduate high school . . . my responsibility is to graduate and succeed so I can provide a better life for my son.” Charlee dreamed of going to college and studying neurology. She transformed from the ashamed teen mom who thought she, “was probably going to drop out,” into a confident young woman. She declared, “I know that if I keep positive, I can do anything.” In her final journal reflection, she wrote:

I believe this research project is very beneficial to see my growth, changes, and struggles I endure on a daily basis. Seeing and hearing other people’s stories also helps me realize I am not alone, and that the struggles I face are real and normal. I enjoyed being a member of this project and hope my story can help others understand teenage mothers.

Charlee succeeded in being the first one in her family to graduate high school. She attends the local university and is studying physics.

**Maddie.** Maddie had to overcome a different set of challenges than the other teen moms in this study. The loss of her mother left her alone, trying to figure out how to take care of herself and her daughter by herself. Graduation gave Maddie something to look forward to, a goal she could set her eyes on and work towards. However, while the other participants looked forward to the next stage of their lives, Maddie seemed to fear it. I believe that graduation felt like the unknown to Maddie, like an unplanned pregnancy all over again. What would she do? How would her life turn out? Unsure of what her future held, she seemed to view life after

graduation as speculative. She planned on moving out east to be with her father, and although he could offer her support, she was unsure of how that would all turn out.

Her dreams centered on not struggling. She stated, “To not be broke every single week. Not be like super-rich, but not have to struggle to pay bills. To be happy; able to have cupboards full of food, a full tank all the time, stuff like that.” Maddie believed that to accomplish her dreams, she would need to, “go to college,” she said. She thought she wanted to be a pharmacist, however, Maddie admitted, “(I’m) scared to go to college because I’m not sure what I want to do. I don’t want to go to college and then not want to do that (job). I’m scared to do that.”

While the other participants’ transformations seemed complete, butterflies emerging ready to take flight into the world, Maddie was the butterfly that got yanked out of the cocoon too early; in process of transforming, but not quite ready when she had to use those new wings. As such, Maddie seemed hesitant and less hopeful than the others. Lawrence-Lightfoot, (1997) dictated that, portraitists listen first for repetitive refrains, and second, for resonant metaphors, “poetic and symbolic expressions that reveal the ways actors illuminate and experience their realities” (p. 193). In listening for resonant metaphors within the data, I kept thinking of the story of *The Little Engine that Could*. In the story, a small train sets off on a journey to cross a mountain. All the big trains laugh and make fun of her. They told her that she would never be able to accomplish such a feat; she was too small and inexperienced. But she was determined to make it over the mountain to deliver her payload to the children waiting on the other side. Untested, she had never climbed anything so steep before. Undersized, she had never had to pull so much weight. However, her determination to not let the children down compelled her to try. She began the long, difficult journey full of hope and determination. As she struggled up the

mountainside, she told herself over and over, “I think I can, I think I can.” She continued climbing upward, pulling more weight than she ever thought possible, “I think I can.” She pulled and pulled, working so hard she’s certain she will break, but she picked up momentum and her chant evolved from, “I think I can” into, “I know I can, I know I can.” She made it to the other side, her perseverance paying off. She was transformed from a little engine that no one had faith in, to a reliable engine that got the job done.

Each of the teen mothers in this study personifies this metaphor. They overcame difficult situations in the face of others calling out their inadequacies. They fought uphill struggles to graduate high school. In the end, they all made it and won the hard fought battle and the belief of others. They all earned what Zoe called, “That golden ticket to my happily ever after.”



## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSIONS

I set out on this endeavor of researching teen mothers' educational resilience for many reasons. First, I had a passion to dispel the notion that teen moms were promiscuous welfare queens responsible for a host of social ills or victims that must be coddled and felt sorry for. I wanted to write from the viewpoint of "goodness" described by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) as, "a search for a generous, balanced, probing perspective. It is a search for the truth – or for the complex and competing truths that combine to shape an authentic narrative" (p. 146). When I looked at the teen mothers I knew, I saw strong, determined young women, fighting for a better future for themselves and their children. I wanted to share this "truth" with others.

Next, I have always been interested in resiliency. I wanted to complete research on a resilient population to help determine its origins and how it functions to help individuals overcome obstacles that many others succumb to. Researching teen mothers who graduate was an ideal choice to accomplish this goal.

Finally, I wanted to do research on a topic that would provide insight into an area where little is known. Unfortunately, there has been very little research on the education of teen mothers from practitioners in the field. Pillow, (2004) admonished:

While teen pregnancy has been understood as having implications for education, teen pregnancy has *not* been situated as an educational policy issue. Despite the amount of attention teen pregnancy receives, educational research is scarce, school data on teen mothers is often absent or out of date, teen pregnancy is repeatedly situated as a psychological, health, or social welfare issue, and educational policy researchers have had little voice or impact on national and state level policies affecting teen mothers. (p. 4)

For these reasons, I set out to shed light on the following research questions:

- Q1     What factors of the various school environments encourage motivation and support resiliency in teen mothers?
- Q2     What are the teen mothers' perceptions of stigma within the various educational settings?
- Q3     What are teen mothers' perceptions of the opportunities and support services available in each educational setting?

I hoped that by answering these questions, I would discover the answer to my central question:

What factors contribute to teen mothers' educational resiliency? The discoveries made in this study provide insight for educators and policy makers to improve educational supports and conditions for future teen mothers to be able to successfully graduate high school.

### **Factors that Encourage Motivation and Support Resiliency**

The six teen mothers who participated in this study shared several factors that encouraged them to be motivated enough to keep going in spite of setbacks. These factors helped them overcome the obstacle of high school graduation and supported their resiliency. "In a 2006 survey exploring why students dropped out of school, 70% of high school dropouts said they were unmotivated" (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006, p. iii). Of the teen mothers who do graduate high school, motivation is heralded as a primary cause. It is imperative that researchers discover what factors contribute to graduating teen mothers' motivation in order to help them be successful.

**Safety.** This study discovered that regardless of where the teen mother attended high school, the traditional school, an alternative school, or a young parent program, to be motivated to attend at all, they needed to feel safe; a sense of belonging and "normalcy." Abraham Maslow predicted this need for safety in his famous hierarchy of needs. Atkins, (2011) described

Maslow's hierarchy:

This hierarchy is usually depicted as a pyramid with five levels, ranging from the most basic needs at the bottom to the most complex and advanced at the top. From bottom to top, the levels of needs are:

- Physiological (biological), such needs as food, air (oxygen), water, shelter, sleep, and a relatively comfortable body temperature (not too hot nor not too cold with respect to the outside temperature)
- Safety, such needs as security, stability, and order
- Social, such psychological needs as belongingness and love
- Esteem, including personal (self-esteem) and esteem from others
- Self-actualization, such as feelings of accomplishment.

According to Maslow, the needs at each level must be met before one can progress to the next level . . . The first three levels are often termed *deficiency* needs because they come about due to deprivation. The two highest levels of needs are often called *growth* needs because individuals strive for them, not out of deprivation, but out of a desire to grow and prosper in life. (p. 1396)

Each of the teen mothers participating in this study needed to feel safe before they were motivated to attend school.

**Supportive teachers.** Once they found a school setting where they felt safe, which included a sense of belonging amongst peers, they required several supports, which helped them stay motivated to attend and graduate. All of the moms participating in this study heralded a supportive and encouraging teacher as critical to their resiliency. When asked what would have happened if that teacher had not been there, the responses ranged from Maddie, who stated, “harder,” to Hannah, who confessed, “I don’t know if I would finish.” There was a range of responses in between to fear of not finishing on time or possibly settling for a GED. Regardless of the severity of impact, having a supportive and encouraging teacher motivated each of the moms to continue with their education.

**Flexibility.** While there were different supports offered at the various educational settings, all of the moms stated that flexibility was crucial to their success. Each of the moms

commented on being able to stay motivated because they had flexibility with their attendance, schedule, curriculum, and even their pathway to earning a diploma. Without the flexibility their educational settings offered them, the participants in this study felt it would be much harder to finish high school. Charlee stated, “This school has worked with me a lot. I was almost gone. All the way gone and they brought me back. Everyone here is really, they really want to see all of us succeed.”

Without safety, supportive and encouraging teachers, and flexibility, factors that support motivation, the six teen mothers in this study might not have graduated. Educators and policy makers must work harder to ensure these supports are available in all schools. They are all free services that could be easily implemented within all educational settings with just a little training. Just as we have mandated training annually on child abuse reporting, Response to Intervention, and a plethora of other services, policy makers should mandate training on providing a safe and supportive environment for pregnant and parenting teens. The benefits of this would help educators better serve all students.

### **Perceptions of Stigma at Various Educational Settings**

Each of the moms described their experiences with being judged and stereotyped for being a teen mom. The popular belief among policymakers, educators, and society still stigmatizes teen mothers (Furstenberg, 2007; Lesko, 1995; SmithBattle, 2005, 2006, 2007; Stamm, 1998). All of the participants in this study left their original school setting, the traditional school, in search of an alternative placement to avoid the stigma associated with teen pregnancy. Even Maddie, the traditional school participant, left the traditional pathway within her school and joined the alternative pathway program, which met in a modular, located outside the main building. When asked about stigma at their current educational settings, all of the

participants described feeling welcomed, not called out or looked down upon. When asked if they thought stigma was different at the other settings, they discussed the judgment they all felt at the traditional school. Most spoke of stigma from their peers, but a few experienced stigma from their traditional schoolteachers, as well. Zoe described, “It’s bigger and there’s more cliques.” Zianna confirmed, “A lot of people just judge you because it’s a bigger school and a lot of students, they just like to judge a lot.” Ashley agreed, “In regular schools there’s cliques and you have to try and fit in . . . you have to be what they want you to be, and when you get pregnant, you’re going to be the laughing stock of the school. I’ve seen it.” Hannah elaborated, “One of the reasons I quit going to (the traditional school) because I feel like it’s (pregnancy) is a less common thing . . . it’s just something to talk about.” Charlee corroborated, “I didn’t want to go to regular high school . . . my peers looked down on me.” Maddie was the only participant who thought maybe there were traditional schools somewhere who were more accepting of teen mothers. She considered, “I bet it’s different at some places because not every single kid at (the traditional school) judges me.”

Educators must stop stigmatizing teen mothers. As professionals, it is our responsibility to help all students succeed. Regardless of our own personal convictions or beliefs, we must rise above our discomfort with teen pregnancy and help these young girls feel welcomed and supported. Ashley described her experience:

I lost all my teachers in 8<sup>th</sup> grade when I got pregnant. They just stopped talking to me. If you didn’t have that support, it’s really hard on you when everyone’s looking at you like, “Look at that teen mom” . . . It’s one of the saddest things for people to imagine that that would even happen. You don’t know how it would be for that person. When you come to school to get away and then your teachers – that would be really sad. You come here to get away. It makes me sad to think about it.

No student should ever experience what Ashley went through. As we face our own stereotypes and fears, we can choose to rise above and embrace these young women with the respect and

dignity they deserve. They are about to embark on one of the most difficult journeys of their life. They need all of the support and encouragement of every teacher and staff member at their schools. As educators support and encourage them, their peers will follow suit, and they can feel safe and valued and begin their uphill climb towards graduation.

### **Perceptions of Opportunities and Support Services Available**

Each of the teen mothers in this study revealed the support services they received from their educational settings that were beneficial in helping them graduate. As discussed earlier, feeling safe and a sense of belonging, having supportive and encouraging teachers, and flexibility with attendance, schedules, curriculum, and pathways to graduation were critical to all of the teen mothers' success, regardless of where they attended school. There were additional opportunities and supports however, that were available only within specific settings that the participants shared as either beneficial or enjoyable that they believed would support other teen mothers.

**Daycare.** It came as no surprise that the daycare offered at the young parent program was heralded as a crucial support that needs expanding. Zianna explained, "They let me bring my baby here while I attend school. Probably without it, I probably wouldn't be here." Pillow (2004) declared that, "less than 5 percent of schools nationwide provide childcare services to teen mothers" (p. 153). Ashley shared her thoughts on why so many teenage mothers drop out. She shared, "With daycare, you're close with them and they're young, they need their mother. They don't have childcare money . . . they have nowhere to take their baby, so they think, 'I'm out. No school for me.'" Maddie confirmed the need for daycare and the struggle teen mothers face without it. She said:

Having more opportunities to bring your kids to school or schools like the alternative school. That's one of the main factors, getting someone to watch Kimmie because that can take like three hours of the day and then you're exhausted. Now you're like, "I have alone time, I'll stay home."

Charlee elaborated:

Daycare is important. I think if daycare can be provided, it should be. That would be something really cool to see in the future for students that want to go to the traditional school, for the district or something to pay for daycare . . . I think that would make it equal . . . I feel like those kids that don't have kids, kids that aren't parents, they get a better shot. Us teen moms get shoved off to the side when if you don't have a babysitter for your kid, or you can't afford daycare, well too bad.

Charlee's poignant response should give policy makers pause. Her advice to quit shoving teen moms off to the side, to give them a better shot, rings true. It is unacceptable that we have legislation in place for every disadvantaged group to provide accommodations to allow them to attend school, except for teen mothers. Daycare is an accommodation that if provided, could prevent thousands of young mothers from dropping out.

**Alternative classes.** Lange and Sletten (2002) found several key elements readily available within alternative schools that help at-risk students, "individualized flexible programs with high expectations, an emphasis on care and concern, and small school size are considered to be key dropout prevention strategies" (p. 10). All of the participants mentioned receiving some benefit from alternative classes and/or instruction. These classes/instruction varied depending on which setting they attended.

Participants from the young parent program talked about the benefit of instruction on how to navigate social service supports like CCCAP and Family First. They discussed enjoying learning about pregnancy and doing activities with their babies. Zianna thought all teen mothers could benefit from these services provided at the young parent program. She stated, "Helping

people with food stamps and stuff like that. They should help moms have scholarships. Maybe teen mom classes, more programs.”

Participants attending the alternative school enjoyed the independent pacing of their classes, it allowed them the flexibility to be able to parent, work, and attend school. Charlee stated, “The way we get credit – get a syllabus full of work and do the credit all by yourself, turn it in, and you get the credit. It’s easy . . . if I didn’t have that, I would be so behind right now.” Hannah mentioned, “It’s easy to get your credits, but like I said, there’s so much more to do when you have a baby . . . maybe have more alternatives, even if just like a few classes.”

Maddie also discussed how beneficial getting special instruction on navigating services are by stating, “(my teacher) was like, ‘we’re applying for colleges,’ and I was like, ‘I hate applying for things.’ But she was like, ‘I’ll help you apply.’ She helps me with things that are hard to do.” In addition to the specialized help she received from her teacher, Maddie credits the KPP program with graduating. She recalled, “There’s no way I’m going to be able to graduate with the credits I have so they got me into the KPP program.”

The research is clear on the need for alternative programming for at-risk populations, Raywid (1994) remarked:

Two enduring consistencies have characterized alternative schools from the start: they have been designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program and consequently, they have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization, programs and environments. (p. 26)

This departure from the standard allows teen mothers the flexibility and support they need to find success. School district leaders should take heed and increase the availability of alternative classes and programs within their districts. While universal daycare is a huge expense that may be difficult to undertake, providing alternative classes and programs within the available school setting is a less expensive endeavor. Finding alternative pathways to earning a high school



diploma is an innovative method to decrease the dropout rates for teen mothers and other at-risk populations, alike.

On the flip side, three of the participants wished the alternative school had more opportunities for social activities and elective classes like the traditional school. Zianna remarked, “More classes, different types of classes like gym, art, and electives.” In fact, when asked if there was a way to equalize all school environments, no stigma anywhere, flexible teachers, transportation and daycare provided, two of the participants said they would rather attend the traditional school. When asked why, Charlee stated, “If that was available, to go to a regular high school and graduate, that’s probably where I’d be. The whole social aspect, sports, prom, a big huge prom, those kind of social activities.” Zoe concurred, “That’s where all my friends are. My teachers, like I have teachers here, but there’s a lot at the traditional school that I miss. Bigger environment; like prom and the football games, blackout dance. You know, it’s fun.”

Alternative educators are experts at meeting the academic needs of at-risk populations, including teen mothers. They should be aware of the social concerns of their students and try to increase the opportunities for their students to experience some of the fun aspects offered at the traditional school.

### **Factors that Contribute to Teen Mothers’ Educational Resiliency**

The central research question of this study was to discover which factors contribute to teen mothers’ educational resiliency. Additionally, I hoped to shed some light on the previous void of educational research regarding mothering teens as described by Pillow (2004):

Overriding any discussion of teen pregnancy as an educational policy issue is the lack of data and information on the teen mother as a student. I cannot overemphasize the problem caused by the lack of basic data collected on the educational experiences of teen

mothers. Questions of how, where, and what type of an education schools are providing to school-age mothers is confounded by a lack of informative data . . . While there are annual counts of the rate of teen pregnancy and full scale reports on prevention policy and programs, there is no corresponding study and analysis on the education of teen mothers. (p. 92)

While there are no easy answers to the lack of statewide data on teen mothers, this study did discover some answers to Pillow's questions.

**Where teen mothers are attending school.** This study discovered that teen mothers are attending school in a variety of settings, a young parent program, an alternative school, and a traditional school, and finding the perseverance to successfully graduate. Even though the traditional high school participant graduated from an alternative pathway within her school, I can confidently declare that teen mothers are graduating from traditional schools earning traditional pathway diplomas. One of the moms that began this study as a traditional student in the traditional programming but did not complete the study did graduate high school on time with her non-parenting peers.

**How teen mothers are doing it.** Each of the teen mothers in this study overcame her struggles by gaining hope that they could do it. Hope was gained by having someone, even themselves, believe in them and help them find the resources they needed. Once they found the supports that would help them, a safe environment, a supportive and encouraging teacher, flexibility with their attendance, curriculum, and programming, daycare, they were able to navigate the choppy waters of motherhood and persevere throughout high school to successfully graduate.

**Types of education teen mothers are receiving.** All of the teen mothers in this study described their education as general, college preparatory with some life skills. Zoe shared, "general high school and life skills, parenting." When asked if she felt prepared for college, Zoe

said, “I feel like I have all the education to be, you know, ready that way.” Zianna also shared the type of classes she was taking by stating, “General education and life skills.” She was unsure about being college ready. When asked if she felt prepared, she stated, “I don’t know, a little bit.” Ashley declared she was taking, “college prep” classes. When asked if she felt ready, she confidently remarked, “yes.” Hannah also reported her classes were, “just general.” When asked if she felt ready for college, she stated, “Yea, pretty much.” Charlee agreed, “General education, I’d say.” She also confirmed, “Yea. I feel pretty prepared for college.” Maddie, who was in an alternative pathway to earning her diploma said she was taking, “KPP,” which is a workplace ready pathway, general high school classes and proficiency levels on multiple tests. When asked if she felt prepared for college, she concurred with the other participants, by stating, “Yea, for the most part.”

Title IX expressly prohibits the exclusion of students from their “education program” or “any extracurricular activity” on the basis of pregnancy (Pregnant and Parenting Teens, 2007, para. 7). Although it is illegal to exclude teen mothers from public education, a form of de facto segregation occurs as many teen mothers are placed into alternative programs, often located off-site of the traditional high school. These programs increase the likelihood of graduation due to offering parenting classes and daycare for their children, but often at the expense of rigorous curriculum (SmithBattle, 2006; Usher & Kober, 2012). Regardless of which educational setting the teen mothers in this study participated in, they received a generalized high school education and some type of life skills classes as part of their curriculum. While this curriculum helped each of them graduate, of note is that none of the teen mothers in this study were exposed to any rigorous honors classes. Although most of the participants said that they felt “pretty prepared” for college, their goals and aspirations of becoming a nurse, a psychologist, a doctor, a

pharmacist, and a neurologist definitely require higher level science and math classes than they were exposed to. While all have started college and set the course towards these goals, I foresee some major hurdles for each of them. I can only hope that they have had enough success at finding support systems and persevering to advocate for themselves and do the same when they reach that first major challenge in college.

### **Recommendations**

Teen pregnancy is associated with all kinds of social ills including high school dropout, welfare dependency, the cycle of poverty, and premature or low birth weight babies. *Education as a right*, as guaranteed by Title IX, has evolved into *education as a responsibility* in policymakers', educators', and society's eyes. Pillow, (2004) stated, "education was certainly not viewed as a right, but came to be constructed as the responsibility of the teen mother" (p. 72). This idea plagued me throughout the entire research process. I was forced to look at my school district, my school, my program, and myself through a microscope. I have to say, I did not really like what I saw. While I work in a district that honestly cares about the welfare of teen mothers and is providing certain services such as the young parent program to help them, I saw glimmers of the *Education as a responsibility* philosophy. While it is not blatant, the fact that in order to get the daycare services they need, they must enroll in the young parent program, located at the alternative school, leaves little room for choice for many teen mothers. As a district, we must increase our awareness and improve our services for pregnant and mothering teens.

When I examined my school's philosophy, I found a stronger correlation with *Education as a responsibility*. I work in an amazing school that is designed to help support the needs of at-risk populations. We have one of the most supportive and encouraging staffs I have ever worked

with. However, while our attendance policies allow some grace to our pregnant and mothering teens, they can become punitive when the absences are excessive.

Upon closer examination of my program, the young parents program, I found strands of the *Education as a responsibility* philosophy. Although we have a daycare located on-site, it is not free. The fee is close to \$34 a day to take care of teen mothers' babies. While this is the going rate, what teen mom can afford this? All of our teen moms are required to apply for CCCAP, which pays the fees and allows their babies to attend. These fees pay for the extra expenses of the nursery workers and facility for the babies. I have always wished our district could afford to just cover this, but have convincing parroted how lucky we were to have this program and therefore, it was the girls' responsibility to apply. Every year, I have several teen mothers who do not want to apply for various, and often very valid reasons. This causes quite a conundrum. These moms either have to find daycare somewhere else for free, pay the fee, choose to only come to school one to two days a week depending on what they can afford, or worse, drop out. If this policy doesn't scream, "Education is a responsibility!" I don't know what does.

Finally, I had to look deep within myself and explore what I truly believed about education. If you asked me, I would assuredly tell you that I believe education is a right, but when I examined my actions, they didn't always line up. As a teen mom myself, I had *Education as a responsibility* engraved into my head. As an educator, however, I believe education is a right guaranteed by our government. Most of the time, I do pretty well. I follow this belief and treat my students, all teen mothers, under the notion that they have a right to an education. Upon close examination, however, I noticed that when those teen mothers fail to come to school, day after day, fail to call in after long extended absences, fail to get any work

completed after a long period of time, or fail to comply with CCCAP after numerous opportunities, that *Education as a responsibility* philosophy rears its ugly head. I find myself thinking that they are not helping themselves and others are sitting at home on a waiting list, trying to get into this program. That's when I had to acknowledge that I, the teen mother who advocated for other teen mothers, was susceptible to the same hypocrisy that I was fighting against.

It's not pretty, but until we mandate policies that positively impact the educational opportunities for pregnant and mothering teens, we are all susceptible to holding them accountable for what we believe they have a responsibility to do. We will undoubtedly find ourselves guilty of believing, "The benefit of an education is not for the teen mother, but pursuing education is what she owes to society for the benefit of her child and relief of the taxpayer" (Pillow, 2004, p. 72).

The teen mothers in this study were amazing young women who found the hope, support, and perseverance they needed to overcome the daunting challenge of graduating high school while parenting. Although they were amazing and fought hard won battles, I don't believe they are extraordinary. In my unique situation as a teacher of teen mothers, I see these amazing young women every day, every year. I have students in my program from out of my district, from out of my state, from traditional schools, from home schools, from on-line schools, from alternative programs, and even returning dropouts. The young women I encounter all want to graduate high school and make a better life for themselves and their baby. The six teen mothers in this study represent teen mothers in general. They stood in the gap and spoke up about their struggles, hopes, and dreams. They shared their courageous stories in hopes of being an

inspiration to others and changing the political and educational climate for teen mothers everywhere. We owe it to them to listen and take their advice.

More than 40 years after the passage of Title IX, teen mothers are still one of the populations least advocated for in education. When asked if they thought education was right or a responsibility, four of the teen moms said responsibility. The other two teen moms said right, but then quickly went on to describe their responsibility as well. They believe that *Education is a responsibility* therefore, they have no right to complain. Charlee stated this best, “We did make poor choices and we should be held responsible for those things.” Policymakers must give them a voice. They are afraid to speak out against the equality or lack of equality of their education.

According to Mittelstadt (1997), “Parenting teen often choose to leave school because of the difficulties imposed upon them by their pregnancy and the refusal of schools to provide services they needed” (p. 331). Teen mothers believe getting their education is a responsibility they must pursue; yet 50% of teen moms fail to graduate high school. Policymakers and educators are responsible for providing those services, those *rights*, guaranteed under Title IX. Educators must become informed about the provisions of Title IX. We must do a better job at collecting data on who the pregnant and parenting mothers are, where they are attending school, and what services are needed. Educators have a responsibility to provide services such as safe school environments, supportive and encouraging teachers, and flexibility with their attendance, curriculum, and alternate pathways to graduation for these young women. Policymakers must increase the daycare services available for teen mothers to be able to attend. All schools and districts must ensure a Title IX coordinator is appointed and trained on how to advocate for this population. Only then, will we see the graduation rates for pregnant and parenting teens approach that of their non-parenting peers.

Alternative programs are a great option for pregnant and mothering teens, but they must increase the rigor and the opportunities for higher level classes for those teen mothers that desire a career that requires those classes. Of the teen mothers participating in this study, four out of six desired such a career. Again, while these young women were amazing, I don't think they are extraordinary. In my experience in the young parent program, roughly 70% - 80% of all graduates are looking into some form of post- secondary training. While a few of those are technical degree interests, most desire to attend a two to four year college. There are always an unusually high percentage of teen mothers who are interested in a career in nursing. Further research needs to be done to discover why this is the case. Regardless of why there is a high interest level in the medical field, these careers require much higher math and science skills than are typically found within alternative settings. The students in this study all received fairly good grades, mostly A's and B's. However, they were all preoccupied with the idea of graduating, not the rigor of their curriculum. Alternative educators owe it to these teen mothers, as well as all students, to figure out a way to offer higher-level course offerings. They want a good job. They are willing to go to college to get a good job. They deserve an opportunity to earn a high school education equal to that of their non-parenting peers. We owe it to them to provide the instruction they need to be successful at the college level.

Finally, the six teen mothers in this study offered some advice to teachers and schools on how they could help and support teen mothers. Their advice to teachers included the following:

- Maddie said, "Motivate them."
- Hannah stated, "Just understanding is the key word I would say."
- Zoe advised, "Ask questions and listen, because teen moms just keep to themselves, you know?"
- Zianna agreed, "Be there for them to support them, to talk advice and stuff like that. Make them feel that you guys care."



- Charlee advised, “Just not to judge. Don’t be judgmental. If someone’s a teen parent that doesn’t lessen their skills any, or lessen their knowledge any, “Who knows,” they’re probably smarter if they’re given a chance. Just don’t judge.”
- Ashley explained, “Don’t make them feel awkward. Don’t ask awkward questions. When they want to talk, let them talk. If you can tell they’re not doing good that day, we already think everyone’s staring, thinking things. Be as supportive as you can. Don’t feel sorry for me. Just *be there* for me.”

This is great advice that teachers must listen to. Professional development on how to effectively deal with this population is crucial. This is an easy cost-effective way to help support pregnant and parenting teens be successful in every educational setting.

Their advice to schools included the following:

- Maddie stated, “Respect . . . I think they need like respect more. I mean if a teen mom graduates, it’s like, ‘Wow,’ a really big deal.”
- Ashley confirmed, “Just more respect towards it.”
- Zianna imagined, “You know how you get diplomas? Maybe as a teen mom, just like knowing you did it as a teen mom. Something that makes us feel more happy that we did it.”
- Hannah declared, “Just to be there for them. Help them.”
- Zoe concurred, “A chance . . . schools just need to give it a chance. Help.”
- Charlee wanted, “The benefit of the doubt. I think a lot of times schools look at teen moms like, “Oh, you’re probably not going to graduate. You’re going to have a lot on your plate . . . I’m going to do it. Just give me the benefit of the doubt, that’s all we need.”

Their words are poignant and reverberate with the basic human rights of all students. All teen mothers deserve help, respect, a chance, and the benefit of the doubt. All schools must offer these basic rights if we are to increase the graduation rates for pregnant and mothering teens.

### **Future Research**

While this study brought much needed insight into the lives and educational experiences of teen mothers, further research must still be done. First, research must be done to determine how many pregnant and mothering teens are being served within our school systems. Until an extensive study is done to figure this out, we will not be able to fully meet the needs and close the achievement gap for this population. Next, similar research needs to be done on teen mothers

who are *not* successfully navigating high school and are in jeopardy of dropping out. We need to compare those findings with the findings in this study in order to determine what's missing.

Further research needs to be done on a larger scale and in various locations to determine if the results of this study hold true for other demographics. Finally, a follow-up study on whether the outcomes these resilient teen mothers had in high school transferred into a college setting.

This study has been a passionate endeavor for me. It has challenged me and provided great insight into how to better meet the needs of pregnant and mothering teens. I hope that more educational researchers will take up this cause and further the knowledge base on how to serve this population. I hope schools, teachers, and districts will hear these women's voices and listen to their advice. I hope that other teen mothers will read this and be inspired to keep going and persevere. I hope some courageous young mom finds her voice and begins the long road of litigation that will permanently ensure an equal education for future pregnant and mothering teens. More than anything, I hope the graduation rates for pregnant and parenting teens rises to match those of their non-parenting peers.

I would like to conclude by closing with Charlee's metaphor about life as a teen mom in high school. I believe her words provide hope and inspiration to other teen mothers and advice for politicians, policy makers, and educators alike to listen to these quieted voices. They have much to offer if we will just give them the chance. Life as a teen parent in high school is like, "Charlie Brown's Christmas tree. In Charlie Brown, they see this little Christmas tree and you know, it's *little*. It's like they doubt it and they judge it. They're like, "That's no Christmas tree." But *then*, they put the decorations on it and it makes it nice. And they realize, it has real potential.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**IRB APPROVAL**



*Institutional Review Board*

DATE: January 15, 2014

TO: Linnea Watson, EdD

FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [537163-4] Educational Resiliency in Teen Mothers

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: January 9, 2014

EXPIRATION DATE: January 9, 2015

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB has APPROVED your submission. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of January 9, 2015.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or [Sherry.May@unco.edu](mailto:Sherry.May@unco.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

**Excellent revisions. My best wishes to you. Maria**

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.

**APPENDIX B**  
**INTERVIEW 1 QUESTIONS**



***College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies***

**Interview Questions:**

Hello. My name is Linnea Watson. Thank you for taking time to participate in this study. As a teen mother and future high school graduate, you have a unique perspective on which factors are contributing to your successful high school completion. Statistically, only 50% of teen parents graduate, you are well on your way to becoming one of the successful ones! Your personal experiences and expertise in this area make you a valuable candidate to participate in a research opportunity to determine what has helped you be successful. Your input could greatly impact the lives and graduation rates of future pregnant and parenting teens. Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Do you have any questions?

**What factors contribute to teen mothers' educational resiliency?**

**Name:**\_\_\_\_\_ **Age:**\_\_\_\_\_ **School:**\_\_\_\_\_

1. Prior to becoming pregnant, how would you describe your educational history and/or experiences?
2. When did you become pregnant?
3. When you found out you were pregnant, how did you feel about finishing high school?  
(ex: optimistic, worried, indifferent)
4. What or who caused you to feel \_\_\_\_\_? (ex: optimistic, worried, indifferent)
5. Who or what has been your greatest influence for staying in school?
6. Are you graduating on time with your class or not? Explain.

7. How did your teachers/educators respond when you told them you were pregnant and/or mothering?
8. What factors of your school environment (young parent program, alternative school, or traditional school) encourage motivation and support resiliency?
9. What factors of your school environment (young parent program, alternative school, or traditional school) hinder motivation and discourage resiliency?
10. What are your perceptions of “stigma” at your school (do others judge you)? Explain.
11. Do you think stigma is any different at the other school (young parent program, alternative, or traditional)? Explain.
12. What challenges to completing high school are you currently facing?
13. How are you dealing with those challenges? Explain.
14. What is your biggest challenge in completing school? Could it be minimized or eliminated by schools? Explain.
15. What educational factors are helping you progress towards graduation? Explain.
16. What kind of classes are you taking? (special classes, college prep, vocational, life skills, etc)
17. As a teen mother, what do you think is the purpose of education for pregnant and mothering teens?
18. Title IX is a government policy that guarantees pregnant and mothering teens an equal education. What does “equal education” look like for you and other pregnant and parenting teens?

19. What could teachers or schools do differently to help teen parents graduate?
20. Do you feel well prepared for college and/or other post-secondary training?
21. Are you planning on going to college or other post-secondary training?
22. If “yes,” what are going for and when will you start?
23. What are your dreams? What does success look like for you?
24. What will it take for you to achieve those dreams?
25. If you could give advice to teachers about how to help teen moms, what would it be?
26. If you could give advice to policy makers (people who make laws) about how to help teen moms, what would it be?
27. If you could describe your experience as a teen mother in high school, what analogy would you use?
28. Is there anything else you would like to add or clarify?
29. Do you have any questions?

Thank you again for participating in this study. I really appreciate your willingness to contribute. All of the interview responses will be analyzed by themes and then reported anonymously in the study. In addition, this information will be cross-referenced to grades and credits earned per semester as well as any other pertinent demographic information. Again, no identifying information will be used in the report. If you would like to see the results of the study, I can get you a copy if you will leave me your mailing address. Do you have any questions or concerns? Thank you again.



**APPENDIX C**  
**INTERVIEW 2 QUESTIONS**



***College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies***

**Interview 2 Questions:**

Hello. How is everything going since we last met? Do you have any questions or concerns before we get started?

**What factors contribute to teen mothers' educational resiliency?**

**Name:**\_\_\_\_\_ **Age:**\_\_\_\_\_ **School:**\_\_\_\_\_

1. Any celebrations and/or issues you've encountered over the last couple of months?
2. Last time we met, you said that your biggest challenge was \_\_\_\_\_.

How's that coming for you?

3. At our first meeting, you shared that your dream or hope was \_\_\_\_\_ What's your biggest fear?
4. You spoke of how important flexibility from your school/teachers are to your success.  
Do you think schools/teachers can be too flexible? Explain.
5. We spoke a lot about the pros and cons of your school environment – if you could equalize schools – meaning no stigma anywhere, teachers were flexible, there was transportation and daycare provided everywhere – where would you choose to go to school? Why?
6. You shared that a teacher/counselor has made a huge difference in helping you graduate, what would this experience be like without them?
7. Would someone else step into that role? Why or why not?
8. Do you think school is a right or a responsibility? Explain.

9. Based on the previous question, if a right – what is the responsibility of schools to ensure teen moms get to participate? If a responsibility – what is the responsibility of teen moms to participate?
10. What do school owe teen moms?
11. If you could go back to 6<sup>th</sup> grade and give yourself advice – what would it be?
12. How would that advice change your life?
13. What makes you different from other teen moms who drop out of school?
14. Have you ever felt like quitting? Why? What stopped you? What kept you in the game?
15. If you could give advice to teen girls who get pregnant – what would it be?
16. Is there anything else you would like to add or clarify?
17. Do you have any questions?

Thank you again for participating in this study. I really appreciate your willingness to contribute. All of the interview responses will be analyzed by themes and then reported anonymously in the study. In addition, this information will be cross-referenced to grades and credits earned per semester as well as any other pertinent demographic information. Again, no identifying information will be used in the report. If you would like to see the results of the study, I can get you a copy if you will leave me your mailing address. Do you have any questions or concerns? Thank you again.

**APPENDIX D**

**CONSENT AND ASSENT FORMS**



CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Resiliency in Teen Mothers

Researcher: Linnea Watson

Phone Number: [REDACTED]

E-mail: [wats5034@bears.unco.edu](mailto:wats5034@bears.unco.edu)

In collaboration with my advisor Dr. Linda Vogel from the University of Northern Colorado, I am researching teen mothers who are showing resiliency towards graduating high school. I will be conducting a study about teen mothers who are in their senior year of high school and on-track to graduate. If you grant permission, I would like to conduct an interview of several formal teen mothers to learn what their experience of high school was like when they were teen mothers.

Despite the wide variety of literature pregnant and parenting teens, there has been virtually no research done from within the educational field, rather, most teen pregnancy and parenting research comes from the health, psychological, sociological, social welfare, and public policy arenas. In 2010, there were 367,678 babies born in the United States to teen mothers age 15 – 19, of those mothers still in school, only half can anticipate earning a diploma. Research over the past 50 years has brought about several initiatives that have proven quite successful in improving the lives of teen mothers and their children and also helped decrease the teen pregnancy rate. When considering the implications dropping out of high school has on individuals and society, it is alarming that practitioners within the field of education have had so little input on affecting the policies that govern pregnant and parenting teens. Additionally, there is little research from within the educational field on the experiences and perceptions of teen mothers from the past to compare to what the research literature describes.

As a former teen mother, you have a distinct experience of what school life was like during a certain time period. Your insights into what really occurred as compared to what the literature says occurred could be invaluable in helping researchers and educators today understand what teen mothers really experience.

Prior to my study, I will visit with the participants to explain the process and to give them this “Consent” form to sign. The forms will be in the possession of the researcher and then provided to my university advisor. Participants will be asked to participate in one, one-on-one interview. All materials will be kept confidential.

The only possible foreseeable risks is bringing up past negative school experiences which may cause discomfort for the participant. Conversely, there are foreseeable benefits to pregnant and parenting teens, as results could impact educational offerings within the school district. Additionally, there could be benefits to the field of education, particularly for graduation motivation strategies for teen parents, based on the findings of the research and build the knowledge base for researchers on past experiences of teen mothers.

Please do not hesitate to contact me via phone or email if you have any questions or concerns about the methods used to conduct this study. Please feel free to copy this letter and keep it for your records.

Thank you for assisting me with this important research.

Sincerely,

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Linnea Watson

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

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Participant Signature

---

Date

---

Researcher's Signature

---

Date

---

Initials



PARENT CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Educational Resiliency in Teen Mothers

Researcher: Linnea Watson

Phone Number: [REDACTED]

E-mail: [wats5034@bears.unco.edu](mailto:wats5034@bears.unco.edu)

Advisor: Dr. Linda Vogel

E-mail: [linda.vogel@unco.edu](mailto:linda.vogel@unco.edu)

Hello. My name is Linnea Watson and I am a teacher in the young parent program at [REDACTED], I was also a teen mother, and I am also a student at the University of Northern Colorado. In collaboration with my advisor Dr. Linda Vogel from the University of Northern Colorado, I am researching teen mothers who are showing resiliency towards graduating high school. Your daughter's school principal or counselor has identified them as a teen mother who might be interested in participating in my research. If you grant permission and if your daughter indicates a willingness to participate, I will be conducting a study for the remainder of the school year. Participants will be asked to participate in two one-on-one interviews, one at the beginning of the research and one at the end of the research, one focus group discussion towards the end of the school year, and they will be asked to keep a journal, including optional pictures if they have a camera, of their educational and mothering experiences. Journals will be provided with instructions. Participants will be asked to keep the journal throughout the entire research process and include an entry at least weekly. Participants may choose to include photos of themselves and/or their children; which demonstrate their educational experiences as teen mothers. Journals will be photocopied for analysis and originals will be returned at the end of the research process. Only non-identifiable photos will be included in the dissertation to keep the participants identities confidential. Additionally, I will be looking at attendance data and transcripts.

Despite the wide variety of literature pregnant and parenting teens, there has been virtually no research done from within the educational field, rather, most teen pregnancy and parenting research comes from the health, psychological, sociological, social welfare, and public policy arenas. In 2010, there were 367,678 babies born in the United States to teen mothers age 15 – 19, of those mothers still in school, only half can anticipate earning a diploma. Research over the past 50 years has brought about several initiatives that have proven quite successful in improving the lives of teen mothers and their children and also helped decrease the teen pregnancy rate. When considering the implications dropping out of high school has on individuals and society, it is alarming that practitioners within the field of education have had so

little input on affecting the policies that govern pregnant and parenting teens. Additionally, there is little research from within the educational field on the factors contributing to educational resiliency in teen mothers.

Your student has shown progress towards earning their diploma and is expected to graduate by May 2014. All participants in this study will be 1) teen mothers – not pregnant, 2) they must be in their senior year, on-track to graduate, and 4) they must attend either a young parent program, the traditional high school, or an alternative high school. I chose senior teen mothers because they are currently living through the obstacles of mothering and school and are overcoming those obstacles in such a way as to be on-track to graduate at the end of the school year.

Prior to my study, I will visit with the students to explain the process and to give them this “Consent” form to take home to their parents. Parents will need to sign this consent form and return it with their student before I can allow students to participate. I will also give students an “Assent” form to complete and have ready before I come back to do the research. When I return, I will cross reference the permission sheets to identify that both forms have been obtained before participating in the interviews. The forms will be in the possession of the researcher and then provided to my university advisor. The participants will be asked to participate in two one-on-one interviews, one focus group with other teen mothers attending from the same educational setting, and keep a journal. All materials will be kept confidential.

There could be some discomfort for participants from the young parent program since the researcher is also their teacher. All efforts will be made to minimize this discomfort and participants may stop the process at any time without any consequences. Agreeing to participate or not participate in this study or anything that is said during the study will in no way affect any participants’ grades or the researcher’s opinion of them. The only foreseeable risk is for the researcher if findings are not positive. Negative school experiences may cause discomfort between participating schools and researcher. Conversely, there are foreseeable benefits to pregnant and parenting teens, as results could impact offerings within the school district. Additionally, there could be benefits to the field of education, particularly for graduation motivation strategies for teen parents, based on the findings of the research.

Please do not hesitate to contact me via phone or email if you have any questions or concerns about the methods used to conduct this study. Please feel free to copy this letter and keep it for your records.

Thank you for assisting me with this important research.

Sincerely,

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Linnea Watson

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to allow your student to participate in this study and if she begins participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise



entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

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Student's Full Name (please print)

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Student's Birth Date (month/day/year)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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Researcher's Signature

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Date

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Initials

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Please check the box if you wish to be notified of the results at the end of the research.



OVER 18 CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Educational Resiliency in Teen Mothers

Researcher: Linnea Watson

Phone Number: [REDACTED]

E-mail: [wats5034@bears.unco.edu](mailto:wats5034@bears.unco.edu)

Advisor: Dr. Linda Vogel

E-mail: [linda.vogel@unco.edu](mailto:linda.vogel@unco.edu)

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individuals and society, it is alarming that practitioners within the field of education have had so little input on affecting the policies that govern pregnant and parenting teens. Additionally, there is little research from within the educational field on the factors contributing to resiliency in teen mothers attending a traditional high school compared to an alternative school.

You have shown progress towards earning your diploma and are expected to graduate by May 2014. All participants in this study will be 1) teen mothers – not pregnant, 2) they must be in their senior year, on-track to graduate, and 4) they must attend either a young parent program, traditional high school, or an alternative high school. I chose senior teen mothers because they are currently living through the obstacles of mothering and school and are overcoming those obstacles in such a way as to be on-track to graduate at the end of the school year.

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Please do not hesitate to contact me via phone or email if you have any questions or concerns about the methods used to conduct this study. Please feel free to copy this letter and keep it for your records.

Thank you for assisting me with this important research.

Sincerely,

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Linnea Watson

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reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Full Name (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Birth Date (month/day/year)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Initials



Please check the box if you wish to be notified of the results at the end of the research.



MINOR ASSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Hello. My name is Linnea Watson and I am a teacher in the young parent program at [REDACTED], I was also a teen mother, and I am also a student at the University of Northern Colorado. In collaboration with my advisor Dr. Linda Vogel from the University of Northern Colorado, I am researching teen mothers who are showing resiliency towards graduating high school. Your school principal or counselors has identified you as a teen mother who might be interested in participating in my research. If you are willing to participate and grant permission, I will be conducting a study for the remainder of the school year. Participants will be asked to participate in two one-on-one interviews, one at the beginning of the research and one at the end of the research, one focus group discussion towards the end of the school year, and will be asked to keep a journal, including optional pictures if you have a camera, of your educational and mothering experiences. Journals will be provided with instructions on how to complete. Participants will be asked to keep the journal throughout the entire research process and include an entry at least weekly. Participants may choose to include photos of themselves and/or their children; which demonstrate their educational experiences as teen mothers. Journals will be photocopied and originals will be returned at the end of the research process. Only non-identifiable photos will be included in the dissertation to keep the participants identities confidential. Additionally, I will be looking at attendance data and transcripts.

For this research, I would like to learn more about your motivation to complete high school while parenting a child. I would like to interview several teen mothers from traditional high schools, the young parent program, and the alternative high school to find out what factors contributed to helping them stay in school and work towards earning a diploma. If this sounds like something you would want to participate in, I would love to have you participate in my research.

If you decide to participate, I will ask that you to take a "Consent" permission form to your parents and talk to them about this research. If they allow you to participate, you will then have to bring the "Consent" form signed and dated by your parent before I can allow you to participate. Once I have your parent's "Consent" form signed and your own permission "Assent" form signed, I will ask you to participate in two one-on-one interviews, one at the beginning of the research process and one at the end, participate in one focus group discussion with other teen mothers from a similar educational setting as you, and keep a journal including photographs of your experiences as a teen mother and a student. I will also look at your attendance data and

transcripts to help confirm any obstacles you identify during the interviews. The interviews will not take more than 1 to 1 ½ hours each and the results will be used to guide our understanding of what schools can do to help teen mothers succeed. The responses to the interview questions have no right or wrong answers and they will be kept anonymous so nobody will know what you answered. I do just ask that you are honest about your opinions and that you answer every question so that my findings are as accurate as possible.

Participating in this study will not help you or hurt you; it will simply allow you to help me do my job. However, even when your parents said it was okay for you to participate, you can change your mind and not participate at all or quit in the middle of the research. Agreeing to participate or not participate in this study or anything that is said during the study will in no way affect any participants' grades or the researcher's opinion of them. I encourage you to ask me any questions you have about this research before we start.

If you want to participate in my research, please sign your name and today's date below. Thanks!

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Student's signature

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Date

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Researcher

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Date



Please check the box if you wish to be notified of the results at the end of the research.