Routines and Motivations of Adolescent Mothers in an Alternative School: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

There is little academic discussion about the education of pregnant minors and adolescent mothers who enrolled in and graduated from stand-alone alternative schools. Moreover, research findings revealed that most students and parents consider alternative schools as dumping grounds for problem students. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe adolescent mothers' experiences at an alternative school so that readers might better understand how this phenomenon is experienced. The research design was built on a constructivist paradigm, which suggests that people construct and interpret realities. Seven adolescent mothers who graduated from an alternative school were selected via purposive sampling and interviewed in depth. The interviews were transcribed and coded; data with the same code names were analyzed inductively, which generated the following adolescent mothers' meanings for alternative education: engaging in daily home and school routines, finding the motivation to finish school, and learning beyond academics. Attending the alternative school contributed to diploma attainment. Through this study, the public may develop a better understanding of alternative education and thus reduce the stigma associated with it.

Keywords: Alternative education, Alternative school, Adolescent mothers, phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

Pregnant minors and school age parents are guaranteed equal educational opportunity according to Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 (Ducker, 2007). This law operates to protect the rights of pregnant and parenting teens in the public school system. Pregnant and parenting students cannot be prevented from attending school or from participating in any extra-curricular activities. Title IX also entitles a pregnant student the choice to leave her regular campus and attend an alternative school that is comparable to a regular school.

In Texas, where this study was conducted, a student who is pregnant or parenting is considered at risk of dropping out of school, according to Texas Education Code 29.081. As such, they are qualified to participate in an alternative program. However, Title IX mandates that the decision to attend an alternative school must be completely voluntary.

Furthermore, any school district in Texas may choose to offer services to their pregnant and female parenting teens through Pregnancy Related Services (PRS). Under PRS, a district establishes a Compensatory Education Home Instruction (CEHI) program to provide academic services to the student at home or hospital bedside when pregnancy prevents the student from attending school and during the prenatal and/or postpartum periods (Texas Education Agency, 2016). CEHI consists of face-to-face contact with a certified teacher providing academic services to the student. In the school district where this study was conducted, a pregnant or parenting student may continue her education in a traditional setting and be provided PRS, or she may decide to attend the district's stand-alone alternative school designed to serve her academic needs.

Previous studies reported that state education agencies with formal definitions for alternative education characterized alternative schools as schools that: (a) use nontraditional settings that is separate from general education classrooms (e.g., classrooms delegated for disruptive students); (b) serve students who are at risk of failure, have behavioral problems, and have been expelled; and (c) prevent students from dropping out (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009; Porowski, O'Conner, & Luo, 2014). While the research literature supported the idea that alternative education programs provide opportunities for diploma attainment, there is a lack of research on the school engagement of at-risk students enrolled in such programs (Ahn & Simpson, 2013; Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigian, Justin, & Lequia, 2016). At-risk students have stories that have never been read and voices that are rarely heard (Farrelly, 2013; Watson, 2014). This lack of research contributes to leaving out pregnant and parenting students with regards to decision making and budget allocations in educational institutions (Vang, 2015). More specifically, there is little academic discussion about the education of adolescent mothers, especially those who enrolled in and graduated from stand-alone alternative schools, thus reinforcing the contribution this study offers.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to give detailed descriptions of adolescent mothers' experiences at an alternative school so that readers might better understand this phenomenon. Alternative schools provide a different route in helping students who are likely to drop out of school or be involved in negative behaviors that hinder educational progress. However, such schools are stigmatized because they are programs separate from traditional schools. In fact, alternative schools have been perceived as "dumping grounds or warehouses for at-risk students" (Herrington, 2012, p. 2). Through this study, the experiences of young women who graduated

from an alternative school were highlighted, allowing an opportunity for their voices to be heard and for alternative schools to be better understood.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The goal of this study was to make the raw meaning of adolescent mothers' academic experiences in an alternative school explicit and visible. The research question that guided this study was: How do adolescent mothers give meaning to their educational experiences in an alternative school?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND APPROACH

The research design was based 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 (Creswell, 2009, 2013). This constructivist paradigm supports the belief that individuals develop meanings out of their experiences, usually formed as they interact and communicate with others. Thus, the product of this study is the rich descriptions and narratives that reflect the constructed meanings of the participants.

This study followed a qualitative research design, specifically, hermeneutic phenomenology, to allow participants to narrate their experiences and reduce the power gaps that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study. Through hermeneutic phenomenology, meaning for a phenomenon emerges through the "hermeneutic circle" (Guignon, 2012, p. 98; Laverty, 2003, p. 21). It is the process of gathering evidence for the phenomenon, understanding the phenomenon and, on the basis of an interpretation, going back to the original understanding to revise it. A researcher engaged with the hermeneutic circle works with participants to describe the phenomenon by paying attention to language and writing.

The following methodological activities in conducting hermeneutic phenomenology were implemented:

1. Turning to a phenomenon, which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
3. Reflecting on the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon;
4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; and
6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (Van, Manen, 1990).

The above mentioned activities developed by Van Manen in conducting hermeneutic phenomenology (1990) are widely accepted in education and nursing (Earle, 2010; Finlay, 2009; Standing, 2009).

SETTING AND SAMPLE

The study took place at an alternative school that serves pregnant and female parenting students at a large urban school district in South Texas. The district had a student population of 49,991 students, comprised of 99 % Hispanic students and 95 % economically disadvantaged students at the time of the study. The school, New Horizon Alternative School (a pseudonym)

has its own stand-alone building where classes are held and a separate building that houses its daycare.

New Horizon Alternative School (NHAS), is recognized by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) as an alternative school. 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' pregnancy prenatal and/or postpartum periods. Aside from academic instruction, the following resources are also provided: (a) library; (b) computer laboratory; (c) special education services; (d) access to a full time counsellor, social worker, daycare director, and nurse on site; (e) fully-equipped onsite daycare for babies up to 18 month old; (f) bus transportation for both the student and her child; and (g) material goods (e.g., baby clothing, diapers, milk bottles, etc.) as incentives for positive academic performance, as evidenced by perfect attendance and course completion.

Enrolment in this school is transitional and voluntary. Pregnant and female 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 group of students, this group gradually disbands as students experience childbirth and as new students enroll throughout the school year.

Purposive and homogeneous method of sampling was used because the participants were made up of individuals who shared common characteristics. The criteria for selecting the participants included the following: (a) mothers, (b) 18 years and above, (c) attended NHAS for at least one semester, and (d) graduated from NHAS from school year 2011- 2012. The names of the qualified participants were randomly selected from a list of 45 names of graduates who met the research participation criteria.

DATA COLLECTION, CODING, AND ANALYSIS

Seven participants, with the following pseudonyms were interviewed: Bianca (19 years old), Denise (20), Nora (19), Cynthia (20), Karen (20), Jasmin (19), and Crystal (18). An interview guide, which was composed of open-ended questions, was used. Six of the seven participants were pregnant at the time they attended NHAS. Only one participant was already a parent when she attended NHAS. Three participants attended NHAS for one semester, three attended for two consecutive semesters, and one participant attended for three consecutive semesters.

A trial interview was conducted with one of the graduates of NHAS who was not a part of the study in order to determine the duration of the interview and to know if the interview questions would yield rich descriptions of the phenomenon. After evaluating the trial interview, the actual interviews with each of the seven participants were conducted and recorded using a digital voice recorder. The participants chose the time and location of the interviews. After each interview session, observations and reflections were written in a notebook. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim.

In-text coding was used to analyze the transcripts. Codes were merged to organize a group of repeating ideas. After synthesizing the content of each code file, themes were generated. This process led to the product of hermeneutic phenomenological research: a descriptive text which explains alternative education from the viewpoint of the seven participants.

RESULTS

Three themes were derived from the data analysis. To explain the themes, the exact words of the participants were used. Data analysis revealed that adolescent mothers gave meaning to their educational experiences by engaging in daily home and school routines. In addition, their alternative education became meaningful because they found a renewed motivation to finish their secondary education. Finally, the participants emphasized that they learned more than academic topics.

Theme 1: Engaging in Routines

The adolescent mothers in this study engaged in daily home and school routines that structured their experiences in the alternative school. Each participant recounted how their daily lives proceeded as student-mothers. The recurring events in their lives were: (a) preparing themselves and their babies early in the morning, (b) being picked up by the school bus, (c) arriving at school, (d) eating breakfast at the cafeteria, (e) bringing the baby to the school daycare, (f) going to classes, (g) picking up their babies from the daycare after school, and (h) riding the bus again to return back home. Crystal, who was pregnant and had her baby while enrolled in NHAS also brought her baby to the NHAS daycare. She narrated:

> I always wake up at five to get ready. I'll get myself ready then wake her (the baby) up, then get her ready, wait for the bus. The bus ride would be like 2 hours…She usually falls asleep every morning in the bus…I'll go take her to the daycare. I'll prepare everything for the daycare. I just go, have breakfast, wait for the bell to ring. I will go to my first period class and just go on through the day, then go to lunch. Usually, when I was breastfeeding her I would go to (the daycare) to breastfeed her and when the bell will ring, I would go back to my classes, and then I'll just go pick her up from the daycare again once the day was over, just go to the buses and wait another two hours.

Bianca had her baby while enrolled and eventually gave birth, but did not bring her baby to the school daycare. She said:

> I would wake up at six in the morning…Once we finish picking up all the students, we would arrive to NHAS, we would sign…We would just enter the cafeteria, eat, watch the news, waited for the bell…We arrive in class, say the pledge of allegiance, and continue with our modules, go to every class, and if you have your baby, leave the class 15 minutes before the bell rang, pick up the babies, and then just go to the bus.

When the students returned home, most of them would immediately spend time with their children, feeding them, changing their clothes, or playing with them. For example, Crystal described:

> We get down. I change her diaper. We eat. She loves to eat... So we just eat, and I would do my homework or play with her, it depends. When she gets hungry, we eat again.

For the two participants who were pregnant when they attended NHAS, namely Jasmin and Karen, their routines after school included doing school work so that they could advance in their classes. Karen explained:

> Well, I used to do the whole booklet because I told the teacher if I could bring it home, write it and finish and answer it, and then take it back there, and then during lunch, if he could help me out if the stuff was right, and yes sometimes it was right. Sometimes it was not right, and then sometimes I stay up the whole night doing the work because I really wanted to finish.

The participants' descriptions of their daily routines showed that there are well set structures in their lives as they perform their dual roles as student-mothers. The routines centered on preparing and going to school, engaging in their classes, and being with their children or doing assignments at home. Such activities occupied their lives and kept them purposeful.

Theme 2: Finding the Motivation to Finish School

The data also revealed the participants' difficulties of waking up very early in the morning, walking to and from classes while pregnant, being stressed and exhausted, taking care of their babies when they get sick, and the lack of money. Despite these challenges, participants persevered to attain their high school diplomas. For them, their children were the central force that kept them going to school.

When the question, "How did you motivate yourself to finish your high school education?" was asked, five participants mentioned that their main inspiration for coming to school was their children, to give them a "better future." Crystal was emphatic in saying that she "just wanted a better future for [her] daughter" and that she was her "only motivation." Denise expressed that she did not want her child to live the same way she did. For Denise, getting an education was a way to ensure that her child's future would be better than hers. Congruently, Nora "wanted to be a good example to [her] daughter," just as her mother attained her GED while her mother was taking care of her children. Jasmin reflected the same sentiment:

> I motivated myself because of my son. I knew I had to finish. I had to do something for him, so he can be proud of me, I mean, that's what kept me going. He kept me going. I couldn't just stop at whatever. I have to keep on going for him, so I can have a future for myself and for him. I would stress out…I have to push myself, push myself.

On the one hand, Bianca saw how her classmates would finish school and felt challenged to do the same. She stated, "By seeing everyone else that would finish faster than me, like if they could do it, I could also do it. Now they're in college, now they're with their babies, now they're working. If they could do it, I could also do it." For Bianca, the success of other students was a key motivator.

With the help of her husband and mother, Cynthia used self-talk to finish school. She recounted, "By telling myself I could do it, and by my husband telling me you can do it too, and my mom. They encouraged me. They tell me you can do it. "

Karen used practicality as a motivator. She did not want to return to NHAS the following semester to finish up her remaining credits. She "didn't want to go next year with (her) girl." She

"thought that was going to be really hard for (her), coming and going and the baby, and studying and when the baby (gets) sick or something."

In sum, data analysis showed that participants' motivation came from thinking of their children's future, from seeing other adolescent mothers' success, and from the encouragement of their significant others. Because of these motivators, attending the alternative school became imperative, despite the daily challenges participants had to face.

Theme 3: Learning Beyond Academics

During the interviews, the participants responded to the question, "Tell me about a time you felt you learned something from a class or from a teacher". Analysis of data patterns pointed to the majority of the participants' acknowledgement of the value of nonacademic topics. These topics sprang from elective classes such as health, speech, parenting, and cabinet making. From these classes, the participants learned practical knowledge relevant to their roles as parenting students. The tone of the participants' voices was firm and assured, and the significant pauses that were made before they answered this specific interview question pointed to the thoughtfulness of their responses. To show the participants' responses from which this theme emerged, see Appendix.

The findings revealed that the participants valued knowledge that is practical and readily applicable in their lives. For Crystal, in particular, taking cabinet making was an experience that opened a path for college:

> I just fell in love with making things, with wood and everything, everything about it. I didn't even know. I never thought about that at all before that class. I just fell in love with making stuff…I'm planning to move close to Dallas to start college there…and get my Bachelor's in Construction Technology.

Jasmin is another participant who exemplified this appreciation for topics that were relevant to her as a student-mother. She perceived the differences between how certain topics were taught in a regular school versus her alternative school. In this excerpt, Jasmin mentioned how the topic of pregnancy was taught more in detail in the alternative school than in a regular school:

> Usually, in a regular school, they just go with the most important things…In the alternative school, they'll go beneath that. They'll want the little details and all that, stuffs that are important, but in a regular school, they don't see it, so sometimes, that gets you confused 'cause you missed out on it. And in an alternative school, they'll go, it's a one on one, you can read it by yourself, or they'll explain you like step by step, not like in a regular school.

For Bianca, getting advice and receiving personal instruction about how to handle life as a teen mom was an essential part of learning that her speech teacher imparted. She recounted:

> Since it was speech, we had to talk a lot…She (the speech teacher) would tell us about our own base lives, our lives out of school, and she would tell us experience about hers. Mostly, she would be one of the teachers that would be one to one.

The words of the participants highlighted the value of learning topics that were relevant to their lives as young mothers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research question addressed how adolescent mothers gave meaning to their educational experiences in an alternative school. The themes indicated that the participants were self-propelled individuals who took charge of their education by choosing to enroll in an alternative school. As young parents, they did not let their responsibilities negatively affect their performance as students. Instead, they structured their lives to perform both roles by engaging in purposeful home and school routines. Additionally, the participants' motivation to finish high school focused on being a role model for their children and the desire for a better future. Their children served as their inspiration to become engaged in school. In fact, some participants expressed that they would only be absent if their babies were sick. Moreover, all participants did school work at their homes and sought teachers' help after school or during lunch break in order to complete their assignments. The participants in this study also expressed desire to reorder their priorities, improve their grades, and attend college. Thus, attending the alternative school was not a meaningless activity but a structured, purpose-driven endeavor guided by a desire to provide a good future for their children.

These findings support previous studies that show motherhood as a source of heightened purpose and motivation for female adolescents (Shanok & Miller, 2007; Zito, 2016). It was found that although adolescent mothers were aware of obstacles that may hinder the fulfillment of their aspirations, they "did not compromise their aspirations or hopes for future attainment" (Klaw, 2008, p. 455). Similarly, SmithBattle (2007) concluded that adolescent mothers' motivation to remain in school emanated from their desire to become good mothers and to avoid low-wage income. Such themes are congruent with the findings of this study.

In addition, the alternative school contributed to diploma attainment. By attending the alternative school, the need for relevant and free access to support services was met. 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 unique needs. From this study, it can be posited that a student's views of alternative schooling might influence her decision and motivation to continue her education through this route. If a student is well-informed and understands the opportunities available for her in an alternative program, she may become motivated to complete her secondary education despite the difficulties of a being a student-mother. In the light of these findings, it is recommended that education practitioners reaffirm the value and contribution of alternative programs to dropout prevention, especially among pregnant and parenting students. When educational leaders, stakeholders, and community members see the value of alternative education, negative perceptions towards this form of education may be lessened. Also, the provision for funding and other forms of support may be facilitated for the benefit of the alternative schools' students. Lastly, a follow up study is recommended to determine the postsecondary trajectories of the adolescent mothers who graduated from the alternative school, thus extending an important academic discussion for this challenged yet promising population.

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APPENDIX

Participants' Examples of What They Learned from a Class or a Teacher

Participant	Example of what she learned	Excerpt from transcripts
Bianca	Prioritizing education above a relationship with a boyfriend	She told us that to never give up, that we're all here to work hard. I know your relationship is troubling, but first you have to think about yourself and your baby. Put aside your boyfriend and ex-boyfriends.
Nora	Making baby food	In Ms. Sanchez's class, we learned how to cook or make baby snacks.
Cynthia	Taking care of the baby	How to feed the baby, if you're gonna breastfeed him or the way to make a baby burp, or know if the baby has something. That was one of my favorite classes that we learned a lot of things, how baby starts growing inside your stomach and things like that.
Karen	Childbirth	Yeah, it's health class. They showed me a lot of stuff and how babies are born like the natural and the C section. I was, like, oh my God! I didn't know anything, anything. I was in shock that day.
Jasmin	How to handle relationships and proper nutrition	Well, uhm, with Ms. Sanchez, I learned, she would give us these booklets about, about learning about things with your, like things you should know with your partner or what not, like to help one another. I mean that was something good and about things that you should eat, and should not eat, and how many portions you should eat it, you should eat of that, and stuffs like that was something that I learned.
Crystal	Cabinet making, construction	From the cabinet making class, Mr. Clark. I learned everything, well, not everything, a lot of things about construction all those things, and he was a real good teacher. He, also, he gave me the names of some people who pursued that career also, so to get to know, know more about them. He opened a door for me in life.