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**Backpacks and Diaper Bags:
Latina School-Age Mothers in an Alternative
School Setting**

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Social commentators, policy makers, and members of the mass media have been instrumental in casting teen pregnancy in opposition to educational achievement. Dropping out of school is seen as one of the major negative outcomes of teen pregnancy. This ethnographic study explores the educational experiences of nine Latina school-age mothers who were enrolled at two sites of an alternative secondary program for pregnant or parenting teens located in a large, urban, northern California city. Contrary to those who claim that teen motherhood is the cause of low achievement, this study suggests that having a child inspires school-age mothers to pursue their educational goals. These goals are nurtured when young mothers are provided with an alternative school experience that supports their needs as both students and mothers.

Introduction

Currently in California Latinas make up the largest percentage of school-age mothers. In 1999, births to Latina girls ages 15-19 made up 65 percent of the total number of teen births in California (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy 2002). A report published by the Public Policy Institute of California (2003) on teen birth rates in California stated that two of every three babies born to teens in California are born to Latinas. Efforts have been made to provide educational, social, and economic support to young mothers and their children in hopes of helping the young families achieve their academic and life goals. Little has been done, however, to understand fully the educational experiences of these young mothers and the impact that mothers, who are students themselves, have on their children's education and readiness for school. Before examining the impact that young mothers have on the education of their children, it is important to look first at the educational experiences of young mothers themselves.

For my research I conducted a pilot study focusing on the educational experiences of a small group of Latina school-age mothers enrolled in an alternative school for pregnant and parenting teens. I focused my research on these young women for two reasons: the first is that young Latinas have the highest pregnancy and childbirth rates in California, and the second is that these women belong to a small group of students who decided to continue their schooling after learning about their pregnancy or after giving birth.

Having worked with a family literacy program for two years that served young mothers at two of the state's alternative schools for pregnant or parenting teens, I was able to establish a relationship with many of the young women. They shared their frustrations with me, along with their desires to achieve more for themselves and for their children. In getting to know the young

women as mothers and as students, I realized that the social stigma placed on low-income, young woman of color who have babies shows how little mainstream society really knows about them and about their experiences as young women trying to achieve their goals and dreams.

The first phase of this study focused on the educational experiences of Latina school-age mothers, specifically those enrolled in an alternative school. To learn more about their experiences, I examined the following questions: 1) What were the educational experiences of the young women prior to pregnancy? 2) What role did family support play in the decisions the young women made during pregnancy and after having their children? and 3) What have been the women's educational experiences as students in an alternative school for pregnant and parenting teens? Although my main focus is on the educational experiences of the young mothers, I also wanted to obtain their views on their children's education. Thus, I also asked the following questions: 4) What educational goals do the young mothers have for their children? and 5) How have their own educational experiences influenced these goals?

The intent of this research is not to address the morality of or take a position regarding teen pregnancy and/or teen mothers. The intent is to examine the experiences of a small group of young mothers, both prior to pregnancy and as young school-age mothers, in an alternative school program. Hopefully, by learning more about the educational experiences of school-age mothers, those who are interested in supporting these young women, both as mothers and as students, will have a clearer idea of how to do this in the most appropriate and successful ways.

Aspects of Teen Motherhood

The Construction of a Social Problem

Teen motherhood is definitely associated with many negative outcomes: poverty, including welfare dependence; low educational attainment among the mothers and their children; high rates of low-birthweight babies and other medical problems; and so forth. Nevertheless, association is not the same as causation (Lustig 1997).

Social commentators, policy makers, and members of the mass media have been instrumental in casting teen motherhood as a social problem (Luker 1996). As Lustig describes in the quote above, teen motherhood is often associated with low educational attainment for both the young mother and the child. Dropping out of school is seen as one of the major negative outcomes of teen pregnancy. Research conducted by the Alan Guttmacher Institute (1999) found that 70 percent of teen mothers drop out of school. Similarly, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (2002) states that only 30 percent of teen mothers complete their high school education by the time they reach the age of 30. Both of these statistics require clarification, however: Among the 70 percent of teen mothers who drop out of school, how many drop out *before* becoming pregnant? Among the 30 percent of teen mothers who complete their high school education, how many drop out *before* becoming pregnant and return to school *after* they give birth? Clarifying these statistics and the factors that shape a young woman's decision to remain in, drop out, or return to school is necessary for understanding the true nature of this "social problem," including the effects of teen pregnancy on educational achievement.

The Education of School-Age Mothers

The education of school-age mothers is not only a concern of those who work with them, but as Lankard (1994) states, it is also a concern of the nation—especially as it relates to the shaping the employment, and economic opportunities of the upcoming generation of adult citizens. Lankard points out that career development should be a priority when helping young mothers make the transition from adolescents living at home to economically independent and self-sufficient adults. Often psychosocial factors influence the young mother's educational achievement. They can also result in low self-esteem, low expectations, aspirations, and motivation with regard to life goals, as well as unrealistic goals and ambitions (Ettinger 1991). Ettinger proposes a list of life skills that would be beneficial for teen mothers to develop: building of self-concept and support systems; learning to access child care, transportation, and other necessary support services; learning to meet the challenge of combining work and family roles; learning to give and receive emotional support; and learning how to network and enhance interpersonal communication and relationships. Both Lankard and Ettinger point to the importance of the development of functional skills for teen mothers. These are skills that the mothers need for their own daily survival and that of their children. Only after meeting the psychosocial and functional needs of the mothers can society address their academic needs.

Title IX of the Education Act, which was passed in 1972, represents one measure taken by society to protect teen mothers. Along with prohibiting discrimination in educational institutions based on gender, pregnancy, or marital parenting status, Title IX grants rights to pregnant and parenting teens in the areas of educational access, absence and leave policies, and extracurricular activities. In essence, under Title IX a pregnant or teen mother has the right to finish her education, by staying enrolled in her comprehensive school; participating in all chosen school and extracurricular activities, as long as she is medically able to participate; and having

absences excused that are related to pregnancy, childbirth, and/or the illness of a child. In spite of these legal guarantees, Wolf's (1999) overview of how Title IX has been applied to protect the rights of pregnant and parenting teens notes that on a daily basis, school districts continue to discriminate against teens who are pregnant or who have become young parents. Pregnant and parenting teens are often forced to attend alternative schools that do not offer the same quality of education as regular comprehensive schools. They are failed for excessive absences and are excluded from certain courses and extracurricular activities.

The creation of Title IX was a positive step in providing pregnant and parenting teens the protections needed to complete their high school education while transitioning into motherhood. As noted by Wolf, some school districts force pregnant and parenting teens to attend alternative schools. In California, alternative schools for pregnant and parenting students have been developed to offer young parents, mostly young women, the opportunity to complete their high school education while receiving necessary support services. The alternative schools are designed to offer not only the necessary requirements for students to receive their high school diplomas, but also courses in parenting skills and child care and developmental programs for their children. With this in mind, it is difficult to distinguish whether a young woman is "forced" to attend an alternative school because of discrimination or "chooses" to attend the school because of the support services that it provides. Still, whether it is by force or by choice, the alternative schools set up for pregnant and parenting teens play an important role in the educational experiences of school-age mothers.

Methodology

The Study

This ethnographic study explores the educational experiences of nine Latina school-age mothers¹ who were enrolled at two sites of an alternative secondary program for pregnant or parenting teens located in Bayside, a large, urban, northern California city. The school sites, Miramar and Vista, house two of the state's three School Age Mothers (SAM) programs, all of which are located in Bayside. Data for the study were gathered through standardized interviews. Additional data were collected through participant observation in the form of field notes taken during class time and during activities facilitated by the family literacy program.

During the time the interviews took place, I worked for the family literacy program that served the teen mothers at both Miramar and Vista. The family literacy program is housed at the Miramar school site. Due to my work with the literacy program, I had already interacted with a number of the teen mothers, or the teen mothers were aware of who I was and the organizations and institutions with which I was affiliated. I recruited subjects for the study by handing out recruitment letters to Latina mothers at the two school sites. The letters described the purpose of my research and invited the student to take part in the study by consenting to a tape-recorded interview about their experiences, scheduled for a convenient time and location. Because the majority of the young mothers were minors, as soon as they agreed to participate in the study they were given a form for their parents or guardians to sign. Upon receipt of the signed form, the interview time and date was arranged. I let the students know that what they told me would be completely confidential and that in no way would their participation influence their grades.

The interviews were standardized and covered approximately eight different areas related to the respondents' social and educational experiences as teen mothers. The general interview

¹ The terms "school-age mothers" and "teen mothers" are used interchangeably in the study and refer to young women who had their children when they were between the ages of thirteen and eighteen.

question areas were: background, school, family support, community support, living in their community, language, educational goals for the child, and motherhood. Each interview took forty minutes to an hour. The majority of the teen mothers interviewed spoke both English and Spanish. The interview questions were made available in both languages, and each respondent was allowed to choose the language she would prefer to be interviewed in. Pseudonyms are used for the names of the mothers, schools, and program.

The Young Mothers

When walking through Miramar and Vista one sees two different colors of faces: black and brown. Approximately half of the students enrolled in the two SAM programs are African American and half are Latina. Most are already mothers and some are mothers-to-be. The ages of the young mothers in this study ranged between 16 and 19 and all of the participants were in grades ten through twelve. Their children were from 7 to 44 months old.

All of the young mothers that I interviewed were either first- or second-generation Latinas. The country of origin most represented in the group was Mexico, and the remaining young mothers were from or had parents from Central America. All of the young mothers spoke Spanish fluently, and all but a few spoke English fluently.

Four of the mothers in this study lived at home with their families and four lived with their boyfriends. Only one of the young mothers lived in a group home; she planned to move in with her boyfriend upon turning eighteen. When asked about their boyfriends, four stated that they were with the baby's father, two had boyfriends who were not the fathers, and two did not have boyfriends at the time. Out of the nine young women, only one was legally married. The same woman was also the only respondent who had two children.

The School Sites

The SAM program at Miramar is located in a building in the downtown area of the city. The school was originally housed in a building closer to the neighborhoods of the young mothers, but it had to be relocated. Most of the women who attend this program site have to take a bus or two to get to school. Before heading up to the third floor of the building where their classroom is located, the young mothers drop off their babies at the child education center on the first floor.

The SAM program at Vista is located at a comprehensive high school. The young mothers attend class every day in a classroom at the back of the school. The mothers at Vista also have use of a child education center where they drop off their babies before class. The child education center is found in a portable classroom approximately fifty feet from the mothers' classroom.

SAM is designed to enable the young women to continue with their high school education while receiving the parenting skills, information, and support services they need to achieve their academic, career, and life goals. What makes the SAM program unique is the accommodations that it provides for the comfort of young mothers and their children.² At both sites mothers can visit their children during their breaks and lunchtime, and teachers allow mothers to leave class to breastfeed their babies. Because of their close proximity to the children's center, a mother can be easily located if her child becomes sick or hurt.

² Although the program is set up to serve fathers as well as mothers, the efforts to enroll male parents have not been successful. At the time of the study only women were enrolled in the SAM program.

Findings

In Their Own Words: Educational Experiences Prior to Pregnancy – “Before I was a mommy...”

Before becoming SAM students, all of the young women in this study had had some type of schooling experience in a regular comprehensive school. During the interviews, the respondents were asked about their schooling experiences prior to becoming pregnant. The majority of the young mothers stated that they had not enjoyed school. A few shared that they did not get good grades and often cut school. For example, Amalia, an 18 year-old senior at Miramar, described how she felt about school before becoming pregnant: “It was not good because I was always skipping school and classes and being around with my friends, and they used to smoke weed and, you know, stuff like that. I never smoked weed though, okay?”

Most of the young women that I interviewed became pregnant in the ninth or tenth grade and decided to stay in their comprehensive school while pregnant, take independent home study, or transfer to a SAM site. Only one of the nine young women dropped out of school because of her pregnancy. Three had dropped out prior to becoming pregnant, and became pregnant within a year of having dropped out. One of the students who dropped out due to reasons other than pregnancy was Sophia, who said she dropped out of school due to family problems during the seventh grade. She clearly remembered her middle school experience: “I guess there was just a lot of drama going and the school was just plain horrible. I think it still is. I heard it’s better, but I think it’s still horrible. I went to Parkside. I mean, even the teacher was selling weed in the school. So that school was bad, and I would cut all the time, all the time. So I never was in school, basically.”

Prior to pregnancy, the educational and career goals of the majority of these young women were vague, and for some even nonexistent. For others, their immediate goals included graduating from high school and getting a job. Teresa explained how she had career interests but sometimes she was just too lazy to do anything about them: “Yeah, I wanted to study cosmetology, and I still do. I would want to do it, then I would get lazy when it came to going to school. I would go to school but I didn’t pay any attention.”

The educational experiences that these young women had prior to pregnancy are significant. Much of the contemporary literature on teen mothers focuses on their low academic attainment and achievement, without fully recognizing the entire context of their experiences. Stating that teen mothers tend to do poorly in school fails to acknowledge the academic and schooling situations of the young women prior to becoming pregnant. Each of the young women in this study had individual obstacles to overcome *before* she became pregnant. What perhaps sets them apart from other teen mothers was their choice to continue their education after learning about their pregnancy.

The Influence of Family Support on Educational Decisions: “Mom, I have something to tell you...”

Upon learning about their pregnancies, the young women in this study had many choices to make. Apart from the obvious choice of whether or not to have the baby, they had to decide what they were going to do with respect to school. As mentioned before, only one respondent dropped out of school as a result of her pregnancy, five of the young women stayed in their comprehensive high schools during their pregnancies, and the other three women had already dropped out of school before they became pregnant. Amalia described the comments made by her schoolmates when she was the only pregnant student at her high school:

Q: “When you were at Mills High, were there other pregnant students?”

A: “No, it was just me, and it was like ‘Oh my God! Look at her she’s pregnant!’”

When it came to deciding what to do after the young women found out about their pregnancies, the role of family support was very important. All were concerned with what their parents would say upon learning they that their daughter had become pregnant. Reactions from parents varied. When asked about how her parents found out about her pregnancy, Sophia explained:

Oh I didn’t tell them. Yeah, I got pregnant, I ran away from home. I didn’t go back until like three months later. I lost all communication with my mother, and when I came back, I went in the house, and I waited for her to get back from work. She called me into her room, and I was all so scared, and I went and sat down on the bed, and she looks at me, and I was right about to tell her when she says, “You’re pregnant aren’t you?” and I’m all “yeah.” She’s like, “You know, you can have an abortion” and all that, you know. She went through the whole thing that I was young and that I could think about it and all sorts of stuff, but I guess after a while she got used to it.

When it came to telling the family about the pregnancy, each young woman’s situation was unique. In Sophia’s case, her mother was initially upset and laid out Sophia’s options, including abortion. Finally, as Sophia stated, her mother “got used to it.” Another young mother, Tanya, delayed telling her parents about her pregnancy. Her mother finally discovered that Tanya was pregnant during her eighth month of pregnancy: “She felt my stomach. It was like—I don’t know—she’s like ‘Are you pregnant?’ I didn’t tell her nothing.”

Sophia goes on to describe how both her mother and father reacted to the news of her pregnancy: “Oh my God! Well, my dad didn’t talk to me until Isabel was three months old and my mom, she was just upset because I was like the goodie-goodie. But in the background I was bad. You know, yeah, so they were upset.”

For Amalia the experience of telling her mother that she was pregnant was painful:

Q: “How did your mom react when you first told her you were pregnant?”

A: “Actually she kicked me out. She kicked me out of the house, and I had...I didn’t have nowhere to go. Her baby, I mean my baby’s daddy, he used to live in a house with all his friends, and I had to go with my friend to my friend’s house like for two weeks. And then my mom came looking for me, and then I came back home.”

Although the young mothers experienced different degrees of difficulty when they first shared their pregnancy with their families, most of them felt that their families eventually were supportive, emotionally and economically, during the pregnancy, and some of the young mothers’ families continued to be a main source of support after the birth of the child.

As stated above, about half of the young women in this study live with their parents while the other half live with the father of their baby. When asked about the reactions from their boyfriends upon learning about their pregnancies, the women described reactions ranging from exclamations of joy to complete denial. When Karina told her boyfriend about her pregnancy, he responded with happiness and excitement.³ Patricia’s boyfriend at the time, who was the father of her baby, initially denied his paternity and then offered reluctant acknowledgment with little support. She explained, “Well at first he said that it wasn’t his. But then when [the baby] was born he said he was the father. But he never helps me or asks about the baby. Nothing.”

Overall, the young mothers stated that they received support in some form (e.g., clothing for their children, money, advice, continued health care coverage) from their families. If adequate support from their own families did not materialize, they found the support they needed

³ Karina’s father, however, demanded that she leave the house. Karina suggested that her father’s reaction to the news reflects his cultural understanding of fatherhood: “Yeah, ’cause like I guess, us as Mexicans or something, we’re raised as in, if you’re pregnant or something like that, he [the baby’s father] has to respond to you. So he like, when my dad asked me that, when I was pregnant, like he said ‘You need to call him because he needs to come pick you up.’”

from the father of their children, their new boyfriends, or the families of their boyfriends. In addition to material support, some of the young mothers received support in the form of encouragement to return to school. Sophia described how her boyfriend convinced her to go back to school:

Q: “Does he support you emotionally and academically?”

A: “Oh, definitely. I think probably he was one of the major reasons I came to school. He kind of pushed me to it. I was really reluctant in coming back. I thought about coming back, but I just was too afraid of it, and he really pushed me to come back to school. He’s really pushed me with homework and with coming to school, and he makes sure I do my work and all that. He’s very proud of me, especially when I show him my grades. So I think he feels happy when I get the grades. I mean, he didn’t finish high school. He said it was his fault, because he really never liked school, and right now he regrets it, and he wants to go back to school. But right now he says his plans are for me to finish school, and then he could go on and go to school. I think that’s good—yeah.”

The decision by all of the young women in this study to continue their education were influenced in part by the reactions they received from their families. If the response to their pregnancy was anger and disappointment, this only made them want to prove their families wrong by continuing with their educations. If the response was excitement and optimism, this helped fuel their desire for academic achievement.

Experiencing the Alternative School: “I go to a school for pregnant girls.”

In the county in which Bayside is located, the SAM program allows young pregnant and parenting students to attend school without the stigma attached to pregnancy in comprehensive schools. When asked how they had heard about the SAM program, most of the young mothers stated that they had learned about the program through their case managers, social workers, or friends who had been in the program. One young mother, Patricia, actually took it upon herself to investigate the program:

Q: “How did you find out about the SAM program?”

A: “How did I find out? Because I went to the school and asked the principal of the school. I also had a friend who had been in the program before me. She told me about it and she gave me the phone number and I called.”

For some of the young women, the decision to attend the SAM program was a result of feeling marginalized at their comprehensive school. Others enrolled in SAM after recognizing the lack of opportunities available to people without an education. Sophia, who had dropped out in middle school, now understood the importance of going to school, and she also now had a reason for wanting to go back:

Q: “What helped you decide to attend Miramar?”

A: “My daughter. Because, I mean, there are some very bad-paying jobs if you don’t have a high school diploma, and I wasn’t old enough to actually get a better job, even if I did have a high school diploma. So I wasn’t going to be able to make a living for my daughter like that. So I came back.”

Now that they attended an alternative school, these women were no longer subject to the stigma of being pregnant at a comprehensive high school. Still, the SAM school sites were known throughout the community as schools for pregnant girls and teen moms. When asked how they felt about attending a separate school, most of the young women stressed the benefits of being in an alternative environment. Karina, a young mother at Miramar, explained, “I guess you feel much better, because you’re surrounded by girls, and they’re all around your age. It’s easier, I guess, to get your work done. You go to a regular school, I think it would be more stressful, because you have to go to class after class and [there’s] more work and stuff like that.”

For other young mothers, the SAM school experience was difficult not because of social stigma, but because they had been out of school for a few years and found the work academically challenging:

Sophia: “I didn’t really care. I mean I still don’t think of it as a separate school. It’s just that I felt weird coming back, because I was afraid. I was like so many years out of school, and I had left off in elementary, and now all of a sudden I was being jumped up to high school, and I was freaked out.”

Carolina: “I felt kind of weird at first, because I didn’t know nobody. And I felt kind of uncomfortable and kind of scared at the same time, because I had forgotten all of everything—reading, writing, math. I forgot everything. So when I came back, I was kind of nervous, but now I’m happy. Happy, because I’m going to graduate pretty soon.”

In fact, all of the young mothers spoke very favorably about the SAM schools. Rather than feeling stigmatized, they expressed appreciation for the services made available to them through the program and for the support they received from their teachers. The extra attention and help that they received during class time, along with teachers who understood that they might be absent for a few days if their babies became sick, were the most often cited reasons for why they enjoyed attending the SAM schools. Had it not been for the SAM program, many of the young mothers might not have gone back to school at all. The SAM program not only gave the young mothers the opportunity to continue their education, but also the opportunity to take the necessary steps towards achieving their other goals, as Sophia described:

My goals are to definitely graduate high school. Which is one of my biggest goals since I guess I dropped off, because, like I’m going to go back, I’m going to go back. And now like all my family is shocked that I’m actually graduating next year. So that was one of my major goals, and now I’m going to achieve that. And my daughter, I think I’ve done great with my daughter. I mean I’m good with her. I want to go, I definitely want to go to college. I don’t want to just stay with a high school diploma. I want to have a good-paying job. I want to have my house. I want to have my car. I want my daughter going to school. I mean, I guess anybody wishes that. I hope that I’ll get it soon.

The decision to return to school, or to leave their comprehensive high school to attend an alternative school such as the SAM program, was not an easy one for these women. Yet, the fear of not being accepted by peers, or of not remembering what school was like, was quickly alleviated by the support they received from the SAM teachers and staff. The young women finally found a supportive environment, designed to help them and their children succeed.

Their Children's Education: "I want something better for my baby."

When it comes to the education of their children, the young mothers have many goals and many concerns. Having experienced the educational system in Bayside, the majority of these mothers want something better for their children. Sophia, who moved out of Bayside, shared her concerns about the local schools:

I wouldn't buy a house here in Bayside, and sometimes I think about it and I feel bad because I lived here in Bayside. Bayside's given me like everything since I've been here, and now I'm saying I don't want to buy a house here. But the schools are a whole lot better in Laketown, and right now I'm not really thinking of where could I get a cheaper house or where's the better communities, just that the schools are really a whole lot better in Laketown. I mean, I don't think I'm going to have the money to put her in a private school, and even the private schools—there's Santa Rita, there's been a couple of girls that came over here pregnant from Santa Rita. So I can't really say, "Oh, just because it's a private school it's going to be perfect."

The topic of public schools and private schools came up quite a few times with the young mothers. Sophia felt that a difference didn't exist between private schools and public schools, because there are young girls who attend private schools and still get pregnant. Karina, on the other hand, felt that she would do whatever she had to in order to get her son, Ricardo, into a private school: "Myself, I would like to put him in a private school. I said if I have to work two jobs, I will. I guess because public schools are not very organized and stuff, and they're not getting their education right. So I'd rather put him in a private school."

Along with the type of education they want for their children, the young mothers discussed other concerns they have for their children when it comes to schooling. Fears about drugs and gangs seemed to concern the mothers the most. Teresa explained: “Well, I don’t know, since right now there is so much drugs and all that in the schools and gangs and all that. I’m concerned, yes and no. She’s going to have to make the decisions and all that.”

Patricia’s concerns focused on what could happen to her son outside of school: “Yes, because in the streets they learn to be here and there like gangsters. And they learn about everything; they learn about drugs. I can’t say what he can’t do, because I won’t see him in the streets. When he’s in the streets, he’ll do what he wants to do.”

It’s interesting to note that both Teresa and Patricia felt that their children were going to have to make their own decisions about what to do and what not to do when faced with these dangers. Sophia, on the other hand, felt that her concerns could be relieved if she developed a good relationship with her daughter:

I really would love to be her friend so she could tell me everything that happens at school, and I really want to help her out. I really want to help her out with school, so I want to be closer. I want to spend time, so I could see her work and how she’s doing in her grades. I don’t want to be very busy. Busy enough not to take care of her, not to really listen to her. I want her to be in a good school, at least a school that I feel is good for her and a school that she feels is good for her. Because if she’s not comfortable, then it’s not going to be good for her. So I want her to be in a safer place, because there’s too much violence around here. So I want her to be around somewhere where she feels safe.

Sophia explained further what she would like for her daughter: “Oh, I would love, like I guess any mother would, I want her to go to college. I want her to graduate high school, but right now I just want her to get through preschool. Right now, my goal is for her to get through preschool fine and then kindergarten. We’ll take that a grade at a time.”

All of the mothers have goals for their children, including the hope that their children would go to college and become successful. When asked what role they felt they played in the education of their children and what they were already doing to prepare their children for school, all of the young mothers stated that they planned on putting their children in preschool. Most of the young mothers said that they read to their children regularly and teach them basic things, such as how to recognize colors, shapes, and numbers. One of the mothers, Carolina, described her activities with her three-and-a-half-year-old son Antonio, who was already in preschool:

I do [play with him with his] toys or with anything that I can find around the house. Or if not, my sister, like she reminded him what apartment letter this was, so he knows when you ask him what apartment you live in, he's like 'F.' So anything that we find around that, you know. You don't have to just write it, make it boring for them, because that's what I used to do. I used to write down the numbers and the colors and, you know, that isn't fun for him. So when he's playing, I try to ask him something with the color of the car or how many wheels it has or certain things like that. Or the shape of the car or something. Try to make it fun for him.

At the SAM program, the young women take various classes that relate directly to their new roles as mothers, covering topics such as life skills, parenting, and child development. Members of community organizations go to the SAM school sites throughout the school year and discuss topics ranging from infant CPR to how to enroll children in preschool. The SAM program helps the young mothers become aware of services available to them in their communities, and supplies them with various forms of useful information. . Through the interviews it became evident that the young mothers do listen to what is being taught to them in class. A couple of the mothers used child development terms when sharing their thoughts on what their children needed in order to be prepared for school:

Q: “How do you plan to prepare her for preschool?”

Tanya: “First of all to talk a little bit more. She's shy at first. Her language skills are good I think, because she knows Spanish and English and that's about it.”

Q: “How do you plan to prepare her for school or what do you already do?”

Sophia: “I read to her a lot, and I know that’s going to help her a lot when she starts going to school, because she’ll be familiar with words. And she speaks a lot. I’ve spoken to her since she was born. I’ve spoken to her. I’ve read to her since she was in my stomach. So she’s always been around reading and words and singing and all that. So that’s worked for her.

I’ve bought her, like, educational blocks and Lego's and stuff she could use her motor skills with. She’s into scissors a lot, which is good and bad, I guess, when it’s not around my clothes. I’ve gotten her markers, the magical ones on only magical paper. Gotten her markers, so I’ve gotten all the things I can to help her out. She doesn’t get any homework, and I don’t spend a lot of time right now with her, but when I’m around her, I’m either reading a book or playing with blocks or writing or coloring or something that could help her out at least with her motor skills.

And looking at letters or we’re, when we’re on the bus, we’re counting to who knows how many numbers and how many times. And singing ABC’s. So hopefully I’m doing something good. Something will stick.”

Very rarely did the mothers speak about themselves without addressing what they want for their children. As these quotes demonstrate, the mothers share a desire for their children to achieve, and they share concerns about the effects of larger social issues, such as drugs and gangs, on their children. They also are aware of the difference in educational quality between public schools and private schools. The young mothers are willing to make sacrifices so that their children can have something better than what they received. Most importantly, all the young women recognize the important role they play in the education of their children.

Conclusion: The Consequences of Teen Motherhood

At a time when most teenage girls are on the phone with their friends talking about boys and the latest movies, and buying the newest styles of clothes and latest makeup colors, a teenage mother is changing diapers, preparing bottles, and making decisions for a helpless little person who is completely dependent on her. Being a student and a mother at the same time is difficult. Two worlds are brought together at a time when the young woman may not be physically or emotionally ready for the challenge.

In her examination of the consequences of an unscheduled transition into parenthood for teen mothers, Russell (1980) addresses three areas commonly studied by researchers: 1) the transition to first-time parenthood, 2) accelerated role transitions, and 3) the crisis of adding a new family member. Russell describes the transition to first-time parenthood as an adjustment experienced by all first-time parents regardless of age, class, or educational level. For many new parents, regardless of age, the “crisis” created by parenthood was not expected due to romanticized views of having a baby and being a parent. In her examination of the work of LeMasters (1957), who pioneered research on “crisis scores,” Russell shows that low crisis scores were found in cases in which there was a state of marital satisfaction, a planned pregnancy, and the desire to have more children. In another study, Russell finds that a woman’s age and the timing of birth within her marital career is related to her gratification as a parent.

Given Russell’s findings, we would expect that the experience of a young mother transitioning into parenthood would include an initial high “crisis” phase, which she may or may not overcome with time. The findings of this study show that gratification as a parent is something each mother felt quite strongly. Although they did experience a high “crisis” phase – when they first learned about their pregnancy, when they had to inform their boyfriends and families about it, and when making the decision as to what they were going to do about their pregnancy – the young women were quite happy being mothers. In fact, some stated that they often felt they were at an advantage compared to women who decided to have children at an older age. They explained that because of their young age they had more energy and time to dedicate to their children, and they described motherhood as a wonderful experience that allowed them to grow and learn along with their child.

The second area Russell examines concerns the accelerated role transition experience of the teenage mother. Russell’s review of the literature finds that not only are young women faced with taking on the new role of mother, but that early parenthood also disturbs other aspects of

their lives. Their personal and family relationships are affected by their new role, as is their completion of school, which could affect their economic self-support. Russell also shows that accelerated role transition has been associated with a high incidence of marriage disruption, poverty, and low educational achievement.

Although low educational achievement is associated with the accelerated role transition of becoming a mother, the teen mothers in this study already had academic problems prior to becoming pregnant. Moreover, the young mothers in this study stated that because they were now mothers, they felt the need to put more effort into school and to achieve their goals, so that they could give themselves and their children a better life. This finding casts doubt on those who claim that motherhood is the cause of low achievement and it suggests that motherhood may even serve as an encouragement for returning to school.

The third area Russell discusses is the crisis created by the addition of a new family member. Russell points out that few studies examine the role that a teen mother continues to play as a child and sibling within her family, or how the addition of a new child from a teenage parent alters interactions within the family. Motherhood brought some of the young mothers with whom I worked a new status within their families, while other mothers described having always played a maternal role in the family as a caretaker of siblings or as the more knowledgeable sibling who could help the parents when negotiating through various social systems. Although it took some loved ones longer than others to accept the news that their daughter or girlfriend was about to become a mother, all of the young women eventually received support from their parents or from their boyfriends.

Policy makers and members of the mass media have cast teenage pregnancy in opposition to educational achievement. This study, which gives voice to the experiences of nine Latina school-age mothers, shows that young mothers have educational goals not only for themselves,

but also for their children. Rather than discouraging educational achievement, having a child seems to inspire school-age mothers to pursue their educational goals. This study shows that these goals are nurtured when young mothers are provided with an alternative school experience that supports their needs as both students and mothers. Although challenges continue to exist for the young women in this study, the SAM program is an important resource in leading them and their children in the right direction.

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