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Abstract

Many studies support the recurring theme that due to early childbearing, the education of teen mothers is jeopardized. Negative stereotypes towards them also prevail representing the view that teen mothers are wayward, divergent, and burdensome to society. However, there is support from the literature that the majority of them maintain career and educational aspirations. Moreover, access of pregnant minors and teen mothers to public education is guaranteed by law. With this in view, the researcher explored the educational experiences of teen mothers, particularly those who chose to enroll in and eventually graduated from an alternative public school that exclusively serves this population. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used in interviewing seven teen mothers who graduated from an alternative school. This qualitative method was useful in understanding subjective experiences, forming insights about individuals' motivations and actions. The participants were selected by purposive sampling. Inductive analysis of the data indicated that attending an alternative school provided academic reengagement, structure, motivation, and a safe and caring learning environment for the participants. This study makes a contribution to the scant literature about the educational experiences of teen mothers, providing evidence that they strive to succeed and can succeed educationally when given support and access to academic services. The conclusions serve as a counter discourse to the prevailing negative perceptions towards this challenged population.

Keywords

Teen Mothers, Alternative School, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Phenomenology

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Many studies support the recurring theme that due to early childbearing, the education of teen mothers is jeopardized. Negative stereotypes towards them also prevail representing the view that teen mothers are wayward, divergent, and burdensome to society. However, there is support from the literature that the majority of them maintain career and educational aspirations. Moreover, access of pregnant minors and teen mothers to public education is guaranteed by law. With this in view, the researcher explored the educational experiences of teen mothers, particularly those who chose to enroll in and eventually graduated from an alternative public school that exclusively serves this population. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used in interviewing seven teen mothers who graduated from an alternative school. This qualitative method was useful in understanding subjective experiences, forming insights about individuals' motivations and actions. The participants were selected by purposive sampling. Inductive analysis of the data indicated that attending an alternative school provided academic reengagement, structure, motivation, and a safe and caring learning environment for the participants. This study makes a contribution to the scant literature about the educational experiences of teen mothers, providing evidence that they strive to succeed and can succeed educationally when given support and access to academic services. The conclusions serve as a counter discourse to the prevailing negative perceptions towards this challenged population. Keywords: Teen Mothers, Alternative School, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Phenomenology

Background

The United States has the highest number of adolescent childbirths among industrialized nations (United Nations Statistics Division, 2015). In 2014, there were 249, 078 live births to mothers ages 15-19 years or 24.2 live births per 1,000 females in this age group (Hamilton, Martin, Osterman, & Curtin, 2015). While the overall teen birth rate fell 44% from 1991 through 2010, it has remained high among African American and Latina teens in southern states (Hamilton & Ventura, 2012). Approximately 77 percent of teen pregnancies are unplanned, which means, they are unwanted or occurred "too soon," according to a national survey of adolescents (Mosher, Jones, & Abma, 2012). This situation is a public concern because it has been documented that adolescent pregnancy increases the risk of public assistance use and lower educational attainment (Casares, Lahiff, Eskenazi, & Halpern-Felsher, 2010).

Adolescent childbearing is a multisystemic problem strongly associated with behavioral, social, and environmental factors. Adolescents who are most vulnerable to early childbearing come from unstable and impoverished homes, have exhibited antisocial behavior, and have used controlled substances (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2010; Tanner et al., 2015). Most adolescent parents are already socially disadvantaged and have faced adversities as children (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2010). In addition, most adolescent mothers already had high levels of

psychological distress even before becoming pregnant (Mollborn & Morningstar, 2009). Thus, pregnant teens and adolescent mothers are among the most challenged population in American society today.

The challenges adolescent mothers face are multifaceted, one of which is their educational attainment. A student who becomes pregnant is at-risk of educational failure. In a study that used national survey data to examine high school diploma attainment among women who were teen mothers, results indicated that only 51% who had teen births earned a high school diploma by the age of 22, compared to 89% who did not have teen births (Perper, Peterson, & Manlove, 2010). Empirical evidence suggests that having a child as a teenager reduces the probability of attaining a high school education by five to ten percentage points and reduces income as a young adult by $1,000 to $ 3,000 per year (Fletcher & Wolfe, 2009). These studies support a recurring theme in the literature: Due to early childbearing, the education of adolescent mothers is jeopardized.

Despite the disadvantageous conditions that beset adolescent mothers, the majority maintain career and educational aspirations. The admission of pregnant and parenting students into the public school system began in the early 1960s (Scholl, 2007). By the 1990s, attendance of pregnant students in school became socially acceptable (Nelson, 2010). Historically, U.S. public schools were geared towards serving unmarried adolescents; adolescents who did not conform to the accepted norms of conduct, including adolescent pregnancy and motherhood, were forbidden to attend public schools (Atkyns, 1968). However, today, access of pregnant and parenting students to public education is guaranteed by law. Schools receiving federal money cannot discriminate in their admissions policies on the basis of marital or parental status as guaranteed by the Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (106.40.b):

> A recipient [of federal funding] shall not discriminate against any student, or exclude any student from its education program or activity, including any class or extracurricular activity, on the basis of such student's pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, termination of pregnancy or recovery therefrom, unless the student requests voluntarily to participate in a separate portion of the program or activity of the recipient. (National Archives and Records Administration, 2000, p. 52872)

While Title IX protects adolescent mothers against discrimination and exclusion from schools no longer occurs, more subtle forms of discrimination are committed against this population, and bias is not prevented (Gough, 2011). For example, pregnant and parenting students have been excluded from extracurricular and honors programs. Some have been forced to attend alternative programs to make them disappear from regular schools (Ducker, 2007). Moreover, inconsiderate policies pertaining to attendance occur, such as the refusal of an excused absence for a sick child (Gough, 2011). In reality, pregnant teens and adolescent mothers are stigmatized, which limits their educational opportunities (Rogers, 2010; Whiteley & Brown, 2010).

There is also a propensity for viewing adolescent mothers as divergent, wayward, and burdensome to society (Fletcher & Wolfe, 2009; Pillow, 2006). Teen parenting is constructed in research and public discourse as a social problem with disadvantageous outcomes for both the teen mother and her child (Hindin-Miller, 2012). Rarely is adolescent mothering seen as (a) an opportunity to exhibit resilience (Easterbrooks, Chaudhuri, Bartlett, & Copeman, 2011), (b) a transformative experience that gives the adolescent mother a chance for personal growth and the renewal of family relationships (Spear, 2004), or (c) a source of motivation to aspire for higher education (Phipps, Salak, Nunes, & Rosengard, 2011).

Furthermore, there has been little academic discussion about the education of this population. Pillow (2006) analyzed this silence as coming from three discourses or beliefs surrounding adolescent pregnancy: (a) adolescent pregnancy as a disease with the female student as a corruptor of moral ideals, (b) education as a responsibility, not as a benefit, of the adolescent mother to reform her waywardness, and (c) pregnancy as a temporary condition, which reinforces the idea that adolescent mothers need no intervention or support. The silence surrounding the education of adolescent mothers reinforces their marginalization. Without understanding the experiences of adolescent mothers as individual students in schools, negative stereotypes may endure and serve as obstacles in addressing their needs.

Attending alternative schools is one avenue by which adolescent mothers can succeed, but school districts battle with negative stigmas of alternative schools as "dumping grounds or warehouses for at-risk students" (Herrington, 2012, p. 2). None of the research on alternative schools provides a clear understanding of how adolescent mothers who graduated from alternative programs view alternative education. This study fills a gap in the literature by presenting the meaning of this phenomenon.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to give a detailed description of adolescent mothers' education at an alternative school so that readers might better understand how this phenomenon is experienced. Through this study, teen mothers expressed their viewpoints, allowing an opportunity for their voices to be heard and for an alternative school to be better understood. In doing so, negative stereotypes—which often become the basis of how professionals relate to adolescent mothers—may be positively transformed.

Role of the Researcher

My role as a researcher is that of an informed inquirer because I have taught secondary English language arts in NHAS for 11 years. I was closely in touch with the phenomenon under study. I knew enough about the workings of an alternative school, which enabled me to ask relevant interview questions. However, I was not an expert on adolescent mothers' experiences of alternative schooling. I conducted this study because of the limited available research about graduates of alternative schools for pregnant and female parenting students.

Research Question

The goal of the study was to make the raw meaning of adolescent mothers' academic experiences in an alternative school explicit and visible. The overarching question that guided this study was: What is the essence of attending an alternative school for adolescent mothers?

Qualitative Research Design

I built my research design on a constructivist paradigm. It assumes that there is no absolute, single reality accessible to a researcher, and that understandings are limited to subjective interpretations of human experience within historical and cultural constraints (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). This constructivist paradigm supports the belief that people interpret and construct realities that are shaped by their culture and language. Individuals develop meanings out of their own experiences, usually formed as they interact and communicate with others. They forge beliefs that are dependent on how they view the world. It follows, then, that as a constructivist researcher, I studied the varied realities shaped by

people and the significance of those constructions for their lives. Thus, the product of this study is the rich descriptions and narratives that reflect the constructed meanings of its participants.

I used phenomenological research as the qualitative approach for this study. Phenomenological research attempts to capture the essence of an experience or the nature of a phenomenon, through analyzing the individual experiences of those who have lived the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). As a phenomenological researcher, I needed to navigate the abundant and conflicting literature in phenomenology and articulate an appropriate process for achieving the aims of this study. After studying articles from peer-reviewed journals in the fields of nursing, education, and qualitative research, I decided to use a hermeneutic phenomenological approach because of its established theoretical and procedural guidelines (Earle, 2010; Guignon, 2012; Laverty, 2003) and its wide use in education (Hatch, 2002).

Hermeneutic phenomenology as a philosophical movement originated from Martin Heidegger and was developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer among others (Guignon, 2012). The hermeneutic approach begins with the notion that human experiences are imbued with meaning, gained from socio-historical contexts and founded on experience. Applied to research methodology, hermeneutic phenomenology is interpretive. Moreover, a hermeneutic phenomenological researcher assumes that people function within the world of language and social relationships (Finlay, 2009). The researcher and participants are co-constructors of meanings, where "inter-subjective understanding" (Standing, 2009, p. 21) about lived experience may be gained. This means that the researcher and the participants may come to an agreement of the meaning of the characteristics or essence of the phenomenon of interest. The researcher involves the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. In this process, the researcher is involved in what is termed as the "hermeneutic circle" (Guignon, 2012, p. 98). It begins with what the researcher understands about the phenomenon, uses this understanding to interpret the phenomenon and, on the basis of this interpretation, goes back to his or her original understanding to revise it. The hermeneutic circle is a process of working with the participants to describe the phenomenon, using imagination and by paying attention to language and writing. In this study, I spent time with the participants by interviewing them, showing them the transcripts, and sharing with them the findings. We freely engaged in conversations about the topic and the research questions.

Research Setting

The study took place at New Horizon Alternative School (NHAS), a pseudonym. It is an alternative education program recognized by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The average number of students in this school from 2010 to 2013 was 130. Ninety nine percent of the student population is Hispanic, and 96% are identified as economically disadvantaged. Enrolment in this school is transitional and completely voluntary. Pregnant and parenting students in this school voluntarily attend classes as an alternative to attending the schools zoned to their homes to access self-paced, individualized instruction and home instruction during their period of recovery from childbirth. Although the school year often starts with a solid group of students, this group gradually disbands as students experience childbirth and as new students enroll. Therefore, instruction is done individually. The teachers' roles in this alternative campus are to design course content, provide individualized instruction, monitor student progress, and evaluate achievement. Certified teachers and home instructors make up the faculty of NHAS. Home instructors are certified teachers who do not hold classes in the school building but go to students' homes to deliver instruction during the students' period of recovery from childbirth.

Sample

Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted me permission to conduct this study on March 7, 2013 (approval number 03-07-130146046). No data was collected prior to acquiring the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The research administrator of Chavez School District granted me permission to carry out this project after I submitted a written application form. An approval letter was sent to me, to the principal of NHAS, and to the assistant superintendent. This permission granted me access to NHAS.

I used a purposive and homogeneous method of sampling because the participants were made up of individuals who shared common characteristics. The criteria for selecting the participants included mothers, 18 years and above, attended NHAS for at least one semester, and graduated from NHAS from school year 2011-2012. The names of the qualified participants were randomly selected. According to Starks and Trinidad (2007), the usual sample size for phenomenological research is between one to ten persons. This is because an individual can generate hundreds of ideas and thousands of words, so large samples are not needed to produce large amounts of data (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). For this study, seven adolescent mothers participated.

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected data through interviews at a time and location that were convenient to the participants. The purpose of interviews is to develop a deep understanding of a particular phenomenon and to create a dialogue between the researcher and the participant about the meaning of the experience. I used an interview guide that was composed of open-ended, background, descriptive, structural, and contrast questions. I used background questions to begin the interview and to elicit familiar information so that the participants can become comfortable during the interview session; I asked descriptive questions to examine the participants' views about what they did as adolescent mothers in an alternative school. Structural questions were designed to examine how the participant viewed relationships in her experiences. Lastly, I included contrast questions to know how the participant made sense of her social world.

I used a high-quality digital voice recorder to record the interview, transcribed the interviews verbatim, and used pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. In addition, I remained open and attentive to the participants' words, gestures, and even silence. After each interview session, observations and reflections were recorded in my research journal. Journal entries served as a way to bracket my personal biases and preconceived notions about my participants' experiences. Setting aside my initial beliefs was a necessary step to ensure objectivity since I had worked at this school as a teacher.

I analyzed the data by carefully reading the interview transcripts several times to get a sense of the whole interview and to determine texts relevant to my research topic. Then I proceeded to in-text coding, which is the labeling of meaningful sections of the interview transcript using category names. Both the language of the participant and terms that describe the information guided the development of the codes.

I brought together the data with the same code names into separate and distinct computer files. Then, I synthesized the content of each file. After synthesizing the content of each code file, I examined each summary to generate initial themes. The themes represented what I learned from the study. I merged the codes to enable me to organize a group of repeating ideas extracted from the coded data. With the repeating items grouped, I looked for linkages between themes to form a rich, descriptive narrative of the participant's perspective about the research topic. Thus, the analysis went beyond breaking down the collected data into segments

but was an iterative process of abstracting meaning from the data. I subscribed to Van Manen's (1990) steps in phenomenological data analysis.

Van Manen (1990) listed reflection as a specific research activity and as a critical element in data analysis. I wrote insights or memos to document the analytic process. Memoing enabled me to describe the data. Moreover, Earle (2010) stated, "it is through the writing and rewriting of themes that the structure and, hence, meaning of the lived experience can be discovered" (p. 290). This is congruent to Van Manen's (1990) fourth research activity leading to data analysis: describing the phenomenon by writing and rewriting. This process led to the product of hermeneutic phenomenological research: a descriptive text which explains the phenomenon.

Results

Seven participants were interviewed, with the following pseudonyms and ages at the time of the interview: Bianca (19 years old), Denise (20), Nora (19), Cynthia (20), Karen (20), Jasmin (19), and Crystal (18). Three themes were derived from the data analysis: getting help, having the opportunity to graduate early, and learning in a supportive environment. To explain the themes, I used the exact words of the participants.

Theme 1: Getting Help

The alternative school provided resources that supported the adolescent mothers' education. These resources were: (a) home instruction, (b) onsite daycare, and (c) transportation for both the student and her child, and (d) material incentives.

Home instruction is a mode of learning where a certified teacher goes to the students' home while recovering from childbirth. Bianca recounted her experience of home instruction as a mode of learning where she felt comfortable and focused on her assignments: She could go to the restroom anytime and eat while doing her work. She and her home instructor studied in the dining room. The home instructor went to her house twice a week for 2 hours. The home instructor brought materials, like modules and textbooks, to give to Bianca. For Bianca, doing home instruction was a way to advance in acquiring her needed credits to graduate. In fact, she completed credits for three subjects while she was on home instruction for 1 month.

Another specialized resource that NHAS has is an onsite daycare for its parenting students. The provision of a daycare gives an adolescent mother a compelling reason to continue her education and denies her an excuse to drop out. Denise confirmed this idea when she stated that if students "have no one to take care of their child, there's daycare there, so they could take 'em too, and they wouldn't have to drop out. They could just go to Horizon." The participants, even those who did not bring their babies to the daycare, indicated that the daycare was an important support in completing their high school education. Two students, Nora and Crystal, emphasized that without the daycare, they would not be able to finish their high school degrees because no one was available to care for their children while they attended school.

Denise, Nora, and Crystal brought their babies to the NHAS daycare. They described the daycare as well-equipped, well-provided, and well-managed. Data revealed that upon arriving at school, the mothers proceeded immediately to the daycare and signed in their babies. The babies were then checked thoroughly to see if they had rashes, scratches, bruises, injuries, or any symptoms of illness. After the mothers put the babies' bags and food into their respective places, mothers proceeded to their regular schedule. The daycare provided formula or whole milk and solid food for breakfast and lunch, whichever was age appropriate for the child.

The daycare teachers taught "listening and learning skills," according to Nora. The babies also have a schedule for napping and playing inside or outside the facility. If the

adolescent mothers were breastfeeding, or if the babies needed medication, there were specific times for mothers to go into the daycare and attend to these needs. Crystal mentioned that during the school year, mothers and babies also participated in some special celebrations. For example, during Dr. Seuss' birthday, the mothers went into the daycare to make little Dr. Seuss hats and to read to their babies. The adolescent mothers described their experiences of bringing their babies to the daycare as a positive experience for themselves and their babies. Nora expressed that bringing her baby to the daycare gave her "a great opportunity that opened a lot of doors." She considered it a "real opportunity" to be able to bring her baby to the daycare. At the time she was going to NHAS, both of her parents were working, and she did not have a job to enable her to pay for daycare. Her statements showed that she genuinely valued the daycare as an important factor that supported her diploma attainment.

   NHAS also provided bus transportation for both student and child. In fact, Denise considered this resource as a major reason she chose to enroll at NHAS. When I asked her what made her decide to enroll at NHAS she responded:

> The transportation because I didn't think they had transportation until I went to go to see how it was and everything, and they told me that yeah there was transportation, that they would take me, pick me up and take me back home. So, I go, ok, so I have transportation and with the baby also they would let us take the babies in the bus.

Data revealed that because the alternative school has a daycare, the school also provided the means of transporting their children from their homes to the daycare via riding the school bus equipped with car seats for babies.

   Data also revealed that the adolescent mothers in NHAS received material incentives through a point system that rewarded on-task behavior, successful test performance, perfect attendance, and early credit completion. According to participants, each teacher awarded them "points," recorded on a "yellow card" after every class to indicate if they were on task or not. If a student was not on task, a student gets a zero. If a student passed a test, she is given two points for that class. All these points are recorded on the "yellow card" given to students every Monday. At the end of the week, students added up the points. If a student got 40 points, she was given a 5-point coupon which could be used to purchase products from the school's "store." The students could get diapers, wipes, toys, clothes, bottles, diaper bags, strollers, high chairs and even cribs, using "baby bucks," in the NHAS store.

   Bianca stated that she never had to buy diapers while she was enrolled at NHAS: "After I left school, that's when I bought my first diaper box, but during school, I never bought diapers." She felt that the reward system was important. According to Bianca:

> Some students, they live in low society, and they don't really have enough money to buy diapers, and diapers nowadays are so expensive. So, if you do good in your classes, and they give you the points, you get the free diapers, and you won't have to worry about your baby, not having diapers, not having wipes.

Crystal considered these incentives helpful and motivating:

> I got a high chair, diapers. It's real helpful. At one point, my baby's father didn't have a job. I got her wipes, books. I got her a lot of books, even toys. Those were the only toys she had, from the [NHAS] store. It motivates you to go to school more, as much as you can since they give you perfect attendance points.

Data revealed that the provision of home instruction, daycare, bus transportation for the student and her child, and material rewards supported the participants' schooling. All of these resources became a part of their reasons why they considered NHAS a good school. These resources helped them in practical ways to continue going to school and eventually finish.

Theme 2: Having the Opportunity to Graduate Early

All the participants identified alternative schooling as an opportunity to accelerate credit accrual and to graduate early. The participants repeatedly used phrases such as "finishing early," "finishing faster," "advance more," and "progress" to signify the idea that attending NHAS was a way to finish high school earlier than their peers who were enrolled in the regular schools. This idea was also the major differentiating point in their perception of the alternative school in relation to a regular school. Jasmin explained:

> In a regular campus, it's not only you. You're with the whole class that their teaching, and everybody's at the same pace, doing the same thing. In the alternative school, you're at your own pace. You have to learn by yourself. They'll help you out or whatever, but actually, you're on your own.

Because students learn in an individualized, self-paced manner using modules and teacher-made assignments, they do not have to work at the pace their teachers or classmates set.

This self-paced mode of learning allowed students to get their credits for the courses any time during the semester. After finishing one class, they take the next class that they need. Crystal recalled, "I would finish my classes, some of them fast." Then, she moved on to another class "as soon as [she] was done."

Jasmin was particularly proud of the situation that she "finished way before time, in April" and "had two months off." Because they graduated, the participants developed positive feelings towards themselves. Nora described this feeling: "Now I feel a bit more positive, a little bit better, now that I have something that supports me [speaking of her high school degree]. I'm not like another pregnant girl there that just, you know? You feel better."

To synthesize, data revealed that attending an alternative school had positive connotations for the participants due to their feeling of safety and acceptance, availing of specialized resources such as home instruction and daycare, and the opportunity to attain their high school diplomas at an earlier time than in a regular school.

Theme 3: Learning in a Supportive Environment

All the participants consistently articulated that the teachers were helpful and caring. Words that participants used to describe their teachers were: "nice," "good," "great," "fun," "supportive," "positive," "friendly," "persevering," "more one on one," and "willing to help." The participants gave descriptions of how teachers specifically helped them in class. For example, Karen talked about how teachers "will answer all of your questions and will help you during lunch and after school." Also, Crystal recounted that her math teacher helped her review lessons and that "she would teach different techniques to solve the problem. She'll give you extra work to practice, worksheets." Furthermore, Denise mentioned that although learning was self-paced, "teachers help you when you don't know the subject you're in."

The data also pointed to the strong sense of connection between students and teachers in the alternative school. The adolescent mothers felt they have a family in the alternative school. Cynthia commented that "you can talk to a teacher, talk about your problems, and [she'll] understand you." This bonded relationship was depicted by Nora who stated that

"teachers are really friendly, and they're real positive, and they care about you. You'll see a teacher in a store. They'll say 'hi' to you. You feel like a family. You feel close."

Not only did participants value the teachers but also staff and administrators. Participants emphasized that no one mistreated or looked down on them due to their pregnancy or situations they faced as teen mothers. Bianca synthesized her view of the alternative school as this: "Everyone there was really helpful, like, I really love this school. I wished I would have gone earlier from my junior year, so I could've start and advance more 'cause I started in my senior year when I was like six already months pregnant." Likewise, Karen summarized her view when I asked her if she wanted to say anything more beyond the responses to questions I asked. She emphasized, "When you go there, you feel that they will help you, and you feel that they're helping you." Lastly, Bianca narrated in detail a time when the principal showed the students kindness by treating them at a fast food restaurant:

> The principal also helps you a lot. Mr. Smith took us on a field on the old mall. They had a book convention, and on our way back, we were all pregnant and mostly half of the bus the seniors that he took were pregnant, so on our way back, he like stopped at McDonald's. He asked the bus driver if he could stop there…he bought everyone combos and ice cream.

Another important support that the data revealed was peer support. The participants' classmates and friends in the alternative school gave them support in different ways. One way a participant experienced support from a classmate was when her classmate graduated from NHAS but continued to communicate with her by sending text messages offering help. Jasmin expressed that the students who already delivered their babies shared their experiences of childbirth and childcare to those who were still pregnant. In addition, Nora described that merely seeing the pictures of students who already graduated, posted on one of the school's bulletin boards, made her feel good about going to the alternative school.

In sum, adolescent mothers learn in the alternative school in a supportive learning environment. The support came from teachers, administrator, staff, and classmates. The people who surrounded the participants were described as caring and helpful. Furthermore, the data revealed that participants valued school lessons about health and nutrition, parenting, relationships, and childcare.

Conclusion

The research question addressed how adolescent mothers gave meaning to their educational experiences in an alternative school. The participants viewed their alternative education as a positive experience due to their feelings of safety, security, and satisfaction with the programs and resources that were available in the alternative school. Small class size, low teacher to student ratio, individualized instruction, daycare, home instruction during the postpartum period, bus transportation, and tangible rewards for good behavior and classroom success contributed to the participants' perceptions of the alternative schooling as another "opportunity" to obtain a high school diploma.

The findings for the research question are consistent with previous research that indicated that pregnant and parenting students who have access to a wide range of services integrated into a stand-alone alternative school display improved academic performance. Compared to those who were not enrolled in the alternative school, the researchers found that alternative school students had higher educational aspirations, better reproductive health outcomes, higher contraceptive use, and better breast-feeding practices (Amin et al., 2006). Additionally, other researchers had previously concluded that students enroll in alternative

schools in order to accelerate, graduate, and pursue postsecondary education (Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). The participants attended NHAS because they were aware that if they had stayed in their regular schools, it would have been difficult to obtain their diplomas because of their status as pregnant and parenting students. In addition, a participant who stopped attending school because of the absence of child care saw an opportunity to complete her education via alternative school because of its daycare. The participants also highlighted the value of individualized instruction which is often the strongest source of acceleration in alternative schools. Thus, access to services not available in the regular campuses, such as childcare, transportation for the student and her child, individualized instruction, and home instruction contributed to the participants' conviction that being in the alternative school was the best route for them to take to complete their high school education.

The alternative school contributed to diploma attainment. The participants perceived NHAS as responsive to their unique needs as pregnant and parenting students. From this study, it can be posited that how a pregnant or parenting student views alternative schooling might influence her decision and motivation to continue her education through this route. If a pregnant student or adolescent mother is well-informed and understands opportunities available for her in an alternative school, she may become motivated to enroll. A pregnant student or adolescent mother who may have considered dropping out or had stopped attending school because of childcare, transportation, or academic problems might gain a feeling of hope and decide to reengage with school in knowing that there are resources and tangible help available to meet her needs in an alternative school.

Reflection

Thinking about the participants' revelations, I became open to the richness of knowledge gained not from books or peer-reviewed journals but from teen mothers whose views are often taken for granted. I gained knowledge by listening from the participants. Like Van Manen (1990), I can state that "when someone has related a valuable experience to me then I have indeed gained something, even though the 'thing' gained is not a quantifiable entity" (p. 53). I became a recipient of the participants' insights and values. The research literature and popular media have often portrayed the lives of teen mothers as a burden to society. However, by interviewing them, I saw the value of knowing their success, a notion that is contradictory to the prevailing attitudes towards them. I learned to highly respect and admire the participants as individuals who succeeded educationally despite the unique circumstances that challenged their aspirations.

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