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EDUCATION POLICY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Educational resiliency in teen mothers

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Abstract: While recent research has shown the long-term effects of teen pregnancy 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. This qualitative case study examined six parenting teen mothers attending three different educational settings 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 of struggle, support, hope, and perseverance. An in-depth look at how these themes played into their educational resiliency is explored, as well as advice for educators and policy-makers alike.

Subjects: Educational Research; Educational Change & School Reform; Education Policy & Politics

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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, Gebregiabher, Marsh, & O'Rourke, 2008). As a nation, in 2010, there were 34.2% 1,000 live births to teenage mothers age 15–19. The state of Colorado is slightly below the national average at 33.4% 1,000 live births (Martin et al., 2012), and in the county where this research took place, the teen birth rate typically sits above the state average and well above the national average at just above 40% 1,000 teen births (Teen Sexual Health & Pregnancy Prevention Coalition, 2010).

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

While only 50% of teen parents graduate from high school, much can be learned from those teen parents who do finish high school to inform how educational leaders and policy-makers can better support the academic success of this group. The six teen mothers who were interviewed for this study shared their insights as to how they persevered in their high school studies while being a parent. The in-depth exploration of the themes of struggle, support, hope, and perseverance that these young parents discussed displayed their own emotional resiliency and the educational supports that helped them beat the odds and graduate.

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. In response to the research gap on teen mothers' educational experiences, the purpose of this qualitative narrative case study was to examine the educational resiliency factors that contribute to high school graduation for teen parents. Therefore, we posed the following guiding research questions: What factors contribute to teen mothers' educational resiliency? Additional, three sub-questions were explored:

Sub-RQ1: What factors of the various school environments encourage motivation and support resiliency in teen mothers?

Sub-RQ2: What are the teen mothers' perceptions of stigma within the various educational settings?

Sub-RQ3: What are teen mothers' perceptions of the opportunities and support services available in each educational setting?

The authors discuss this study in four main sections. In the first section, we review the literature relevant to educational resiliency in teen mothers. In particular, we review research on economic costs, educational issues, and motivation and resiliency in teen mothers. In the second section, we explain the methods used in our study. We discuss the themes that emerged from the data collected in our study in the fourth section on "Findings," as well as a portrait of each teen mother and her story. In the final section, we discuss actions that school and district educational leaders can take to support the academic achievement and graduation of teen parents.

1. Literature review

1.1. 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" (Centers for Disease Control & 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 (Centers for Disease Control & 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.

1.2. 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.

1.2.1. 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% 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.

1.2.2. 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 & 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], (2010), 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 (1981) 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 Sletton (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, Morrissette (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.

1.3. 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.

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.

2. Methods

Qualitative methodology was used to bring a rich, complex understanding of the meanings derived from the lived experiences of teen mothers who had completed high school based on the belief that personal interviews would best capture how participants interpreted their experiences, the factors that they viewed as challenges, and the factors to which they attributed their success. In addition to a constructivist perspective, the lead researcher also adopted a critical theorist perspective with the hope that "walking a mile in another's shoes" would increase awareness and change societal perceptions, as well as influence further research on the educational experiences of teen mothers.

Case study design was used in this study because the lead researcher was "interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation" (Merriam, 2009, p. 42) in the exploration of a "real-life, contemporary bounded system ... through a detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information" (Creswell, 2013, p. 97) through which themes could be identified, narrative case study takes the design one step further by using the data collection to tell the participants' stories. 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), was used to provide a voice for teen mothers to tell their stories of resiliency within a variety of educational settings.

2.1. Data collection

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.

A purposeful sampling was used to identify possible participants who would "inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (Creswell, 2013, p. 156) as "information-rich" (Patton, 2002, p. 230) cases. The criteria for participation in the study was as follows: (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. Based on recommendations by school counselors, principals, and/or teachers; student availability and reliability for follow-through during the research process, and student interest, six students participated in this study.

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. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the lead research for accuracy. Participants were also asked to record their experiences in a journal and agreed to have documents reviewed on their educational background. 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."

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. The convergence and contrast of themes was sought by searching for repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, institutional and cultural rituals, triangulation of data, and revealing patterns based upon the recommendations of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (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.

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 & Davis, 1997, p. 13). In fact, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (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 lead researcher co-constructed the portrait alongside the participants. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (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, several strategies were implemented to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

Triangulation, member checking, and the disclosure of the lead researcher’s position or bias were utilized to ensure the trustworthiness of this study (Creswell, 2013). Interviews, journals, and school data were used to triangulate the data. 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. The themes that emerged from the data were then compared to the literature on teen parents and resiliency. The lead researcher is the daughter of teenage parents, was a teen mother, and is currently a teacher working at an alternative school. This background information was shared with the participants, creating a unique relationship bond that supported a safe environment for the participants.

3. Findings

Of the six participants, two 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 came from diverse backgrounds. Included in Table 1 is a list of each participant’s pseudonym, race, age of motherhood, graduation timeframe, and type of school attended.

Table 1. Participant’s pertinent characteristics

Participant	Race	Age of motherhood	Graduated on time (4 years)	Type of school attended
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

The following four themes emerged during the research process, each one building upon the last, and intertwining throughout: struggle, hope, support, and perseverance. 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). 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 and several included drawings in their journals depicting these metaphors. Following are the stories of the participants, prefaced by a description of the educational context that each attended.

3.1. Young parent program completers

The young parent program is located in a small building on the campus of the alternative school and hosts a variety of young mothers coming from all across the area. The mothers take their content classes next door at the alternative school but spend half to two-thirds of their day taking parenting classes and being introduced to community resources at the young parent program where they can also earn college credit in early childhood education. A daycare for babies up to 18 months old is located next door to the young mothers' classrooms. Participants in the program also benefit from the ongoing donation 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.

There is often a waiting list since it is the only program with an on-site daycare. The program helps 18 to 23 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.

When asked about the program, students in the study talked about enjoying the flexibility and support the program offers. A major issue the students complained about is that there is no daycare for children over 18 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.

3.1.1. Zoe's story

Zoe is a 17-year-old Latina mother attending the Young Parent Program with her 7-month-old son, Jack. 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 As and Bs to Ds and Fs. 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.

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.

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.

3.1.2. *Zianna's story*

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 one talks with Zianna, one is 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 a while 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.

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 1).

3.2. The alternative school

With an average of around 150 students per year, the alternative school is a relatively small campus set in the middle of the downtown area. Students come from schools across the region. Participants in the study observed that there are no cliques at the alternative school where all students were at-risk for dropping out for a variety of reasons, but rather that the alternative school is a place where the playing field has been leveled. Participants also expressed the view that the teachers at the alternative school were more personally supportive than at the traditional high school. Charlee stated,

Figure 1. Zianna's metaphor.



“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.” The only negative reluctantly expressed by one participant is the public perception that the alternative school was “where the bad kids go,” even though the loners and troublemakers at the traditional school are the leadership team, mock trial team, and Honor Roll students at the alternative school.

3.2.1. *Charlee's story*

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. 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 lot 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, 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.

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.

3.2.2. Ashley’s story

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 (Figure 2).

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.

Figure 2. Charlee's metaphor.



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. 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 her interviews, Ashley frequently offered sound advice for teachers and policy-makers 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 8th grade when I got pregnant, they just stopped talking to me ... I see my favorite 8th 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!

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.

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.

3.2.3. *Hannah's story*

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 started attending the traditional school her freshman year, but, after attending private schools through middle school, she immediately felt lost inside the school's 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, saying, "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. Maybe early on in her pregnancy or motherhood she had felt more burdened, but by the time she participated in this study, 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 her last interview, 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 3).

3.3. The traditional school

The traditional school looks like any ordinary American high school on the outside, however the inside reveals a series of additions, dead end hallways, rooms that are numbered in no apparent sequence, and more than 30 exit doors. Over 1,600 students attend this school. Although this school is located in the middle of the farming community, it is also the school that is located the closest to the most affluent section of town. The parking lot reveals a divide of 1980's and 1990's pickups and shiny, new Mustangs, Lexus, and BMWs.

Located in the parking lot of the traditional school is a small modular building. It is here that students can work on an alternative pathway to earn a diploma. Students are allowed to enroll in the alternative pathway program if they are more than one year behind in their credits for graduation. With a small student to teacher ratio, the program helps an average of 8–10 at-risk students who might otherwise dropout earn a regular high school diploma every year.

Figure 3. Hannah's metaphor.



3.3.1. Maddie's story

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 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 appeared 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.

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.

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."

3.4. Themes

Four themes emerged during the research process, struggle, hope, support, and perseverance. 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. Four of the themes struggle, hope, support, and perseverance fell clearly into this category of repetitive refrains.

3.4.1. 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 with the struggles falling to the three categories of emotional, physical, and social. Table 2 illustrates some of the terms in the data associated with each type of 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.

The struggle of motivation was directly tied to a fear of failing or disappointing their babies, family, and teachers.

Table 2. Theme 1—struggle with categories and 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

Another struggle many of the teen moms faced was isolation. The stigma associated with teen pregnancy often left them feeling ignored, sad, and lonely. 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.

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). Maddie described the competing responsibilities 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.” Not surprisingly, each of the participants mentioned their struggles with juggling all the competing responsibilities.

Besides emotional and physical struggles, the six teen mothers in this study experienced social struggles. 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.’”

The stigma of being a teen parent manifested in the loss of friends and even rejection by teachers. Ashley shared, “I lost all of my teachers in 8th 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.” Being judged, hearing rumors about themselves, and the loss of friends all contributed to the social struggle experienced by the teen mothers in this study.

3.4.2. Hope

One of the defining themes that emerged in this study was hope. Table 3 illustrates each of the sub-themes identified during the analysis of the data and how it was assembled into the theme of hope.

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. 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.

3.4.3. Support

The participants in this study identified 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,

Table 3. Theme 2—hope with sub-themes

Hope sub-themes

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

Table 4. Theme 3—support with categories, sub-categories, and sub-themes

Support		
Educational categories	Educational sub-themes	Family sub-themes
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	

services, and peers. Table 4 illustrates the categories and sub-categories with each of the sub-themes identified to create the overarching theme of support.

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 & Sletton, 2002; Morrissette, 2011). This study, however, found that all of the participants were able to access these critical supports regardless of where they attended school.

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.” Surprisingly, the students in this study expressed the desire and need for teachers to play a pseudo-parental role in setting boundaries, having high expectations, and also providing recognition for the difficult task of being a parent and a student. 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.

In the area of services, a variety of supports were identified by the participants. All of the teen mothers mentioned flexibility as a critical factor in their success. Participants from the young parent program specifically mentioned the specialty services of that program as integral to their success, particularly the daycare provided. Small classes were also discussed by several of the mothers with individualization of pace and less pressure noted as critical factors. Alternative curriculum, including credit earned for working, was another key support discussed by participants.

Table 5. Theme 4—perseverance with sub-themes

Perseverance

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

While peer support was not 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. Ashley explained, “Those girls helped me out. We were pregnant together. We always had something to talk about. You have connections. You need that.” 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.

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.

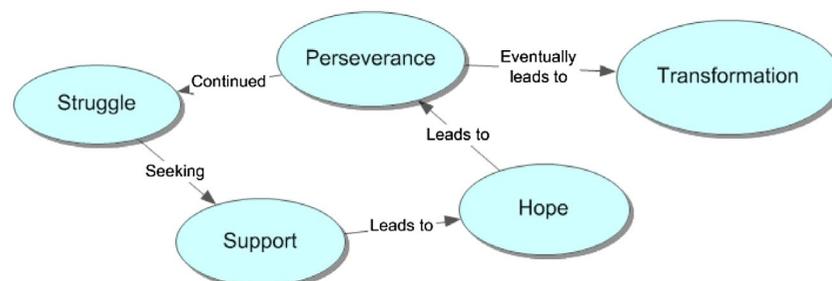
3.4.4. Perseverance

One of the defining characteristics of the six teen mothers who participated in this study was perseverance. Table 5 describes the sub-themes that were identified within the theme of perseverance.

The teen moms in this study overcame seemingly insurmountable obstacles to become one of only 50% of teen mothers who graduate high school. Despite obstacles of homelessness, the death of a mother, struggling to make ends meet financially, the stories of the participants are steep in a “never give up” spirit (Figure 4).

Transformation could be considered an over-arching theme that emerged from the participants’ stories as they explain how they grew from pregnant, frightened teens into mothers and adults. The struggles of being a teen parent led the participants to seek support. That support led to hope and perseverance to continue onward despite the struggles. That perseverance also led to a new level of maturity manifested by understanding and responsibility in each of the young women who participated in this study. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) described the aesthetic whole as, “the last and most comprehensive feature of portraiture” (p. 261), and transformation was that esthetic whole that emerged from the collective portraits of these participants.

Figure 4. Relationship among the four themes.



4. Conclusion and recommendations

More than 40 years after the passage of Title IX guaranteed the educational rights of teen mothers, teen mothers are still one of the populations least advocated for in education (Pillow, 2004). When asked if they thought education was right or a responsibility, four of the teen moms in this study answered, “responsibility.” The other two teen moms said right, but then quickly went on to describe their responsibility to obtain an education. They believe that *Education is a responsibility* therefore, they have no right to complain about the unique challenges that they face as parenting teens. Charlee stated this best by saying, “We did make poor choices and we should be held responsible for those things.” Policy-makers must give them a voice as they are afraid to speak out against the lack of equality of their education on their own.

Teen mothers believe getting their education is a responsibility they must pursue; yet 50% of teen moms fail to graduate high school. Policy-makers and educators are responsible for providing those services that support *the right* to an education guaranteed under Title IX. Recommendations based on this study and past research include the following:

- Educators must become informed about the provisions of Title IX and 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.
- Policy-makers must increase the daycare services available for teen mothers to be able to attend school while parenting.
- All schools and districts must ensure a Title IX coordinator is appointed and trained on how to advocate for this population.

When the necessary supports for teen mothers such as those outlined above are put into place, American society will see the graduation rates for pregnant and parenting teens approach that of their non-parenting peers.

In addition, alternative programs are a great option for pregnant and mothering teens, but the rigor and the opportunities for higher level classes must be increased for those teen mothers that desire a career that requires an advanced education. Of the teen mothers participating in this study, four out of six desired such a career. While a few of those are technical degree interests, most desire to attend a two to four-year college. 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 As and Bs. However, they were all preoccupied with the idea of graduating, not the rigor of their curriculum. It is the responsibility of alternative education providers to offer higher-level, college prep classes in alternative settings, for teen mothers and all students begin served by these programs. Teen parents 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 which prepares them for success in college. Educators have the responsibility to provide the instruction teen parents need to be successful at the college level.

Finally, the six teen mothers in this study offered some advice to teachers and schools to how teen mothers can be supported in completing their high school education. Their advice to teachers in their own words was as follows:

- 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 should listen to. The advice the students gave to schools in general emphasized respect and not dismissing teen parents as failures. Professional development on how to effectively deal with this population would be helpful, as well, but the students emphasized listening and caring. Those are easy and cost-effective ways to help support pregnant and parenting teens in all educational settings. All teen mothers deserve help, respect, a chance, and the benefit of the doubt. All schools must provide these basic rights if we are to increase the graduation rates for pregnant and mothering teens in the future.

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