

Literacy After Labor:
School-Age Mothers and High School English

BY

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THESIS
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For mothers, especially mine.

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SUMMARY

Since the passing of Title IX legislation in 1972, pregnant and parenting students have been protected from discrimination in federally-funded educational settings. The experiences of school-age parents in schools, however, have been primarily studied in programs that separate them from their non-parenting peers. This dissertation broadens the study of school-age mothers by examining the relationship between parenting status and student experience of four school-age mothers enrolled in an inclusive English class. Classroom talk, responses to literature, and writing were analyzed to uncover ways that motherhood functions as potential asset or Fund of Knowledge in the classroom. In this qualitative case study, ethnographic methods were utilized to observe classroom interactions and gather curricular artifacts. Additionally, interviews were conducted with the teacher and focal participants.

The school-age mothers in this study drew upon their lived experiences as parents to inform their classroom literacy practices. They were the most active participants in the class, showing increased motivation and ability to self-advocate. They brought their parenting identities into transactions with texts they read, and they utilized writing to counter dominant discourses. However, they also positioned themselves as more than mothers, struggling against past and present conditions that threatened their physical, emotional, and financial wellbeing. At times the curriculum and teacher's practices functioned to explore these realities and heal wounds.

While a majority of research and scholarship on this population has focused on policy or program implications, this dissertation offers suggestions for classroom teachers to support the needs and strengths of school-age mothers. Ultimately, this research intends to promote teaching practices and curriculum that disrupt limiting narratives of who school-age mothers are as students and humans.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"I am her mother, and I know what's best for her," Shante nearly shouts.

"Sometimes she may want something that I know isn't best for her, and she won't get it. That's the problem these days, letting kids have everything they want."

"You a tough momma," James chuckles. Shante's opinion directly contrasts with what the other students have been saying in regards to the importance of parents giving children what they ask for, and I can see in Shante's eyes that she is not amused by James's response. I jump in, attempting to steer the discussion back to our starting point: the book The Other Wes Moore.

I ask, "It sounds like some of you are blaming Wes's mom for his decision to start selling drugs. Is that what you think?"

"Well, not exactly. But it's kinda true, like I started selling drugs 'cause my mom couldn't buy me the things I wanted, that I saw the other guys having. But at the same time, I wouldn't say it was really my mom's fault. I made that choice. I was old enough to know better," Zach responds with his own personal connection. Several students murmur in agreement, and the bell rings before we have time to go any deeper.

This exchange stays with me -- not because of Zach's candid admission of illegal activities, which I grew used to several years before -- but because of the intensity in Shante's response. As a teacher at an alternative high school where at least one-third of the students are parents, I was accustomed to the students bringing up their children or their own parenting philosophies in class discussions. But during the term with Shante and Zach, I found myself paying more careful attention to these parenting references because I was about to become a parent myself. I had always believed in learning from my students, but this was especially true when it came to parenting, as many of my students were far more experienced than I was. Shante was offering a lesson, and I was listening.

It was during my time as a pregnant teacher that I began to notice all the ways that my students' positions as parents were visible in my classroom. From tattoos of a child's name and birthdate on a neck or wrist, to "X's Mommy" emblazoned across a folder, to jeans unbuttoned to allow room for an expanding belly, my students displayed parenthood as a visible identity. As Shante demonstrated, they also sometimes brought their parenting experiences directly into their transactions with texts as readers and writers. While Zach, although also a parent, was clearly aligning himself with the main character, Shante's lens as a reader was squarely focused on the mother. These moves as readers shade how a text is interpreted and remembered. Over the course of the semester, Shante mentioned her daughter in two-thirds of her journal entries, as well.

On one hand, I was paying attention to these parenting references as a future parent; on the other hand, I also began wondering what I could learn as a teacher of many parenting students. I wondered about the relationship between being a parent and being a student; as an English teacher, I was also interested in the relationship between parenting and literacy. While teachers are constantly being encouraged to differentiate instruction and make accommodations for learners' diverse needs, parenting status is very rarely brought up as a potential area for consideration. In what ways might parenting status matter in the classroom? Are there unique needs of this population, or perhaps, are there ways that school-age parents are constructing their parenting position as an asset in the classroom? If so, I wondered how I might structure my curriculum or teaching practices to better support their lived experiences.

These questions paved the way to this study, which examines an English class that included some school-age mothers. While still interested in practical implications, my shift from classroom teacher to educational researcher brings the students' experience to the forefront. In this research project, I investigate how school-age mothers navigate their identity positions, interact with dominant discourses, and engage in school-based literacy practices within an English classroom. For this study, I spent a semester as a participant observer in a classroom at

the alternative high school where I used to teach. I observed thirty-one hours of classroom instruction and collected curricular materials from all lessons. I also collected all of the written work of four school-age mother focal participants and conducted interviews with them and their teacher. Through a strengths-based approach, this study examines ways that school-age motherhood influences and shapes students' literacy and learning, particularly within an English classroom. In my data analysis, I paid careful attention to all references to motherhood, as well as themes related to identity positions that made up the hybrid identity of school-age mothers, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and age. Furthermore, I looked for references related to education and literacy. The final layer of my analysis focused on the relationship between the identity data and school data to draw conclusions about how being a school-age mother impacts the focal participants as readers, writers, and thinkers in their English class.

Purpose and Significance

It has been established that becoming a mother marks a positive change in the lives of many young people who were previously disengaged with school (Breen & McClean, 2010; Brosh, Weigel, & Evans, 2007; Zachry, 2004). Additionally, motherhood leads to changes in literacy practices outside of school (Lycke, 2009). How these shifts in attitude, belief, and behavior are visible in a classroom has not been established. The experiences of school-age parents in schools have been primarily studied in settings that separate them from their non-parenting peers (Hallman, 2007; Spera & Lightfoot, 2010; Luttrell, 2003). There is a dearth of research on parenting students' experiences in inclusive, mainstream settings. However, that is where most school-age mothers are currently being educated.

Rather than view school-age parenthood as a detriment, I focus on how students may use their parenting experience as an asset in school settings and how literacy can be approached in such a way that honors experience rather than alienates and blames. I look to Rosenblatt's transactional theory to explore the ways motherhood impacts reading, Yagelski's ontological theory of writing-as-a-way-of-being to make sense of participants' personal and

creative writing, black feminists to situate literacy practices in the intersections of identities, and popular culture to frame dominant discourses that are taken up and resisted through the literacy practices of the focal participants. A specific theoretical contribution I hope to make with this study is the application of a “funds of knowledge” approach as a way to view school-age parents’ lived experiences as potential assets in the classroom. As conceptualized by Moll and Greenberg (1990), “funds of knowledge” refer to the out-of-school skills, resources, and networks that households draw from in order to function and thrive. Although over the past twenty years, a sizable body of funds of knowledge work has accumulated in the fields of early childhood, family, and even adolescent literacy, no one has specifically framed such a study on the classroom implications for school-age parents. While my project does not follow the typical home-study approach of most funds of knowledge research, I attempted to use interview questions about students’ lives, students’ writing, and careful examination of classroom actions and interactions as “windows” into funds of knowledge (Street, 2005).

Situating Myself in the Study

I was thirty years old when I became a mother. That is to say that I was not a school-age parent. Nor was I raised by one. My biological mother was only 17 when she became pregnant with me, but was already a college freshman. It probably matters on some level that I was technically born to a teen parent before being adopted at birth, but my interest in this population and project was primarily sparked by my experience as a teacher of many school-age parents. As an adolescent, I had knowledge of a few peers who became mothers, but they were not young women I socialized or shared classes with anyway, and I must admit I have no idea what happened to them in school after they became pregnant.

I include these self-positioning statements because being an outsider to the group I am studying brings specific challenges and responsibilities. I am also an outsider in terms of race and socioeconomic status; I hold a position of privilege. When I was pregnant, my students were eager to discuss, ask questions, and give advice. On multiple occasions they brought up

the differences in my situation and their own, with comments about my marital status, car and home ownership, and age. As much as we bonded over the experience of pregnancy, they never considered me a peer. I am acutely aware of all the ways I can misrepresent the participants in this study. As other researchers have discussed (Coffel, 2001; Luttrell, 2003; Kelly, 2000), writing about school-age parents is fraught with challenges, including the risk of further marginalization or stigmatization by tuning into differences from the mainstream. The students you meet in the following pages amaze, disappoint, challenge, inspire, and confuse me. I respect them as people and as parents, and while my goal is to honor their voices and experiences, I understand the power I wield as the one sharing their stories.

Neighborhoods and realities divided. Whether approaching on the city bus or my car, the route from my home to Westside Alternative Center (WAC) has always put me a little ill at ease. It is not that I feel unsafe, although the crime rates for the school's neighborhood are among the worst in the country; rather, the sharp contrasts of my neighborhood and this one make inequities impossible to ignore. Unlike WAC's street, my street does not have police surveillance cameras at intersections or "Safe Passageway" signs denoting that children should follow this path to arrive safely at school. In contrast to the retail establishments and businesses surrounding WAC, I do not have to shout my request through a small window in bullet-proof glass to order fast food or from a convenience store on my block; instead, within a five-minute walk I can have a meal at a critically acclaimed restaurant, sip a cocktail on an enclosed patio, read a book at a coffee shop, and buy organic produce. Although WAC is located in the city's largest (by population) neighborhood, none of my friends have ever visited the area and few had heard of it before talking to me. To my knowledge, no WAC students come to my neighborhood either.

I ended up teaching at WAC almost by chance, responding to an ad on Craigslist before I moved to this major Midwestern city. My fiancé (now husband) drove me to the interview, and we circled the block several times in search of the school. When we finally saw a small sign

outside the side-street door of a windowless cement building, Nick turned to me and said, “Are you sure you want to go in?” I am not sure why I didn’t hesitate, but I resolutely said yes. When he picked me up an hour later, I told him it was a “real school” inside and that I wanted the job. Maybe I was in denial that I had no other real prospects, so practically it made sense to accept the position. I like to think that I saw something special in the place that clicked with something I was hoping I had within me but was not quite sure.

My first day with students was “Orientation,” where I met my advisory students who would not necessarily be in my classes. These students, like all enrolled at WAC, were seventeen to twenty-one years old with a range of ability levels and earned credit. Our half-day schedule focused on a combination of icebreakers, introductions to school policies, and academic activities meant to ease the transition back into school (short readings with journal assignments). Within the first fifteen minutes, I learned that two of my students had children and two more had babies on the way. I also realized after the fact that one of my students probably let the others know that he was the one to see if they wanted to smoke marijuana at lunch; I don’t remember his exact coded language, but I both was naive enough not to catch on right away and savvy enough to read the situation after and infer what I had missed. Few of the lessons I created for that first year were worthy of being repeated again, but I have fond memories of the daily enthusiasm that allowed me to push aside any anxieties about working with students whose lives were unlike any I had taught before.

I stayed for six years, teaching while taking graduate courses and also returning for one year after the birth of my daughter. I taught some lessons and units that I am proud of, even sharing my ideas at conferences. To the very end, I also struggled to balance engagement with intellectual challenge, rapport with leniency; I constantly wondered what is “relevant,” to whom, and why. The combination of graduate studies, assistantship responsibilities, motherhood, and WAC teaching ultimately became too much juggling for me, and I left my teaching role to work on this dissertation. On my last day of teaching at WAC, my coworkers presented me with an

honorary diploma. Although I had finished eight years of post-secondary schooling, this framed certificate signified the most meaningful education experience of my life. Without my time as a teacher at WAC, I would never have been prepared to undertake this project.

I do not consider myself a poet, but later I will share poetry written by my participants. In the spirit of doing what you ask your students to do, and in an attempt to shed further light into how I perceived my experience at WAC, I offer a poem I wrote for the school's National Poetry Month celebration in 2013, which I modeled after Patricia Smith's "What It's Like to be a Black Girl (For Those of You Who Aren't):

What It's Like to be an WAC Teacher (for those of you who aren't)

It's knowing the content of urbandictionary.com postings
without having to look them up;
It's realizing there are more definitions of *thick*, *loud*, *square*, and *thirsty*
than any computerized test could realize.

It's knowing the lyrics to Chief Keef songs
and that *Wale* isn't pronounced like *whale*;
It's secretly wishing you could bop,
and not being able to suppress a smile at your students' humor.

It's reading every book you can get your hands on,
just in case it might interest your students;
It's learning Black history and reading Black authors,
because that was left out of all your school learning.

It's getting frustrated sometimes
and worrying about the challenges of your students' lives all the time;
It's seeing the gap between what your students know
and what test scores and society think they know.

Equal parts exhausting and exhilarating,
Being a WAC teacher is about knowing there's no other school you would rather be a
part of.

Despite the poem's sunny ending, being a WAC teacher -- and I expect a teacher almost anywhere -- is also fraught with tensions, questions, and anxiety. As Luttrell (2003) and Coffel (2011) note, alternative schools are particularly anxiety-filled places. Being a teacher at WAC is also about constantly wondering if you and your school are effective. Many of my colleagues

also pursued graduate studies in a range of disciplines, driven by a desire to find answers or new approaches to the questions that arose daily in our classrooms.

I chose to conduct my research at WAC because I knew there would be a sizable population of school-age mothers to study, as there were every year I worked there. I saw a gap in the existing body of research, unable to find any studies situated within a classroom at an alternative school that served a mix of parenting and non-parenting students. I returned to begin my research after a one semester gap, and in that short period of time nearly all of the students I knew at WAC had graduated. Only one student in the classroom I observed had been enrolled during my time as a teacher there. As an outsider who only spent a few hours per week in the school and its neighborhood before returning home to code and write, I felt the divide between my world and the students' even more clearly. This tension further compelled my belief that the stories of these young women, influenced but not limited by their surroundings, need to be shared in order to reconceptualize what it means to be a mother and high school student.

Intentional terminology. As Luker (1997) reminds, a majority of those called “teen mothers” are technically legal adults of 18 or 19 when they give birth. Like Lesko (1995) and Pillow (2004), I choose to utilize the label “school-age,” rather than teen, adolescent, or premature -- yes, some literature actually calls these women “premature mothers,” a clearly judgmental label. The mothers in this study are all part of a state-funded support program called “Parents Too Soon.” While so many other groups have fought for non-offensive titles, I am dismayed that the official language around this population continues to be framed as one of deviance. I believe my selected terminology immediately creates distance from the debilitating stereotypes that attempt to constrain these women. In my interviews and conversations with the participants of this study, I found myself typically just referring to “students who are parents,” as an even gentler label, but in the spirit of smooth writing, I primarily refer to them as “school-age mothers” throughout these pages.

Single-gender focus. I also wish to clarify that my study focused only on mothers because of the participants in the focal class, not because of purposeful omission of fathers' experiences. School-age fathers have been essentially ignored by the research community, particularly in educational research. It is quite telling that there are several studies focused on incarcerated teen fathers, but none on fathers as high school students. My experience as a teacher of school-age fathers, like Zach in the opening vignette, revealed that pervasive stereotypes about absent or deadbeat dads did not at all tell the true story of this group of young men. The population of school-age fathers is smaller than mothers, as a majority of adolescent females become pregnant by men over the age of 20 (Paschal, 2006). Future studies should address the gender gap in theory and research about parenting students.

Chapter Overviews

In chapter two, "School-Age Mothers On-screen and In Schools" I analyze "public noise" around school-age parenting in an effort to situate the common images of school-age parenting within larger dominant discourses. I look to fictional portrayals in film, reality television shows, and memoirs of both school-age mothers and teachers, with particular focus on the portrayal of school in these narratives. I synthesize the findings through a literature review of theory, policy, and research on school-age motherhood related to education.

In chapter three, "Identity, Positioning, and the Story of One Classroom," I use a story from the first day of class to orient the reader to my study, as well as to begin to explore data around identity and positioning. I go on to analyze the classroom talk data from the semester, specifically focusing on how the school-age mothers position themselves in the classroom and what that may reveal about school-age motherhood as a central, hybrid identity.

In chapter four, "Intention, Enactment, and Instruction in Third Period," I summarize and analyze the course texts, paying particular attention to the portrayal of parents. I also describe how the texts were enacted, noting silences and points of emphasis. Furthermore, I propose

that three key characteristics allowed the teacher to create a classroom where school-age mothers flourished as learners.

In chapter five, “Reading with Their Bodies - Motherhood as a Reader Stance,” I analyze how the school-age mothers of the study read, responded to, and made meaning from course texts. Using Rosenblatt’s transactional theory and the Funds of Knowledge approach, I explore how the in-school reading events were impacted by the students’ mothering status, arguing that the school-age mothers tapped into their parenting experience to deepen their reading.

Chapter six, “Writing as a Way of Being a School-Age Mother In-the-World” is framed by Yagelski’s ontological theory of writing as a way of being and black feminist theory. I analyze the ways the school-age mothers utilize writing to embrace and counter narratives of their lives through the writing assignments of the term, particularly “Raised By” poems. I also look to the class anthology of “Raised By” poems to gain a greater understanding of the community discourses the mothers are writing through and against.

Chapter seven, “More Than Mothers” focuses on the interconnectedness of motherhood and other relational identities, specifically romantic partner, daughter, and friend. This chapter also explores the themes of conflict, rage, and loss that characterized some of the focal participants’ relationships. Further, the concept of wounded healing is discussed as a way to understand some of the impact of the focal teacher’s instructional practice.

In chapter eight, “Schooling School-Age Mothers,” I offer practical implications for teachers on what this study reveals about teaching parenting students. I also propose what a curricular unit focused on school-age parenting as a generative theme would look like and suggest ways to capitalize on the funds of knowledge of school-age parents.

Chapter 2: School-Age Mothers On-screen and In Schools

Jasmine: *What are you going to do?*

Sam: *About what?*

Jasmine *nods towards Sam's stomach.*

Sam: *Oh, I'm going to keep it.*

Jasmine: *Cool.*

When pregnant high school student Jasmine reposes the question, "What are you going to do?" back to her pregnant science teacher Sam, there is no doubt that the audience feels Sam's surprise and discomfort. Thirty-year old middle class white women do not get asked this question; it is part of their privilege. Yet, young women like Jasmine can be asked by nearly anyone. Sam answers honestly and humbly, "I'm going to keep it." This moment in the film *Unexpected* (2015), written and directed by former Chicago Public Schools teacher Kris Swanberg, exemplifies contemporary shifts in the discourses around adolescent childrearing.

Jasmine is black and lives on Chicago's South Side, but her character challenges standard misperceptions of teen parents. She is not a high school dropout -- she is an academically strong student, and her pregnancy does not cause her attendance or grades to decline. In fact, she graduates before giving birth. She is not promiscuous -- although the relationship does not last through the birth of the child, she becomes pregnant in the context of a committed relationship. She lives with a supportive grandmother, holds a job after school, and is college-bound. Although persistent stereotypes exist, research reveals that young women who become pregnant in their teens are more likely to return to or stay in school than dropout (Luker, 1996), have no more sexual partners on average than their peers (Furstenberg, 1980), and are typically in a relationship when they conceive (Kaplan, 1997).

Being a pregnant teacher of pregnant students is not a unique phenomenon, especially as a majority of school-age parents choose to attend traditional high schools. Yet very little has

been portrayed about this experience. In this fictional example, Sam and Jasmine bond through the mutual experience of pregnancy, despite differences in their circumstances. At first they spend time after school working on Jasmine's college applications, but then start attending prenatal yoga (and drinking milkshakes) together. The plot, however, is not as simple as an unexpected friendship, as Sam and Jasmine never transcend the ingrained student-teacher hierarchy. While Sam may be the paid educator, it is Jasmine who takes the role of pedagogue in most of the film's most poignant and educative moments. Just as in the reposing of, "What are you going to do?," several times in the film Jasmine gently reveals Sam's double-standards and hypocrisy by simply stating Sam's own words back to her.

Through Jasmine, this film reminds teachers the value of being open to learning from their students and holding themselves accountable to the same standards they set. The biggest and most unexpected take-away, however, is the idea that teachers may not always know what is best for students. Conventional wisdom tends to agree with Sam that Jasmine absolutely should go away to college to do what is best for her and her baby's future. In the film's closing scene at Jasmine's baby shower, however, I think Sam learns that perhaps she was wrong. By staying in Chicago and enrolling in a community college, Jasmine will be able to utilize her strong family support system. Sam does not have the same kind of familial network, so she overlooked this resource in Jasmine's life. Especially since many educators come from different backgrounds than their students, how often are community and cultural funds of knowledge and capital overlooked or shortchanged?

Swanberg's film is refreshing and worthy of praise for its nuanced and honest depictions: a "blighted" community as a place where mothers walk their children to school on dark and cold mornings, rather than a crime-infested war zone; an early career teacher leaving the profession because of bureaucratic circumstances, rather than burnout caused by a chaotic school environment; a pregnant teen with ambition, rather than a directionless welfare mom. Swanberg's work is characteristic of a larger shift away from deficit-oriented views of

marginalized populations, that although still not mainstream, are emerging as counter-narratives to the deeply rooted and problematic ways that Americans talk about race, poverty, violence, and parenting.

How We Got to Now: School-Age Parenthood

Unfortunately, *Unexpected* is an outlier in popular culture. And despite some buzz after its Sundance debut, it is not really all that popular either. However, two other films from the past decade with pregnant adolescents at the center have garnered significant acclaim (even in the form of Academy Awards) and box office success. As Oliver (2010) asserts, “Pregnancy is no longer in the shadows;” she points out Hollywood’s current obsession with pregnant bodies, even as objects of sexual desire. Similarly, school-age pregnancy has come out of the shadows and revealed itself on-screen as a complex phenomenon with multiple faces and stories.

Through an analysis of the “public noise” around school-age parenting, particularly film and reality television, in this chapter I set out to situate the complex and even rival images of teen parenting within larger dominant discourses rooted in systemic racism and neoliberalism. I am particularly interested in the relationship between school and these mothers, as student identity is often central to the framing of such narratives, despite little focus on actual academic learning or intellectual gains.

It is notable that teen pregnancy, rather than parenting, is most often the focus. I believe it is the visibility of the phenomenon -- the physical changes of pregnancy, particularly the large belly-- that draws such interest. Adolescent pregnant bodies continue to be highly publicized sites of critique, often used as scapegoats for systemic problems in society (Kelly, 2000). Not only do pregnant bodies diverge from what is considered the normal path of development, there is also the connection with teenage sexuality, a topic that seems to enrage, excite, or at least fascinate both adults and adolescents (Kaplan, 1997).

For example, in 2013 the city of Chicago launched a major anti-teen pregnancy advertising campaign featuring images of shirtless, pregnant teenage males with sullen

expressions (see figure 1). The ads were supposed “to spark conversations among adolescents and adults on the issue of teen pregnancy and to make the case that teen parenthood is more than just a girl’s responsibility” (City of Chicago, 2013). While the ads may not follow the traditional path to get there, the result is the same of nearly all pregnancy prevention ads: shaming the pregnant body. This example further demonstrates the way enlarged abdomens are considered fair game for exploitation, whether it be shock value or mockery.



Figure 1. City of Chicago ad (2013)

Consider the movie poster image for *Unexpected* (see figure 2) in contrast to the “Unexpected?” ad. Two smiling pregnant females sit on a bench, and one has her hand placed on the other’s swollen belly. The position of Sam and Jasmine side by side-- one white and one black, one appearing to be an adult and the other a teen -- could easily be one of contrast, but instead is crafted to show a bond of likeness. While the pregnant bodies are still central here, the facial expressions push back on notions of shame. To appreciate what a shift *Unexpected’s* portrayal of a black school-age mother as competent and positioned similarly to her pregnant white teacher marks, I will present an overview of the complex history of the “crisis of teenage pregnancy,” as it has so commonly been framed.



Figure 2. *Unexpected* movie poster (2015)

The most important point to note is that despite the ongoing focus on this issue, the number of adolescents becoming parents has actually been steadily decreasing since the 1950s (Luker, 1996; Elise, 1995). In *Unfit Subjects: Educational Policy and the Teen Mother*, Pillow (2004) summarizes the history of America's "obsession with the teen pregnancy epidemic:

a close look at the construction of teen pregnancy, even in its short history, has been defined differently at precise moments for varying political and social needs. What the problem of teen pregnancy is, who it is a problem for, and how government should intervene and on whose behalf (the teen mother, the child, or society) has always occurred within a shifting social context - a social context that defines and at times redefines the problem of teen pregnancy. (p. 18)

The "short history" that Pillow refers to is the mid-1970s, which marks the beginning of national debates on how to handle the scandal of adolescents having babies. The root causes of teen pregnancy's rise to the top of social concerns are linked to a number of gender and sexuality-based changes in American society at the time, including the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision, increased accessibility to birth control, increased rates of premarital sex, and trends towards later childbearing for middle class adults (Luker, 1996). Pillow (2004) asserts that it was actually the increase in white, unwed mothers that sparked public outrage. She points out that in

contrast to today's stereotypes, initially images of teen pregnancy were focused on white girls, and argues that a race-based, two-tiered system has always existed in the treatment of adolescent mothers. Policies and programs aimed at young white women focused on rehabilitation, whereas young black mothers were seen as "untreatable" (p. 24). The 1970s, with attention focused on white mothers, saw legislation intended to end discrimination against pregnant and parenting teens and policies, including the end of forced withdrawal from public schools. Although rarely discussed or reported, Title IX included a provision making it illegal for schools to exclude students due to pregnancy or childbirth (Pillow, 2004, p. 61).

Pillow cites the 1980s, under President Ronald Reagan, as the beginning of enduring stereotypes of teen mothers as poor and racial minorities. President Reagan's emphasis on welfare reform included frequent mentions of teen mothers dependent on welfare, linking adolescent parenting to cycles of poverty, which was already a racialized discourse. Discourses around the decline of the black family were also becoming mainstream in the 1980s, further linking race and teen parenting. Pillow asserts that as teen mothers became viewed as "other girls," rather than "our girls," the public began to panic out of fear that too many poor, minority, fatherless children would drain the resources for everyone else. Luker (1996) concurs that teen pregnancy reached epidemic status in the eyes of the American people once the phenomenon became viewed as synonymous with poverty; she also supports that the stereotypes are racialized, pointing out a historical fascination with black sexuality.

Pregnant Bodies on the Big Screen: An Analysis of the Current Decade through Film

A comparison of two recent films, both more popular and acclaimed than *Unexpected*, illustrates that the racialized two-tiered system that Pillow (2004) describes continues to exist. At the same time, there has been a desirable progression away from the stigma of teen pregnancy. In 2007's *Juno*, written by Diablo Cody and directed by Jason Reitman, a white middle-class suburban teenager becomes pregnant after her first sexual encounter and chooses adoption. On the surface, the film could be a counter-narrative of school-age pregnancy. The protagonist

is positioned as one of “our girls,” rather than the “other,” which is a rare reminder that young women of any background can become pregnant. Juno is neither a troublemaker who is inspired by her pregnancy to turn her life around, nor is she an overachieving do-gooder whose pregnancy shocks everyone around her. She may have a strange fashion sense and mature wit, but overall she is a “regular” teen girl. The film, like *Unexpected*, reserves moral judgment and avoids shame. In fact, when the ultrasound technician says, “thank goodness for that!” in reference to learning that Juno is planning adoption, Juno and her step-mother harshly criticize her for being judgmental.

This film has been heralded by some as feminist or post-feminist, particularly in the decision to allow a single mother to adopt the baby. In my opinion, however, the treatment of abortion and adoption is rather narrow and conservative. Very little emotional weight or critical thought is given to Juno’s reproductive choices. The story of a white middle-class mother choosing adoption, even if she selects an atypical candidate to receive the baby, is not a radical variation on adoption. As Pillow (2004), Ladner (1987), and Kelly (2004) discuss, adoption has always been seen as a “good choice” for white mothers, but not embraced in the black community due to historical limitations on black adoptions; to clarify, for decades black babies were not desired by the middle-class white clientele of adoption agencies, resulting in black cultural standards that reject this as a viable option.

Although I am not claiming *Juno* itself as largely problematic, *Juno* in relation to another Best Picture nominee from just two years later, *Precious* (2009), raises questions about race and class-based portrayals of school-age mothers. *Precious: Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire*, directed by Lee Daniels, tells the story of a black sixteen year old living in Harlem. The title character represents nearly every disadvantage imaginable -- she is illiterate, probably with an undiagnosed learning disability; she is poor and receives welfare; she is morbidly obese; she is a victim of frequent physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. When the film begins Precious has one child, a daughter with Down Syndrome, who is being raised by her

grandmother. Both that child and her next pregnancy result from incest -- specifically rape by her father. The conventional underdog storyline follows Precious's intellectual and emotional growth fostered by a nurturing school environment, resulting in her leaving her extremely troubled home. Motherhood is one of Precious's identities but not the primary emphasis throughout the film; however, she is clearly positioned as a mother at the end with custody of both her children.

Before I go any further, I want to share that I initially saw this film with a group of my students after we read the book together in book club, which I organized for five years. My students loved the film; afterward we talked about the amazing performances of the film's stars, as well as the changes from the book. Later when I presented the possibility that the film represented a stereotypical and potentially exploitative view of urban black life, my students adamantly rejected the criticism. My students are not alone in their praise, as the film garnered overwhelmingly positive reviews from most film critics. Despite my concerns about this damaging portrayal of a school-age mother, each time I watch the film I continue to find it more engrossing and emotionally affecting than the glib *Juno*.

While an example of a dysfunctional black family in line with Moynihan's (1965) sensationalized and racist, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, *Precious* shifts a little of the blame away from the family structure and instead onto systems that fail to support and protect children. Public schools did not educate Precious: she is sixteen and illiterate. Similarly, Child and Family services did not keep Precious out of an abusive home. In the end, two individuals, a teacher and social worker, ultimately help Precious find the internal and external resources she needs to gain independence. While the film hints at systemic failures, it fails to contextualize how Precious's mother has been similarly underserved and villainizes her without any hint of sympathy. Ultimately the film falls into the familiar trope of individual saviors -- although not white -- and a "pulling yourself up by your bootstrap" narrative, rather than a social critique.

Although both films stray from convention in some ways and perpetuate dominant discourses in others, both *Juno* (2007) and *Precious* (2009) deserve credit for their avoidance of crafting school-age parenthood as a tragic mistake that ruins a life. That simple narrative may have once been the only story widely espoused about school-age parents, but it is no longer. Juno and Precious are complex and even flawed characters, but not tragic or immoral, and neither is defined solely based on her reproductive history. However, these depictions are primarily still constructed within the web of dominant social relations. The contrast between the white, middle-class, apparently well-adjusted Juno and the poor, black, abused Precious reflect sensationalized race and class-based disparities that continue to dominate conceptions of who school-age mothers are and what happens to them. Mainstream audiences can accept teen pregnancy as humorous -- if it is embodied by a white, middle class body. Similarly, mainstream audiences can accept a family situation characterized by abuse, dysfunction, and incest -- if it is a black household. I am not sure that the reverse is true: how would similar storylines be received if sociocultural contexts and races of the protagonists were altered? The two-tiered system for viewing and responding to school-age parenthood remains a reality.

Complicating blame and shame. Another subtle but important difference in these two films is about stigma. Kelly (2000) conceptualizes four competing frames for who is blamed for an adolescent pregnancy. The most powerful of these frames, the “wrong-girl frame,” locates the problem within the individual, positing that adolescent mothers are girls who make bad choices that lead to pregnancy, and they do so because they were abused or unloved as children. The “wrong-family” frame, which comes from political conservatives, focuses the stigma on the family that brings up young people who would have sex outside of marriage and not legitimize a child’s birth through matrimony. Feminists attempt to counter the previous two viewpoints with the “wrong-society” frame, which argues that individual choices must be viewed within larger societal contexts. Some who operate within this frame speak out for respecting diverse families, or even point out that most discussions of teen mothers are racist and classist.

Precious, depending on how you view it, can be the story of a wrong family (an example of “black pathology”) or wrong society (systemic failures); however, especially due the nonconsensual nature of her pregnancies, it is not the story of a girl’s mistakes.

Juno (2007), on the other hand, explicitly positions itself in the fourth frame: “stigma-is-wrong,” which Kelly (2000) describes as the position often taken by school-age mothers themselves but rarely shown in the mass media. Kelly explains that some school-age mothers state that becoming a parent was a positive decision and resist being seen as victims or morally deficient. This is true for many of my former students, as well as the participants of this study. When Kelly wrote about these frames in 2000, there may not have been mass media representations of “stigma-is-wrong,” but *Juno* (2007) is a more contemporary example of how this discourse is peaking into the mainstream. In the case of *Juno* (2007), I wonder if the protagonist’s identity positions and choice of adoption make this discourse more palatable.

More recently, examples of women -- including women of color -- have been publicly espousing the “stigma-is-wrong frame,” albeit to smaller audiences. In 2011 Gaby Rodriguez received national media attention for her high school senior project: a fake pregnancy. She subsequently published a memoir, which was immediately adapted into a made-for-tv movie, both called *The Pregnancy Project* (Rodriguez, 2012; Buckley, 2012). Rodriguez’s “social experiment” was focused on exposing harmful stereotypes and reactions that pregnant teens face. She addressed her entire school in a convocation, revealing the hoax and receiving a standing ovation (at least in the film version) after making statements such as, “Once the act is done, why throw teen parents under the bus?...What good does it do anyone to sit around insulting the parents? What can possibly come of it?” (p. 125). Her speech focused on how the negative reactions to a young person’s pregnancy from their peers and even adults causes them to feel depressed, lower their own expectations, and possibly drop out of school; furthermore, the comments made to the fathers scare them off.

Similarly, five women who gave birth as adolescents started an organization that began with the social media hashtag #noteenshame. The larger movement is now centered on supporting “the Young Parents’ Dignity Agenda,” focused on promoting social policies that better meet the needs of adolescent parents and pushing back on teen pregnancy prevention campaigns that rely on stigma (Ronan, 2015; Strong Families, 2015). One of the founders, Natasha Vianna, gave a TEDx Talk entitled, “Changing the Meaning of Teenage Motherhood” (2014). She argues that instead of the current definition of teenage motherhood, what if we collectively redefined it so that the expectations are that teen mothers will finish high school and go college. She further posits: “And what if being a teen mom meant that she can do anything she wants to do? And what if being a teen mom meant that she’s going to love being a mother? And what if we finally accepted that being a teen mom means she is also a valuable woman?” (2014). I am not sure that collectively we have embraced Vianna’s redefinition or moved past the two-tier system, but #noteenshame, *The Pregnancy Project*, *Unexpected*, and coverage in the blogosphere indicate that change is happening. I see this shift in the broader culture as an opportunity for similar changes to occur in educational settings.

MTV and the Commodification of School-Age Motherhood

Although reconceptualizing teenage pregnancy was not really the intention, the television network MTV has done more to affect change in American perspectives on school-age parents than any other organization. Through the series *16 and Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, and *Teen Mom 2*, MTV brought stories of school-age pregnancy and parenthood to millions of viewers (Guglielmo, 2013). The audience may not have realized it, but these shows, particularly *16 and Pregnant*, are intended to educate -- a form of “edutainment,” as Tally (2013) describes it. *16 and Pregnant* actually emerged from a partnership between MTV, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (Guglielmo, 2013). The driving narrative, therefore, is one of cautionary tale. Daniel (2013) snarkily summarizes the general lesson of each episode: “Do not get pregnant as a teenager if

you want to continue participating in *normal* teenage activities, such as playing sports, looking thin and fashionable, attending a regular high school, buying trendy nonessential goods, and moving away to college to live in a dormitory with your friends” (p. 83). This unscripted series, despite the extensive editing to craft repetitive elements from episode to episode, does not manage to adhere cleanly to such a simple moral message, though. Even when voice-over narration focuses on challenges and regrets, each episode includes significant visual imagery of happy mothers doting on their new babies. As Daniel (2013) notes, the mothers are shown as surviving and relatively thriving. It turns out, school-age parenthood in reality is too complicated to adhere to a single prevention discourse.

How school-age mother identity is constructed across the reality shows, however, is fairly homogenous and reveals that dominant discourses linking race, poverty, and school-age parenting from the 1990s have been replaced with neoliberal discourses that may be just as damaging. Juno’s character would fit much better than Precious or Jasmine from *Unexpected* (2015). As Daniel reports, in the first two seasons of *16 and Pregnant*, twelve of the sixteen young women appear white, and all are portrayed as probably middle-class (2013, p. 82). Similarly, all four women featured on *Teen Mom* are white. As MTV constructs it, school-age parenthood is no longer synonymous with poverty or racial minorities in the way Pillow (2004) and Luker (1997) described. I see this decision as primarily market-driven to appeal to the mainstream audience and advertisers. Murphy (2013) emphasizes that the subjects on screen purposefully reflect the target viewing audience, in hopes of deepening the power of their “prevention” message -- as if saying, she is just like you and got pregnant, so you better be careful! Is this really a shift away from race and class-based stereotypes, or another example of the two-tiers? At least poor, urban mothers are not harshly juxtaposed with middle-class white youth. However, I contend that whitewashing race, culture, and class from these narratives is still damaging. As Margonis and Parker (1995) and Lipman (2011) have argued, “colorblind” neoliberal discourses result in deepening inequities because they leave disparities unexplored.

The identity of the school-age mother constructed by MTV on reality television does not actually reflect reality, in which disproportionate numbers of black and Latina women, particularly in urban areas continue to become school-age parents. I worry that omitting their stories results in women like those in my study becoming further marginalized as a result.

Furthermore, by de-emphasizing economic hardship, MTV avoids any elements of structural critique. The locus of blame and control is placed on the individual women, with some elements of criticism towards parents or “broken homes.” Sisson (2011) discusses how a distorted portrait of reality is painted on *Teen Mom 2*, specifically:

You know what I haven't seen though? Any of the pregnant high schoolers talking about going to WIC and getting on food stamps. Any of the young mothers dealing with the stigma of receiving public benefits. Any stories of the impossible bureaucracy of Medicaid. Really, I haven't seen any discussion of the huge overlap between economic disadvantage and early parenthood at all. There's occasionally a nod to getting financial aid for school, or a brief exclamation of "diapers are expensive!" But there's certainly no real, meaningful exploration of the fact that poverty is the single largest indicator of whether or not a young woman will become a teen mom.

Market-driven discourses avoid talk of poverty and structural inequality, and these television programs are certainly the product of the capitalist market -- MTV has financially benefited from the exploration/exploitation of young parents on-screen. Have school-age mothers as a group benefited from the increased attention to their stories? That is a more complicated question to answer. While the depiction of teenage mothers in popular culture is in some ways becoming more nuanced, realistic, and progressive, such depictions often remain entrenched in dominant discourses.

Silences and narrative gaps: Consent, desire, and choice. Other examples of the shows' complicated relationship to hegemonic discourses center around sexuality, both female sexuality in general and adolescent female sexuality. Discussion of consent is absent. None of

the mothers shown -- at least in the televised version of their stories -- became pregnant through rape, nor do they mention feeling pressure from their partners. A tension exists between this silence, which hints that the young women must have chosen to engage in sexual activities, and the silencing of sexual desire. In 2006, Fine and McClelland noted that a plethora of information about teenage sexuality was available online, but the whole story is not told: "we don't know if she enjoyed it, wanted it, or if she was violently coerced" (p. 300); this perfectly characterizes the portrayal of sexuality in these series as well. In contrast, *Juno* (2007) and *Precious* (2009) both approach consent more directly, albeit without significant emphasis on desire (*Juno* has sex only once).

While other MTV shows helped catapult the discourse of adolescent desire out of the shadows, apparently desire and motherhood must be kept separate. In *Teen Mom* there are subtle references to female desire, but these are only shown in the context of policing by adults. Rather than accept their daughters, who are now mothers, as sexually active, the parents on the show repeatedly set limitations (such as not allowing the child's father to sleep over) or openly espouse abstinence-only beliefs (such as throwing out birth control because it should not be needed). Murphy (2013) concludes from a discursive analysis of the first season that "*Teen Mom* functions as a technology that aids in (re)production of the hegemonic discourse of institutional/patriarchal motherhood" through the emphasis on forgoing selfish desire, including sexual desire, which is already viewed as inappropriate and "dangerous" (p. 35).

Another hegemonic discourse reproduced through these shows is heteronormativity. As Fallas (2013) notes, "Queerness simply does not exist in *Teen Mom* world" (p. 61). I have taught several school-age mothers who identify as lesbian or bisexual, but such examples are apparently too far out of the mainstream for inclusion on television. Marriage is highly valued by all of the characters, just as dominant discourses say it should be. What *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* are missing is "thick desire," as characterized by Fine and McClelland (2006). This framework argues that young people are "entitled to a broad range of desires," which extends

beyond sexuality by situating “sexual well being within structural contexts” (pp. 299-300). Fine and McClelland (2006) link regressive neoliberal policies and discourses with the silencing of “thick desire.”

In line with similar regressive trends regarding reproductive choice, *16 and Pregnant* only featured pregnancies that ended in birth during its regular seasons. However, one special episode was devoted to abortion. Notably, the “No Easy Decision” special was broadcast outside of prime time and not publicized by the network. Gordon (2013) calls it a “positive, feminist, and pro-choice portrayal” (p. 179), and Harris (2010) describes it as “shockingly good.” Three young women were featured, and collectively their stories resulted in a multi-faceted narrative that included discussion of a partner’s emotions, parental restrictions, financial burden, the supportive voice of a clinic counselor, and the natural mixed emotions of the mother. The host, Dr. Drew, referred to abortion as a “parenting decision,” and asserted, “Having an abortion is not uncommon, but talking about it publicly is” (2010). Similarly, neither *Unexpected* (2015) nor *Precious* (2009) deal with abortion as an option at all, while *Juno* (2007) allows it to appear as a choice that the protagonist quickly decides against. I agree with Gordon (2013) and Harris (2010) that for this one segment, MTV does actually counter hegemony in their acknowledgment of reproductive choices.

Unintended consequences? A highly publicized and oft-cited study from the National Bureau of Economic Research (2014) cites *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* as responsible for a reduction in teen births. This was the aim of the show, after all. What I am more interested in is the connection between the popularity of these series and the emergence of the “stigma-is-wrong” discourse into more public domains. I think this relationship is not as simple as increased exposure leading to progress; instead, a few direct and indirect factors were at work. Despite the shaming prevention premise, the mothers featured on these shows actually garnered a level of fame and financial security from their participation, particularly the four stars of *Teen Mom*. The relationship between fame and shame is complicated, but some of the

celebrity status came from “role model” positioning of young women who were focusing on making “good choices” after a mistake, which Kelly (2000) describes as a common framework that adults use when working with teen parents. The similarities between the women featured and the intended audience also encourages some viewers to empathize with the mothers. While the women on-screen espouse primarily prevention discourses, through their actions and their reception by the audience, blame and stigma become less fixed. During the same time, counter-stories and feminist pushback for the series emerged through non-mainstream and social media, from #noteenshame to articles on sites such as Bitch Media, Think Progress, and Vitamin W. When New York City launched a major teen pregnancy prevention campaign in 2013, just a few months before Chicago’s pregnant guy ads, the *New York Times* described backlash and even printed a letter from a former teen mother speaking out against utilizing shame as a prevention tactic.

Taken together, these reality programs and the public noise surrounding them, along with the films about school-age mothers, reveal that the dominant narratives have shifted significantly in the past decade. Rival images of who school-age mothers are, what will become of them, and how they can be helped exist depending on who you ask. Even within groups, such as school-age mothers, feminists, or conservatives, there are competing constructs. However, one point of agreement is the importance of education, particularly achievement of a high school diploma. In the next section, I focus the lens of my analysis on the role and representation of school in the constructions of school-age parenthood, both in popular culture and real life.

School and School-Age Mothers: Tensions of Inclusion, Exclusion, and Accommodation

Capitalizing on MTV’s success, TLC debuted its own reality television series about school-age mothers in 2012. This lesser-known show, *High School Moms*, which only lasted one season, was set in a high school for pregnant and parenting students. The mothers appear more racially and economically diverse than their MTV counterparts, while discourses of choice

and desire are similarly silent. The show itself emphasizes the mothering identities of the students, especially through showing dramatic birth scenes. Unlike the silences about financial strain in *Teen Mom*, one recurring storyline focused on a student's struggle to pay the daycare fee (a sliding-scale based on income). Despite its setting in a high school, the series' relied on presenting tensions between mothering identities and "normal" adolescent identities, rather than specifically student identities. For example, the first two episodes prominently feature preparations for the school's first Prom, which according to the school's principal will make the students "feel special" and "boost their self esteem" (episode 1). A teacher in the second episode explicitly calls Prom a chance for the girls to feel "like regular teenagers for one night;" earlier in the episode, however, a pregnant girl is shown struggling to find a dress that fits over her belly.

High School Moms, in its focus on a separate school, represents one of the competing approaches to educating school-age parents. Although a few schools offer noncurricular options, such as an after school parenting program, primarily schools take one of two dichotomous approaches, which Kelly (2000) refers to as "ghettoizing" vs. "mainstreaming." She explains that schools either view pregnancy as a serious illness that cannot be cured and requires an entirely separate program (ghettoizing), or as a short-term illness that requires no special treatment (mainstreaming). Pillow (2004) describes this dichotomy using the metaphors of "pregnancy as a cold" or "pregnancy as a disease," drawing from the primary discursive models that school policy documents reveal. Pillow (2004), Zellman (1981) and Luttrell (2003) link these two approaches to a racist "two-tiered system" because more affluent and white women tend to be mainstreamed while poor women of color tend to be separated. *High School Moms* shows a racially diverse population in contrast to the predominately white MTV moms who are more likely to attend mainstream settings.

Schools and programs like Florence Crittenton High School in Denver, the setting of *High School Moms*, primarily emerged as a result of Title IX legislation in 1972. Burdell (1998)

notes that between 1972 and 1979, more than 1,000 community-based programs for pregnant and parenting students were established in the United States. The prototype for such programs was the Webster School in Washington, D.C., which was established in response to the tension between wanting to educate pregnant teens and fear that such students might “corrupt the morals of other students” (Luttrell, 2003, p. 16). This tension, which further stigmatizes school-age mothers, frames all separate programs. Even when special programs are housed within traditional high schools, such as the program Luttrell studied (2003), the students tend to remain physically and socially isolated from their peers. Luttrell (2003) discovered that “bad example” discourses were prevalent in both official program documents and the students’ self-perceptions.

Although no longer the norm for pregnant students, nearly all educational research on school-age mothers has focused on separate settings. Separate school programs tend to position students as mothers first and students second, with an emphasis on parenting classes and vocational training (Zellman, 1981; Pillow, 1997). Burdell (1998) theorizes that three hidden curriculums largely shape the school experiences of school-age mothers in segregated settings. Through the formal content, as well as the underlying messages sent by school policies and teachers’ discourses, these programs operate around curriculums of domination, protection, or redemption. Programs or classes that emphasize gendered and limited conceptions of success are often devalued within a larger school system, suffering cuts in funding and lacking the same technology and resources of other classes, thus furthering male domination. Focusing on creating a therapeutic haven (Kelly 2000), a curriculum of protection is characterized by teachers who feel they need to protect their students from undue stress or stigma by creating a nurturing environment; however, according to Burdell (1998), such an approach tends to lack academic rigor and limits participants’ academic and career prospects. A curriculum of redemption formally emphasizes responsibility and utilizes success stories to show young mothers it is possible to “turn their lives around.” Kelly (1998) similarly found that teachers’ main

discourse around school-age parenting is that of “good choices.” Staying silent about class, gender, race, and power, teachers continue to perpetuate the “wrong-girl” frame. Kelly (2000) also found frequent examples of teachers or schools silencing the stories of school-age mothers, such as when students in a parenting program wrote plays about teen pregnancy that ended up being co-opted by the teachers to be prevention stories for non-parenting peers.

Counter to these studies, Hallman (2007 and 2012)’s in-depth studies at a school for pregnant and parenting students present possibilities for how meaningful learning can occur in an alternative setting. She argues that the key to educating students typically marginalized and viewed as “at-risk” is “reassigning” their identity. Specifically, in her 2007 publication, Hallman identifies three salient themes of how to reassign the identity of school-age mothers: “1) positioning the teens as both mothers and students; 2) viewing the school as both a place of learning and a place of community; 3) positioning the young children as both the hope for the future and the hope for their mothers’ future” (p. 80).

High School Moms as a site for analysis. I watched and analyzed all episodes of *High School Moms*, using Burdell and Hallman’s theories as starting frames for my analysis. From the classroom scenes I conclude that the formal curriculum in the content areas is more focused on college preparation than vocational training, in contrast to the findings of pre-2000 research on similar settings. However, a certified nurse’s aid (CNA) training class is shown in one episode, revealing both college and career focused “pathways.” Although little discussion of the school’s academic model was featured, the school’s website states the teachers follow the Denver Public Schools Curriculum. The scenes from English classrooms featured a persuasive speech assignment, an informational presentation on the Dust Bowl with a listening rubric component, a grammar quiz, and an opinionnaire on gender roles. While the formal curriculum contrasts Burdell’s (1998) finding about the unrigorous courses common in separate schools, it does not fully reach Hallman’s (2007) vision as a place where students are positioned as both

students and mothers in the classroom -- only scenes shown from elective classes reveal any interaction between formal curriculum and students' lived experience as mothers.

When the teachers were shown in "talking head" clips, they emphasized the social-emotional emphasis of the school, and classes such as Leadership, Future Choices, and Art Therapy are shown. The school nurse also organizes small group meetings, such as one for pregnant students approaching their due dates. I consider the school an example of what Kelly (2000) calls a "therapeutic haven," but without the limited discourses around "good mothering" that she describes; rather, Florence Crittenton appears to achieve Hallman's (2007) goal of serving as a space for both learning and community. The students refer to their teachers by their first names, and the principal, who seems to know all of the students by name, circulates the lunchroom each day to chat with students. Drama is reserved for the individual struggles of the students, rather than problems with school culture or between the staff. While most of the student-teacher interactions are positive, or at least focused on students' "potential," one prominent storyline features a student named Londisha who finds the work "boring" and does not get along with her teachers. She offers a critique that the school "tries to help too much," revealing a tension that can come from a hidden curriculum of protection. However, Carla, who is portrayed as a star student, states that she does not want to graduate and leave because of the supportive environment. This praise hints at a potential problem with the "therapeutic haven" approach, that students may rely too much on the supports and struggle on their own. Even a teacher articulates this concern at the beginning of episode five: "If you can't make it here with the immense amount of support that this school provides, how are you going to make it out there?"

In addition to protection discourses, redemption discourses also characterize much of the hidden curriculum of the school and framing of the series. A student named Amber explicitly states that she is going to "stop the cycle" of teen parenthood in her family. The teachers, however, focus more on what I would characterize as "resilience" than "good choices." This

makes sense to me contextually, as resilience discourses have emerged as mainstream in the past few years (McGreavy, 2015), and *High School Moms* is more contemporary than the research of Burdell (1998), Kelly (2000), or even Hallman (2007). Multiple times, teachers state a variation of being “inspired by what these girls have overcome.” The series concludes with graduation, including scenes from the speeches of the class valedictorian and salutatorian, both of whom lost family members within the past year and reference these deaths in their speeches. As Pillow (2004) observed in her research and I saw with my students, the lives of young mothers are often shaped as much by trauma and violence as they are by motherhood. While a softer and less moralistic discourse than redemption, an emphasis on resilience can easily get tied up with neoliberal discourses that emphasize individual achievement while ignoring the structural implications.

Similarly, *High School Moms* primarily avoids any contextualization of the school or students’ experiences within the larger web of political, historical, and community discourses on school-age parents and education. There is no discussion of students’ previous high schools, nor of their perception of the school’s larger reputation. The one exception is the Prom storyline, particularly in the second episode, when the principal describes for the camera (rather than to the students) the response to a Denver Post article about the school’s first Prom: “There has been negative comments made from people out in the community, going, ‘Why are there girls getting a Prom? They should just be focusing on their education.’ They forget that they’re teenagers, and they should have fun things in their lives.” While the students do not discuss this backlash, this moment hints that there are untold layers of their experience at this school, relating to larger dominant discourses around stigma and even domination. The students on *High School Moms* may be receiving a far better education than other school-age mothers around the country or from previous decades, but by attending a separate school their experience still in some ways reflect the “pregnancy as a disease” metaphor and its limitations.

Mainstreaming and media portrayals. Although separate programs were the norm for decades, recently many of these programs have been dissolved or de-funded. While some educational programs faced criticism in line with Burdell's (1998) findings about a lack of rigor, others have been closed simply due to budget constraints, such as highly-regarded Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit, which closed in 2014 despite high graduation and college acceptance rates and national advocacy from organizations and individuals, including Rachel Maddow (Wells, 2014). For better or worse, a majority of school-age parents now attend schools without special programs catering to pregnant or parenting students (Coffel, 2011). For many students, pregnancy does not lead to a change in schools at all, with some mainstream schools, particularly in urban areas, now even offering daycare. Very little educational research has focused on students' experiences in these mainstream schools, though. A confounding factor is the lack of data kept by states on pregnancy, parenting, and education. I look to examples from reality television, news media, and memoirs to fill in gaps in the existing body of educational research.

In the book version of *The Pregnancy Project*, Gaby Rodriguez (2012) aptly summarizes a primary theme of my findings: "What I felt was that pregnancy was stealing my entire identity. All anyone wanted to talk about was the baby. It was like I was just a human incubator now" (p. 126). As previously discussed, pregnant bodies garner significant attention and stigma. Pillow (2004) claims they do not *fit* in school. From well-intentioned questions and comments about the pregnancy, such as those shown on *16 and Pregnant* in scenes at Maci's accelerated school, to outright criticism from teachers, as Rodriguez experienced second-hand, pregnant students in particular face a barrage of attention focused entirely on one aspect of their identities. No wonder a student in the first episode of *High School Moms* asserted, "You can come here and not be judged and not be looked at negatively." At the same time, peers and even teachers can also be supportive, even going beyond "redemption" discourses to counter stigma entirely. For example, Rodriguez's leadership advisor told her, "I don't know why you can't be a leader and a

teen mom" (2012, p. 105). Several examples of national news stories, however, focus on school officials taking a position opposite of that advisor. As Kelly (2000) discusses, in 1998 an Ohio high school student was dismissed from her school's chapter of the National Honor Society because she was a mother. Similarly, Rodriguez (2012) ends her book with the story of mother Kimberly Wymberly, whose grade point average made her valedictorian, but was forced to share the honor. While legally protected from exclusion from educational settings, these students' stories support Pillow's (2004) assertion that school-age mothers remain discriminated against. Discourses of morality or even deviance dominate school responses to these events, with assertions about not condoning such behavior. It seems that even when treating pregnancy as a cold on the surface, discourses of disease can still characterize decisions.

Other policy -- or lack of policy -- examples that receive less attention can be equally damaging. In her journalistic account of a cohort of first-year Teach for America teachers, Donna Foote (2008) describes how special education teacher Rachelle questions how the "smart, streetwise" girls in her third period class ended up in special education, noting that three were mothers and a fourth was pregnant (p. 4). Foote (2008) does not give further comment, but I immediately took note and wondered how often schools misuse special education as a way to deal with school-age parents. In the one in-depth study of inclusive schooling for school-age mothers, Kelly (2000) found that in a school with a separate "pull-out program," the teachers viewed parenting students as less academically strong than their peers and in need of remediation, ignoring the great range of academic abilities in the non-parenting population. A possible link occurs with absences related to childbirth and the lack of support offered for keeping students caught up academically. In her memoir *Life After Birth: A Memoir of Survival and Success as a Teenage Mother* (2010), Summer Owens describes her six weeks of homebound instruction following the birth of her child as worthless, in which a teacher simply dropped off worksheets and offered no instruction or help. Her school had no clear policies about make-up work accommodations, so she had to make plans with each individual teacher.

In Kelly's (2000) study, the administrator in charge of placing mothers in regular education classes focused on handpicking teachers who would be more accommodating to the students, rather than attempting to implement a schoolwide policy on absences.

LouAnne Johnson's teaching memoirs offer examples of a teacher's perspective on pregnant and parenting students. *My Posse Don't Do Homework* (1992) and its film portrayal, *Dangerous Minds* (1995) include the triumphant narrative of Shamica, who returns to finish her senior year after giving birth and spending some time at an alternative setting. In contrast, Johnson's second Book, *The Girls at the Back of the Class* (1995) includes the story of Blanca: "A beautiful sixteen year-old with shining ebony hair and an irresistible smile, Blanca had earned very good grades before she had her baby, but afterward her grades dropped out of sight. She put up such a good front that I didn't realize her spirits had dropped along with her grades until I read her journal" (Johnson, 1995, p. 233). Since the publication of this book, Postpartum Depression (PPD) has gained widespread publicity, thanks in part to celebrities such as Brooke Shields and Gwyneth Paltrow sharing their stories. What Johnson is referring to, without naming it, is a student suffering from PPD that has gone untreated. Although possible in any setting, I wonder if PPD is more likely to go unnoticed in settings without special services for school-age mothers, with teachers assuming a lack of sleep or juggling of responsibilities has caused a decline in grades, attendance, and mood.

By pointing out these potential problems with inclusive environments, I do not intend to argue that separate schools are better. Separate schools have been researched, analyzed, and theorized with much more depth than inclusive settings. My goal in synthesizing different personal and media narratives is to begin to shed light on an under-studied phenomenon. While I acknowledge that many school-age mothers manage to graduate on time and maintain grades similar to before giving birth, in general schools are overlooking -- at the best -- and stigmatizing and hindering -- at the worst -- a whole group of students. As Pillow (2004) notes, educators have not been involved in national policy about school-age pregnancy and parenthood; I am

interested in changing that and believe that a necessary step is uncovering and theorizing the experiences of school-age mothers in a range of settings. Possible legislative changes are on the horizon that would increase the numbers of school-age mothers who continue their education at the school where they are already enrolled, such as The Pregnant and Parenting Students Access to Education Act, introduced in 2013. There is also momentum to include school-age parents in family leave policies, and New Mexico has already passed a statewide excused absence policy for pregnant and parenting students.

Conclusion: Reconceptualizing school for mothers

While researchers from the turn of the twenty-first century focused on the dichotomy of approaches to school-age parenthood, I posit a third model, which is inclusive but not traditional. My study is situated in a school like the one in *Precious* or shown on some episodes of *16 and Pregnant*: an alternative school more broadly focused on “at-risk” youth. Such schools can focus on credit-recovery (or even accelerating credit earning, such as in Maci’s case on *16 and Pregnant*) or raising grade levels for GED completion. While the school of my study follows a traditional six-period day with rotating classes, alternative settings are increasingly independent or even online-focused, with students in one classroom all day working at their own pace. Although larger data sets have yet to quantify this fact, the examples I have seen support that higher concentrations of pregnant and parenting students attend these alternative settings than mainstream, comprehensive high schools. Wells’s (2014) report on the charter school that replaced Catherine Ferguson Academy further supports the increasing popularity of alternative charters that focus on “at-risk” youth. The work of Lycke (2010) and Coffel (2011) similarly focus on school-age mothers from alternative schools that are not just for pregnant and parenting students, while both researchers focus on literacy practices outside of school. The story of how and why these mothers end up at such settings are variable and complicated, with some choosing alternative schools before becoming parents and others enrolling in response to lost credits and attendance concerns after delivery. My study offers a glimpse into the lives of a few

school-age mothers in such a setting, but I believe that more educational research in general needs to explore alternative schools and programs to investigate the ways in which these settings are serving and not serving the needs of non-mainstream students.

Regardless of the type of school setting, the strongest research finding in relation to school-age parenthood is that becoming a parent increases students' motivation for completing school. Luker (1997) asserts that pregnancy and parenthood does not cause young women to drop out of high schools; rather, students who are disengaged in school are more likely to become parents. Supporting this claim, Zachry's (2005) study of youth enrolled in a teen parenting program found that seven of nine participants reported having little interest in school before becoming pregnant, and all participants said pregnancy or childbirth increased their interest in education. Additionally, the working class women Coffel (2011) interviewed all dropped out of school before becoming pregnant, but returned after giving birth. This theme is prevalent in the popular culture examples of school-age parenthood, too: On *Teen Mom*, Amber says she has to get her GED for her daughter; On *High School Moms*, two different students state on-camera that their children are the reason they're in school; one student on *High School Mom* asserts on the fifth episode, "They think we won't make it because we're teen moms, but I think I wouldn't have made it otherwise."

What troubles me in this motivation discourse is the emphasis on a single item, the high school diploma, and the lack of exploration about why it matters or what is learned in the process. On the reality shows, school is positioned as a highly valued burden: scenes of mothers struggling to complete schoolwork at home while their young children cry or physically disturb them and their workspaces alongside voice-overs about how important school is. As I watched dozens of reality television episodes, I could not find a single example of a student reading for pleasure, discussing a school topic outside of the classroom, or even using online literacy skills to search for practical information. Just as sexual desire is presented as one-dimensional, so too is educational desire. Where is the "thick desire" for learning? In a majority

of educational research on school-age mothers, it is only asked if a young woman graduated, not what she learned, what her subject was, or what she is curious about. Despite the ways *Precious* (2009) perpetuates some dominant discourses, I appreciate how it connects increasing literacy with increasing independence and intellectual curiosity. In this way, it is a rare counter-example to the simplistic conception of educational motivation. I realize that school-age mothers are not unique in this regard, and that it could be explained as Whitney (2011) conceives as a longstanding problem with “the schoolishness of school,” or as Means (2011) has argued as a result of neoliberal school policies and discourses that frame school around marketplace value. However, the narrow gaze of the reality television producer and even the educational researcher has produced a limited vision of what success looks like for a school-age mother.

Expanding this vision, however, is tricky. School-age mothers are a heterogeneous group, as Kelly (2000) asserts. Their needs are “leaky,” in that they are neither just economic or family issues, but rather reveal the superficial separation between in-school and out-of-school (Lesko, 1995). While a monolithic narrative no longer characterizes the dominant stereotypes of who these young women are, school policies are difficult to differentiate for individuals. Rather than focus on the macro level, such as national legislation or districtwide programs, in my study I zoom my lens all the way in to one classroom with four school-age mothers as students in an attempt to uncover implications for how an individual classroom teacher might enact curriculum that counters hegemonic discourses of school-age motherhood and accounts for thick educational desire.

Chapter 3: Identity, Positioning, and the Story of One Classroom

February 5, *First day of class and first observation.*

It's the first day of the spring semester, which at WAC means students have entirely different schedules than the previous term, and some students may be brand new to the school. As I enter Ms. Price's room, I glance into the classroom across the hall, which was mine for six years. Since I packed up my books and personal artifacts the previous June, I have been back at WAC just once, to talk with Ms. Price and administrators about my plans to conduct research. I feel strangely out of place as I slip into a chair at the back of the classroom with my laptop in hand.

The temperature was around 0 this morning when students would have gotten up for school. The hallways are quieter and less crowded than usual, and I'm told that attendance is down. Yet, Ms. Price's third period English class has 19 of 20 students present. The room feels crowded, like it's reached comfort capacity. Students sit at long tables, mostly three to a table, all facing the front. I only see one face I recognize among the students.

I notice right away that this is a mostly female class. Only 4 male students are present, and I will only hear the voices of two of these males during the course of the class period. One sleeps for nearly the whole period, and another speaks only quietly with the student sitting closest to him. Like the school as a whole, the students are all black. Ms. Price seems to know all, or nearly all of them, already. She takes attendance by sight, saying a few names aloud and scanning the faces, then nodding when she finds the student. While most of the students sit quietly, a female in the front corner of the room playfully engages with Ms. Price: "You knew you couldn't get through the morning without me as your student. I bet you were so relieved when you saw my name on that sheet," she says when Ms. Price gets to her name. Ms. Price looks at me and says with a laugh, "This is Ebony. You'll hear from her a lot because she's a loudmouth and a bug." Ebony responds with a smile, "Ah, you know you love me."

Ms. Price is wearing snow boots, slim khakis, and a school hoodie. She is a black woman who looks younger than her thirty years. Four minutes into the period, after finishing attendance and taking a student to the registrar for a schedule question, she stands near the classroom door, with all the student chairs oriented facing the opposite direction and begins: "For those who don't know me, my name is Ms. Price. This is an English class, titled Power & Identity. There are only 2-3 things we're going to do today. It's a light day. You won't get many days off, but we will get started on Monday." She passes out a syllabus with another teacher's name on it, explaining that this class used to be taught by someone else, but "there wasn't really need to change it." She says the only real changes are the readings. "We're not going to read Antigone and that, but we will read The Coldest Winter Ever."

Somehow nearly 10 minutes pass of teacher talk, with Ms. Price going over the syllabus and her expectations. The students are quiet, but I notice that only Ebony and two or three other students are looking at her while she speaks. She also has me introduce myself and pass out my informed consent form. When some faces indicate skepticism, Ms. Price assures the class, "You know I wouldn't set you up for something shady." Her conversational style and tone throughout the period is this way -- familiar. In addition to standard proofreading posters, her classroom walls feature a few handmade posters that show her personality, such as a "No More Shortys!!!" sign urging longer written responses. She and Ebony, Calvin, and Charles playfully tease each other throughout the period. I hear the first, "I love you Miss Price," halfway through the period from Charles. I expect to hear this as a refrain throughout my visits.

Other than going over the syllabus, the only other activity for the first class period is a handout of seven open-ended questions that students complete individually and then discuss as a class. When Ebony states she does not know what to do, Ms. Price reassures her, "This is your opinion. This is all you. There's no right or wrong answer." The questions, written by the same teacher as the syllabus, deal broadly with notions of identity and power.

The first reference to parenting occurs at 10:50, 19 minutes into the first day of class. The second question on the handout asks, "What hats do you wear?" and when a female student asks for clarification, Ms. Price responds, "Like are you a mother, a sister, etcetera." When the students volunteer to share their answers, Ebony reads her list of hats: "Mother, sister, daughter." I am elated to learn that Ebony is a mother, thinking to myself that she is exactly the kind of engaged student I pictured for my study. I also learn that Charles is a parent when he tells the class he is "bipolar" because "sometimes I love my babymama, and sometimes I hate her ass." Other than a chuckle and "ok," Ms. Price moves on from this comment.

During the class discussion, Calvin is the most vocal. I find out after class that three mothers were present, noting that all three took part in dialogue (along with only three non-parenting students). Race and class both come up, particularly in relation to power, as Gloria notes that "white people have the power" and Ebony mentions that poor people want power. Calvin makes the fourth reference to parenting. When Ms. Price asks about the difference between wants and needs, he responds, "Let's say your baby needs some Pampers, but you want to get high. If you don't buy the Pampers and just buy the weed, you're like damn, now I'm out of Pampers." The whole class laughs, and Ms. Price, also laughing, says, "You're all laughing, but it's true." Ebony asks Calvin if he has kids, to which he responds, "Nah."

There is one other reference to parenting, and it's a longer exchange initiated by Ms. Price. When talking about wants and needs, Ms. Price brings up the new governor and mentions that he just cut the Daycare Action Council, which supports "young mothers who need daycare to go back to school."

Ms. Price: What are we going to do now? You know how important daycare is. And now we have this new governor, and he's a multimillionaire. And that's his identity, and it's going to affect how he runs the office.

Gloria: *It's these young people who have kids who didn't vote, and then the wrong person ends up in office.*

Ms. Price: *And if his personal values don't line up with ours, he's going to make decisions we don't agree with.*

Ebony: *He's like, I got a babysitter for my child. I don't care if this young mother don't have a babysitter for her kid.*

Ms. Price: *What's going to happen to this mom?*

Ebony: *She's going to drop out of school, and you can't get a job without a high school diploma, or if you're 16 or 17. That's why a lot of girls drop out of school, they can't take care of their babies, and they don't have help.*

Rhea: *I agree.*

With that dialogue, the class ends. There are still two minutes until the bell, but Ms. Price collects the papers and the whole class discussion is done.

Project Overview: An Ethnography of School-Age Parents and High School English

Beginning with this first day of class, I spent thirty-one hours observing Ms. Price's third period Spring semester English class. I was present for one-half of class meetings, typically Tuesdays and Thursdays (the class did not meet on Fridays). Through a qualitative case study approach that utilized ethnographic observations, interviews, and document collection, I explored school-age parents' experiences in this English class, particularly investigating the relationship between their parenting identities and student identities in a classroom. As in the opening vignette of this chapter, I also approached my study from a narrative orientation, relying on telling stories to make meaning. I look to stories, both those that unfolded during my observations and those told during interviews, to understand and analyze who school-age parents are, how they see themselves, and how that matters in the classroom. A more detailed overview of my data collection and analysis are included as Appendix A

In this chapter, I introduce my subjects, setting, and research process. I also introduce my framework for identity and focus on how school-age parents navigated their identities within the classroom, specifically through classroom talk data. My initial guiding question was: When, and in what ways, do school-age parents position themselves as parents within the classroom? For example, how do school-age parents make their parenting status visible? How and when

do they refer to their parenting experiences? When, and in what ways, are school-age parents positioned as such by others? Additional research questions and data sources will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Site overview. The site for my study, Westside Alternative Center* (WAC), is one of twenty campuses of a large umbrella of alternative charter schools in a major Midwestern city. WAC existed, however, before the charter school movement began. It was established in the late 1970s as an adult literacy program that granted GEDs. In 1995, it became accredited to give high school diplomas, making it an official alternative high school. Officially considered “dropout recovery,” WAC enrolls students who are 17 to 21 years old with at least 8 high school credits. I have come to think of the students as simply “over-age and under-credit” because the “dropout” label is misleading. Some students come to WAC after being out of school for a while, or being incarcerated, but for many there is no gap in school enrollment. They come to WAC because they have been kicked out, forced out, or chosen to leave other schools. As noted in chapter 2, WAC represents an increasingly common but under-studied type of school: alternative but not focused only on pregnant and parenting students. WAC does not have the trappings of a typical high school: there are no lockers, gym, or auditorium. There are also no metal detectors, in contrast to most local public schools. Six of the seven classrooms are in one hallway, which gets very crowded during the three minute passing period. As a school focused on credit recovery, only core classes are offered: English, math, social studies, and science.

The student population is constantly in flux, with students graduating every semester and new students enrolling every quarter. Some students attend for just one semester and graduate; others enroll with few credits and spend two or more years taking classes. Students must live within city limits to enroll, and a majority live in the neighborhoods closest to the school. Reflective of the surrounding community area, nearly all students are black and qualify for free or reduced lunch (as an indicator of socioeconomic status). WAC’s students come from many different high schools, including public, charter, and other alternative schools. In 2004 the

largest public high school in the nearby community was closed as a “failing school” and replaced with three specialized small schools, all of which have struggled to maintain enrollment. Two other nearby high schools became turn-arounds, meaning that all faculty and staff were replaced, and the school was taken over by a non-profit management company. Of the high schools within 1.5 miles of WAC, the average ACT composite score is around 14.5, fewer than 10% of students met college-readiness standards on the past several years of state exams, five-year graduation rates are below 60%, and the out-of-school suspension rates are four to five times higher than the district average. All of this is to say that WAC’s students primarily come from unstable, under-performing schools. The student populations are nearly all-black and all low-income at these schools, a reflection of a segregated school system in a segregated city.

Although neither WAC nor the local district (or any educational bodies) keep official statistics on school-age parents, there are always a significant number of school-age parents enrolled. In previous semesters when I taught at WAC, over one-third of my students were parents. The social worker estimates that between 25-30% of students during the semester of my research project had children. Local data reveals that the school’s neighborhood has the second-highest adolescent birth rate in the city, with 21.4% of births to mothers ages 15-19 (Bocksay, Harper-Jemison, Clark, Paik, & Jones, 2012). There is no formalized parenting program in place, although the school social worker meets with many school-age parents to offer assistance and emotional support. The student services coordinator completes attendance paperwork for many of the mothers who receive government daycare funds as long as they are enrolled in school. In previous semesters the social worker and another teacher organized a monthly lunch group for mothers, but the group did not meet during the 2014-2015 school year.

Participants. Ms. Price’s third period class is representative of the school, with five school-age parents (4 mothers and 1 father) and one pregnant student enrolled at the beginning of the semester among the class of twenty. Rather than grade or ability levels, all of WAC’s

English classes are mixed-ability and mixed-credit level electives organized around themes; as Ms. Price explained to the class, this course was about “Power and Identity.” This was Ms. Price’s sixth year at WAC (and eighth year as a teacher overall). I was her colleague for five years, frequently collaborating on school-wide initiatives and co-teaching a two-period class for one semester. Although we did not socialize outside of school functions, we were friendly and shared stories about our lives beyond school. Ms. Price has two sons, a two year old and a fourteen year old; she gave birth in high school but never explicitly positioned herself as a school-age mother to the students. During the semester of this study she was engaged to be married to the father of her youngest son.

The four school-age mothers were selected as focal case study participants, which involved collection of all written work for the semester, interviews, and extra attention in my field notes. Here I will give a brief introduction to each young woman, focusing primarily on their school histories and responses to the first day handout. Unless otherwise noted, they live with their children in their mother’s household.

Name (Pseudonym)	Age, Number & Age of Child(ren)	Answer to Question 1 on the 1st day handout: “What makes up your identity?”
Ebony	18 1 son - nearly 1 years old	Me being me, smart, respectful, loving, fun.
Gloria	18 1 son - 6 months old at the beginning of the study	I’m a lovely person in the inside but I have a brick wall up on the outside. When I love, I love hard and I care about a lot of people until you show me different.
Mercedes	19 1 daughter - 1 years old	I’m a quiet to myself person. I’m interested in mostly everything.
Candace	21 1 daughter - 5 years old 1 son - 2 years old	*Did not complete

Ebony. On the first day of class, Ebony was the first student to share any answers from her survey and the first to position herself publicly as a mother. Ebony told me that she had

always been a good student, missing very few days of school during her pregnancy, staying caught up through homebound instruction after her delivery in April of 2014, and always receiving honor roll recognition. Before enrolling at WAC, she attended a large public high school about 2 hours away in another state. Over the summer, her mother decided they should move to have additional help from family members with the baby. She and her child's father kept in touch but broke up during the move. She enrolled at WAC in the fall of 2014 and had enough credits to take a half-day schedule, planning to graduate "on time" in the spring ("on time" indicating with the cohort she started first grade with).

As Ms. Price indicated in her playful banter on the first day, Ebony is well-liked by the staff and students. I saw evidence of her being "respectful, loving, and fun," as she described. She is further profiled at the end of this chapter.

Gloria. Gloria is the youngest and newest mother from this study. On the first day of class, she did not position herself as a mother publicly, but she did speak of her child frequently throughout the term. Her son was born during the beginning of the fall semester, just before she turned 18. She and her child's father, an established rapper, broke up a few months before her son's birth. Before she knew she was pregnant, she was kicked out of her neighborhood public school for fighting and attended a suburban high school during most of her pregnancy. She "dropped out" because she was embarrassed about the pregnancy and tired of the negative comments from her new classmates, such as "a baby bump isn't a good look on you." She told me that prior to getting pregnant she was "always fighting and getting arrested," but she stopped "all that" as soon as she found out about the pregnancy. She began attending WAC, where her older sister graduated from two years prior, just a few weeks before her son's birth. She earned all her credits from first semester, managing to stay caught up despite taking off "around 4-5 weeks" after delivery. Despite not finishing the second semester of her junior year, Gloria was set to graduate "on time" through the credit recovery of WAC.

Gloria loves to make people laugh, is not afraid to speak her mind, and looks like a model. I saw glimpses of the “lovely person in the inside,” despite her focus on putting up a “brick wall.” Her story forms the frame for Chapter 7.

Mercedes. Mercedes was present on the first day of class and participated in some whole-group sharing, without explicitly positioning herself as a parent. She did speak of her child, as well as her child’s father, frequently during the rest of the semester. When Mercedes became pregnant, she was a strong student at a strict charter school with a reputation for academic rigor. She failed a few classes for the first time after the spring birth of her daughter, and when researching schools she realized that if she transferred to WAC she would not need to take summer school classes; in fact, because WAC requires fewer credits to graduate than her school did, she only needed to attend for one semester. Mercedes opted to take the fall semester off and planned to graduate “on time” in the spring of 2015. The father of her child also attended WAC; they were still in a relationship, and he seemed to stay at her house frequently.

Mercedes is mature and academically skilled. Despite describing herself as quiet, she and I liked to exchange stories of our daughters and their development. She is profiled in more depth in the introduction to Chapter 6.

Candace. Candace was the only student absent on the first day of class. She is the oldest case study participant and the only participant with multiple children. Both of her children are from a seven year relationship that recently ended. The father of her children graduated from WAC the previous year and was my student. WAC is the fourth high school Candace has attended. During her first pregnancy she was attending a suburban high school and transferred to an alternative school for pregnant students for one semester. When she gave birth to her second child, she dropped out of another suburban high school and stayed out of school for two years. She enrolled at WAC in the fall of 2014, prompted by terms of a probationary sentence. She did not earn any credits in the fall, telling me it was due to transportation issues caused by

her ex-boyfriend destroying her car. She has been told she has to pass her classes this semester to be allowed to re-enroll and graduate next year before turning 22 (which is the eligibility cut-off for granting a diploma). During this semester, her children are living away from her for the first time. While she lives with her sister, her two children are living with her mother. I do not know the specific custody details of her situation, but Candace tells me this arrangement is temporary, until she gets “stable.”

Candace is a strong reader, thoughtful debater, and skilled code-switcher; I sincerely hope she gets “stable” soon, however she means it. She is more fully described in Chapter 5.

A note on participant selection. Although I was originally open to pregnant students, mothers, and fathers, only students who were already mothers became the focus of this study. The omission of pregnant students resulted from chance and timing. On the first day of class, one student self-identified as pregnant in conversation with Ms. Price. Although I initially gained her consent as a case study, she miscarried early in the term, and I opted not to include her. Another student self-identified as pregnant after the halfway point of the semester, but a week later she stopped attending school to care for her ill mother. One more mother, Brianna, joined the class after the halfway point (WAC occasionally enrolls additional students to maintain funding quotas). She is referenced but not included as a focal case study.

While I initially gained consent from Charles, the class’s only fathering student, to collect his written materials and potentially conduct an interview, I decided not to focus on him for several reasons. I worried that a representative sample of just one father was too limited. This particular father had a great sense of humor and a calm demeanor. He also had a learning disability, was on house arrest, and had limited involvement with his child. Ms. Price described him as “shrinking” when surrounded by the academically stronger students in the class, and his class participation after the first day was very limited. Charles and other school-age fathers deserve a study that shows their heterogeneous range of circumstances and experiences, and I did not feel that this study and participant population was adequate for this purpose.

Role of the researcher. As a former teacher at WAC and former colleague of Ms. Price, I was neither fully an insider or outsider in this researching setting. I brought an understanding of the student population, school culture, policies, staff, and English curriculum into this study. This insider knowledge meant I did not have to spend additional time getting to know how things work at the school or learning about the school's surrounding community. To the students, however, I was primarily an outsider. Within the focal class, only one student attended WAC during the previous school year when I was a teacher. Calvin was my student in one class, but he stopped attending during the term and did not pass any of his classes. During my time as a researcher, we never spoke of his time in my class, but at the end of the semester I did praise him for the turnaround in his attendance and participation.

Calvin did test my new role during the second class session. He told me another student called him a "bitch," and I redirected him to Ms. Price. I was never looked to as a source of discipline again. Students saw me as a possible assistant, though. Ebony in particular asked for my help and even called me her "little helper lady" when she could not remember my name. Because most class periods were spent in whole-group discussion or whole-group read alouds, my helping role was more limited than I anticipated it would be. I took part in some class discussions, but a majority of my time was spent in the back of the classroom, furiously taking notes. The students did not seem bothered by my presence but also did not actively engage with me.

My relationships with the case study participants were more involved than with the rest of the class, but there was always more distance between us than I expected. Despite conducting interviews, I do not feel as if I know these four young women any better than I would if they had been students in my classroom. I can cite their inconsistent attendance, as well as limited interactions to engage during class time, as partial causes. I also acknowledge that I was more hesitant to initiate interactions than I would have been as their teacher. I was always conscious of my potential to be seen as an intruder or voyeur, especially because I was

primarily interested in stories related to a stigmatized identity. In future research projects, I might add another layer of interaction, such as organizing a lunchtime book club for mothers, similar to Coffel's (2011) study, or including a home visit component.

Although I saw her the fewest times and found her story to be the most complicated, I actually felt the closest to Candace. When we first met, she immediately told me that she knew all about me, stating, "My ex sure loved you;" he was my student for two classes the previous year. Although their break-up was hostile, her perception of me was positive, so we had instant rapport that did not exist with the other students in the class. She also capitalized on my knowledge of her ex-boyfriend to explain things to me, like this description of her daughter: "Well, you know how her daddy is. So of course she's smart, but has an attitude already." She initiated interactions with me that were friendly, not just related to questions about an assignment. She especially liked telling me which celebrities and movie characters I reminded her of (Anne Hathaway and "the brunette from *Sex in the City*").

Despite our history as colleagues and even co-teachers, Ms. Price never really positioned me as anything other than an observer. She did not ask for feedback on her teaching or for advice about upcoming lessons, nor did she ask questions about my study or findings. In return, I never offered evaluative feedback, positive or constructive. Whenever asked about my project from other teachers or staff at WAC, I usually said something along the lines of, "I'm not sure what I'm finding out, but it's interesting."

Initial researcher reflections. I became quite fond of this class, and it was Ms. Price's favorite of the term. Like the first day, there were never any classroom management concerns, and the students had strong rapport with Ms. Price. The class could hold an engaged, civilized yet lively discussion that spanned a whole class period. They looked forward to coming to the class because of the discussions they would have, and Ms. Price often let them lead the conversation without attempting to steer them back to her lesson plan. Ms. Price told me the class was her most mature, which she attributed to the strong female presence, especially the

mothers. The first day of class was representative of the thirty-one observations in some key ways, such as the active role of the mothers and the majority of class time spent on dialogue. However, attendance was much higher on the first day than any other class session.

Before I entered Ms. Price's classroom that first day, I knew that any study involving humans, particularly adolescents, would be messy because teenagers are unpredictable, constantly changing, and still in the process of becoming. Based on my experience at WAC, I also expected that there might be responsibilities and even tragedies outside of school which might impact attendance and limit some of my data. I also anticipated that a study situated in another teacher's classroom would sometimes make me wish I could revise the lesson plan or jump in and take over instruction. These tensions are nearly unavoidable in studies like mine. However, qualitative research, particularly of the narrative orientation, allows for meaning to exist in the questions, contradictions, and gaps of the stories. In the next section I return to the story of the first day of class to begin unpacking how parenting, race, class, sexuality, and ability Discourses shape identities and classroom experiences.

Identity Positions in Third Period: Motherhood in Classroom Talk

In the "Power and Identity" course, the first question Ms. Price asked students was about their identity. In doing so, she established her classroom as a site of identity work. I believe that schools are sites of identity construction, even when the questions asked are less direct than Ms. Price's. By "identity work," I mean those psychological and cultural processes individuals use to classify themselves as similar to or different from others in order to define themselves. These processes are both internal and external, such as decisions regarding speech, gesture, and dress (Gee, 2001). Literacy practices, including the act of writing responses to Ms. Price's question and discussing answers aloud, also offer windows into these internal negotiations. As originally conceptualized by Vygotsky, sociocultural theories view literacy and identity as linked through language. Finders (1997) describes this relationship: "Speech mediates thought, which is a product of social interrelationships, a dialectic between self and community" (p. 9). This

dialectic is conceptualized through Discourses in the work of Gee (2001), who asserts that identity is constructed through employing particular Discourses within social interactions. As I will explore in my data, this emphasis on Discourses (with a capital D to differentiate it from linguistics) explains why being a school-age parent does not have one static meaning; rather, school-age parents are constantly defining and being defined by others through their social interactions.

I am interested in identity because I believe who students are and how they define themselves matters in classrooms. I agree with Hallman (2007) that for teachers, understanding students' identities is necessary in order to design curriculum and evaluate instruction that best serves students' needs, particularly marginalized or "at-risk" students. As a researcher, considering students' identities helps me make sense of the choices they make in speech, behavior, and writing. Particularly in this study, I see consideration of identity as essential because regardless of whether presented as a shift, rupture, transformation, or added layer, becoming a mother impacts a woman's sense of self or identity. In conversation with McCarthy, Moje (2002) explains, "Links between identity or self and consciousness have been well articulated by philosophers and psychologists alike....Because it seems that selfhood and identity are linked, and because mind and consciousness (as socially constructed) have something to do with learning and using literacy, we can argue that identity and literacy are linked in important ways" (p. 228). If becoming a parent affects identity, then it also affects consciousness, which in turn relates to learning and literacy. This relationship is at the heart of my study.

In response to the question, "What makes up your identity?" the focal participants focused on individual personality traits, such as Mercedes's self-description as a "quiet to myself person" that align with with Gee (2000) would refer to as a "core identity," meaning that they are true across contexts. The second question about their "hats" suggests that an individual has a variety of possible identities to draw from at any time and begins to conceptualize identity as a

multifaceted construct in line with Gee's (2001) notion of "identity kits" or the toolbox metaphor of Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014a). The students primarily focused on their *personalities* for question one and their *roles* for question two. I am interested in the relationship between these roles and personalities, looking to conceptualize identity in a way that considers both individual subjectivities and larger Discourses/institutional forces.

Ms. Price never offered a definition of *identity*, and her students never asked for one. Similarly, Moje and Luke (2009) note that literacy researchers routinely fail to define and unpack their definition of identity. The wide use of this term seems to assume a common definition, but Moje and Luke (2009) contend that five different metaphors are common for conceptualizing identity: difference, self, mind, narrative, and position. To summarize, identity-as-difference studies focus on group membership, such as racial or ethnic groups, and the comparison of groups; identity-as-self studies are concerned with how selves come to be, often viewing self-formation as a result of social interaction; identity-as-mind or consciousness studies take an existential approach and view activity, consciousness, and reality as dialectical processes; identity-as-narrative studies argue that identities are constructed through the stories people tell about their lives; and identity-as-position studies focus on the ways that individuals accept or resist the labels placed upon them. Underlying all of these conceptions are assumptions that identities are constantly shifting and inextricably linked to context (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014b; Gee, 2001).

It would be easy to assume that studies of school-age parents tend to follow the "identity as difference" metaphor, focusing on what makes school-age parents different from their non-parenting peers. This perspective, however, is not currently the most common -- nor in my opinion, the most productive -- frame for understanding school-age parenthood. I want to be careful not to essentialize or focus solely on difference, but rather to embrace school-age parents as complex and multidimensional individuals. My study is situated within an "identity as position" metaphor because of the ways this framing allows for consideration of self,

consciousness, relationships, power relations, and conflicts. Moje and Luke (2009) note that this metaphor brings together the other four metaphors, and they summarize:

The thrust of work that operates from this metaphor is that subjectivities and identities are produced in and through not only activity and movement in and across spaces but also in the ways people are cast in or called to particular positions in interaction, time, and spaces and how they take up or resist those positions. (p. 430)

A positioning metaphor suits my study because school-age parenthood is a social position -- a sorting label imposed by powerful bodies and dominant Discourses. Although I have not come across any school-age parent studies that explicitly describe their concept of identity in this way, all of the discussion related to tensions (Spera and Lightfoot, 2010; Rolfe, 2008), “future selves” (Hallman, 2007; King et al, 2009), or counter-narratives (Hallman, 2012; Luttrell, 1997 & 2003) align with this frame.

In considering the school-age parent identity of these students, it is important to note that this is not a singular position or identity, but rather an example of hybridity. Even in its naming, there is an element of age, a status as student, and the role of mother -- which of course involves gender identity. This hybrid label also brings assumptions of heterosexuality and marital status (single). Furthermore, those I refer to as school-age mothers are also positioned according to race, class, and even intellectual capacity. Rather than a model rooted in separate and distinct identity positions, I prefer the idea of an “identity cube” built off of the “laminations” concept as described by Holland and Leander (2004) and Moje and Luke’s (2009) updating of it. Holland and Leander (2004) conjure images of thickly lacquered wood with their “laminations” theory, offering an explanation for why identities may at times appear stable, while also being fluid and conflicting. Moje and Luke (2009) propose that a person is “like a cube or a quilt (or an even more multiple-sided object), wherein different sides are comprised of differently ordered layers” (p. 431). Instead of pulling a discrete identity out of a toolbox or kit, as proposed

by Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014a) and Gee (2000), maybe it is more like adjusting your “identity cube” so a different face is up.

Analyzing and theorizing the first day. Ms. Price was the first to reference parenting as a possible identity position, listing it as the first example of a “hat” students may wear. Ms. Price is aware that some of her students are parents, but considering this label only applies to one-quarter of the class, I believe she was actively de-stigmatizing school-age parenthood by choosing mother as the example. However, I also acknowledge that my presence could have influenced her choice in referencing this particular hat. Absent from the case studies’ work were any references to race, culture, religion, class, or affinity groups. Gender appeared only through their hats: “mother, sister, daughter, girlfriend,” with only Mercedes listing a gender-neutral hat of “role model.” Glaringly absent, at least to me, is any mention of “student” as a primary hat or role in their lives. Perhaps they focused only on permanent or long-term roles, seeing student as a temporary position? Perhaps being a student and the responsibilities of that role are subordinate to their positions in their families?

All three mothers present listed “mother” as the first hat on her list (and Charles also listed father first on his list), suggesting that motherhood is the central identity position of school-age mothers, as several researchers have asserted (Luttrell, 1997 & 2003; Proweller, 2000; Raeff, 1994; Rolfe, 2008; Spera & Lightfoot, 2010). Through their public identifications as parents right away, I believe Ebony and Charles show pride in their position, connecting with Paschal’s (2006) claim that African American teens, males in particular, gain respect and status from their peers when they become parents. However, rather than seeking to establish their status in the class, I think Charles’s and Ebony’s willingness to share at the beginning of the class discussion probably links to their existing rapport with Ms. Price more than any other factor. After all, Charles was the student to proclaim, “I love you Ms. Price.”

Peer-positioning, self-distancing, and larger discourses. While the self-positioning statements were unsurprising to me, two dialogue exchanges from the first day stand out in

particular for the insights they offer into public and private understandings about school-age parenthood. The first is the reference to parenting that Calvin made: “Let’s say your baby needs some Pampers, but you want to get high. If you don’t buy the Pampers and just buy the weed, you’re like damn, now I’m out of Pampers.” Although not specifically referencing only school-age parents, his comment seems to function as an example of peer-positioning, particularly in his use of second-person. I believe his primary goal was actually to elicit a laugh, “entertaining” his peers through talk, described by Smitherman as a central feature of black discourse (1977, p. 3). At the same time, his example comes from larger discourses about poverty, reminding me of “Welfare Queen” discourses from the 1980s and 90s (Pillow, 2004) and revealing the lasting impression of these deficit-model images.

As I reflected on my first day’s field notes, I wondered if there was a connection between Calvin’s statement, which I took as falling into negative stereotypes of parents in this community, and the self-distancing position that both Ebony and Gloria took in the exchange about the governor’s budget cuts. Both mothers made reference to young parents impacted by the cuts without making any personal connections to the situation. Gloria referred to “these young people who have kids who didn’t vote,” while Ebony discussed “this young mother who doesn’t have a babysitter for her kid.” My initial analysis was that Ms. Price should not have affirmed Calvin’s statement, but rather pushed back on his assumptions in order to maintain the classroom as a space that countered stereotypes. Several weeks passed before I asked my case study participants, Ebony and Gloria, what they remembered about that first class session. When I asked Gloria about Calvin’s pampers versus weed statement, she laughed and said, “Unfortunately that can be true, like for some people I know.” She was not offended because for her, both Calvin’s comment and her own criticism of “these young people who have kids who didn’t vote,” align with the larger story she tells about herself, a story about being exceptional -- different from other “teens today who always be focused on the wrong stuff,” and different from

other teen moms who “don’t have their priorities right.” It turns out she did not vote for governor either, but it was because she was still seventeen at the time of the election.

Although Gloria’s reading of this classroom story is one of self-affirmation, that she is not like those other young parents, there is a clear contradiction here. I was not able to unpack it with Gloria at the time, but as I triangulate what I know across data sources, Gloria actually receives daycare assistance from the program Ms. Price referenced. It is possible she may just not be willing to admit to me that she constructs a self-image that rejects government assistance and poverty because of associated shame or stigma. However, I wonder if comparing herself to others she knows diminishes her sense of relative poverty, as Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) found in their life history interviews of those living in poverty. After all, Gloria mentioned that she received monthly social security benefits after her father’s death, so she did have more income than most of her WAC peers. Although she accepted government assistance, I believe she did not consider herself dependent on it, as opposed to other young mothers she knew.

In contrast to Gloria’s judgmental distancing, Ebony actually took an empathetic position with “those young parents” or “this mom.” In the dialogue Gloria’s assertiveness contrasts with Ebony’s style, which I would describe as a little more hesitant or less declarative. This is a characteristic trend of their performance styles. Twice in the first class period Ebony referenced people not getting the help they need, in reference to the young mother without daycare and her reframing of the wants versus needs question, where she stated, “Poor people need stuff. They don’t have money to buy clothes or anything. People ain’t hiring poor people because of the way they look, but no one will help them.” In her interviews, she expressed that she was lucky to have a lot of help and support. Like Gloria, she sees her situation as outside the norm of teen parenthood, but she emphasizes the positive role her mother and aunt play in making her story different, rather than Gloria’s self-reliant narrative. When I asked her about Calvin’s comment, she said she was not bothered by it because he was just “being a bug,” trying to get a laugh. Although she did not remember asking him if he had children, she told me, “He wouldn’t have

said that if did have kids.” Ms. Price’s take was similar, as she told me that she had previously taught Calvin in class, and “You just have to know how to take what he says.” For all three, the first day of class was not particularly memorable. To the students the first day was more about noticing Ms. Price’s tone and style, such as her allowing students to “cuss a little” (Ebony), talking about current events that matter to them, and “just wanting us to have a conversation” (Mercedes).

Comparing my notes to students’ memories reminded me of my lens and biases, and how even reporting classroom dialogue is never value-free. As a former coworker of Ms. Price, I already had a clear sense of her teaching practices; besides, I was focusing less on her and more on the students’ voices. What the case study students revealed was that they were more focused on their teacher than their peers, at least on the first day. I wonder if the nature of WAC, as a place with short student residencies and a fairly singular focus of earning a diploma, contributes to this focus on the teacher over peers. Ebony told me, “I’m not really worried about making friends; I’m here to graduate,” and most of her classmates seemed to concur.

In this one story, I think there are specific points to be gleaned, as well as many questions to guide further analysis across data sources. If the teacher becomes the center, as the students primarily tell it, then there are lessons about how to both invite students’ positions as parents into the classroom without positioning them yourself. While Ms. Price offered “mother” as a possible identity, she never explicitly positioned any of the students as parents. Even in the dialogue about the governor, Ms. Price did not attempt to make the conversation personal, although she knew that both Gloria and Ebony were mothers. She asked, “What’s going to happen to this mom?,” rather than asking if either of them were impacted. Through the examples she gives, Ms. Price shapes her pedagogy to her context; if none of her students were parents, she would not use the same examples for the hat question, nor would she have brought up the daycare funding. Although the students did not tell me they noticed or

appreciated this specific decision, it fits with their general appreciation for her as an “understanding” teacher (Ebony).

Parenting and positioning beyond the first day. The daycare conversation was the only clear example of mothers self-distancing from their parenting identity during the semester. During sixteen of the thirty-one class sessions that I observed, at least one of the case study students referenced her parenting status, typically through mentioning a child. Before digging into the data more deeply, I should clarify that of the thirty-one class sessions, there were five days when none of the case study participants were present. No references to parenting were made during these class sessions. Charles was present for four of those five days, but he never made reference to his fathering status after the first class session. Additionally three sessions were focused entirely on watching films with no formal dialogue and very little conversation at all, and during the final exam session students were also mostly silent. Therefore, the prevalence of school-age mothers positioning themselves as mothers in the classroom through their dialogue was over 75% of the time (16 of 21 class sessions in which at least one mother was present and there was a component of dialogue).

Sharing around the margins. Not quite half of the time, parenting talk was informal and unrelated to the curriculum. All of these examples came from Gloria and Mercedes. For Gloria, one function of informal parenting talk was to express frustration; on two occasions she complained out loud about her son’s daycare, calling their rules “irritating” and the teachers’ comments to her “annoying”-- once no one responded, and once Ms. Price agreed, “It can be hard to find reliable daycare, I know.” Both Gloria and Mercedes also expressed pride in their children. Three times Mercedes told a small group of classmates or Ms. Price and me about how smart her daughter was, such as how she is “already good at hide and seek,” and how she “is always talking to people on the bus and asking the funniest questions.” Gloria showed a classmate a video of her son dancing, and although she said, “I think there’s something wrong with my son,” her facial expression and voice indicated she was amused and impressed with

him, and the classmate responded with a laugh and praise for his “cuteness.” Both Gloria and Mercedes also positioned themselves as knowledgeable about child rearing through conversation with peers. In a side conversation at the beginning of one class, a classmate mentioned that another WAC student recently had a baby, but the baby was still in the hospital. Gloria stated that it was probably jaundice, and explained, “You know if you have jaundice, that can cause brain damage.” Similarly, Mercedes shared medical advice about a rash with Brianna, the mother who enrolled for part of the semester. After a representative from a nearby bank visited the class, Mercedes also told Brianna she should get a savings account for her daughter, saying, “That’s what I’m going to do for my daughter.”

In these informal scenarios, Gloria and Mercedes framed the classroom as a place of community, not just an academic setting. Mercedes frequently utilized minutes at the beginning or end of the period to engage in personal conversation, often with just one or two friends (Brianna and Tiffany). It was notable that in this classroom the mothers did not form an affinity group (Gee, 2000). No exchanges about parenting were shared between case study participants and when selecting partners for assignments none of the mothers ever worked together. I think the lack of connection stems from the narratives of exceptionality by which Ebony, Gloria, and Mercedes defined themselves. As previously discussed, both Ebony and Gloria considered themselves outliers to what it means to be a teen parent. Mercedes similarly defined herself as a “role model” because of the ways she “was not a statistic” -- meaning that she would graduate and be successful despite having a baby in high school. This self-definition supports the mentor position she took with Brianna, in terms of offering advice. Finding points of similarity would counter these central beliefs, which might be why Ebony, Gloria, and Mercedes kept their distance from each other. Of course, similarities in position are only one factor that may impact relationships, and the personality differences between these students probably also matters -- Mercedes being quiet and Gloria having a “brick wall up.”

For Candace, I think the lack of informal parenting talk resulted from internal tensions about her identity as a mother, especially in light of her loss of custody. As the oldest student in the class and most experienced mother, she might be expected to have the most to say about parenting. However, it was painful for her to speak of her children, as evidenced by the tears she shed in our interview when sharing that she was living away from them at the moment. Practically, she also had fewer day-to-day concerns or stories to share because of her distance from her mothering role. Candace also attended the fewest class days of any of the mothers, which both limited the relationships she formed with classmates and impacted the amount of classroom talk data I could gather from her.

The connection between parenting and attendance also came up a few times, usually right at the beginning of class. Twice Ms. Price apologized to the class for missing the previous day, stating her child was ill. Once she went on to say, “I just think mothers are better suited for taking care of kids when they’re really sick. I felt like he needed me. Today he is a little better, so his father can watch him.” These two references were the only time Ms. Price spoke of her children or positioned herself as a parent when I was present. On at least one occasion, I heard Mercedes and Ebony ask for make-up work and mention that their child had been sick. Although none of the mothers maintained attendance rates above 75%, their attendance rates were in line with a majority of their classmates. Gloria had the third-highest attendance rate in the class at 70%. While Candace attended the fewest days of any student who did not formally drop (at around 40%), few of her absences could be explained by parenting responsibilities because of her custody status.

Positioning as mothers and students. Slightly more often than they talked informally about parenting, the focal participants brought their mothering identities and experiences into transaction with enacted curriculum by speaking from a parenting lens in whole-class discussions. Especially in the beginning of each unit, Ms. Price devoted significant class time to pre-reading discussion activities. A majority of the class talk data came from these

conversations, and the mothers tended to be active participants (when they were present). In later chapters, I will explore positioning related explicitly to reading and writing. Here, I focus on classroom dialogue that emerged from anticipatory set or pre-reading activities, rather than in response to course texts.

For example, on the third day of class (my second observation) students completed an anticipation guide for the story “Thank You, Ma’am” by Langston Hughes. The handout included thirteen statements to select “Agree or Disagree,” and students completed it silently before going over responses as a whole class. One statement read, “You should never trust anyone,” and many voices at once said “Agree.” Mercedes, however, asked, “You can’t trust your mama? You can’t trust your kids neither?” A few classmates co-signed their agreement with murmurs. In that moment, she drew on her position as a mother to challenge her classmates ideologically.

Moments later the students were discussing the statement, “It takes a village to raise a child,” with loud agreement. For the only time of the semester, Ms. Price explicitly positioned one of the students as a mother by asking, “But is it different than back in the day? Today if I saw Gloria’s kid doing something wrong, am I allowed to discipline him?” This time the students were adamant in their negative response, including Gloria who stated, “I know sometimes my baby gets to yelling and it gets irritating, but you ain’t gonna shake my baby!” Ms. Price followed up with the group, “So it sounds like I’m hearing you actually disagree with this statement?” Mercedes responded, “My mother, my auntie, lots of people help me.” Her friend Tiffany agreed, “I don’t know anybody who don’t have help with their child.” Unlike the trust statement, this question on the anticipation guide more directly dealt with parenting, so I am not surprised that some of the parents spoke from their parenting position.

Although a brief exchange, there are potentially valuable implications here. Specifically, Mercedes’s assertion of the help she receives aligns with Hill Collins’s (1987) construction of “othermothers” as “significant to the institution of Black motherhood” (p. 5). In interviews with all four of the case studies, mothers, sisters, and aunts were credited with aspects of caretaking.

Viewing these mothers as deeply supported, rather than just as “single” or “unwed,” is an important consideration of their identity. I also realized that other students in the class might also take on “othermother” roles in their households, specifically Tiffany and a student named Rhea. A young niece lived in Tiffany’s household, and Rhea had a younger brother in Kindergarten. As Tiffany did in this discussion, several times in the semester she affirmed statements made by the mothers. Similarly, on the first day, Rhea was the one who responded, “I agree,” to Ebony’s comment about young mothers dropping out of school because they need daycare help. In their classroom participation, these two students shared some of the characteristics of the mothers that will be discussed in later chapters, specifically making text-to-self connections and perspective-taking. Further study and consideration of “othermother” identities and experiences might provide another link to students’ outside-of-school lives that could matter in the classroom.

Mercedes also spoke of her daughter during a conversation prompted by a survey on race. Rhea shared that other black people looked down on her dad’s Nigerian accent and never believed he was her real dad. Mercedes responded, “My daughter is going to face that. Her daddy is from Liberia, and people are going to think it’s weird that she doesn’t talk like him.” When asked what they speak in Liberia, Mercedes went on to say, “I want him to speak French around the baby, but he thinks it will confuse her.” I commented that it’s good to learn languages early, and Mercedes responded, “I know. I keep telling him that.” As the only mother still in a relationship with her child’s father, Mercedes reveals how for some parents the position of mother is tied with another position, such as girlfriend or wife. Mercedes also positions herself as an expert, as she did in the informal advice conversations.

Although Candace was not present during the other class conversations, she also spoke from her mother position, such as during a scenario sharing activity at the beginning of the gender unit in April. In response to a question about a guy wanting to buy a doll for his nephew, many students opposed the idea. Candace stated, “I would buy my son a GI Joe Doll, but that’s

it. Definitely no baby doll.” Rhea shared that her brother had an Elmo doll with a potty, and she thought that was okay, to which Candace murmured “maybe.” A few minutes later Candace spoke from her mother position again, but this time in response to a scenario about domestic violence. While the scenario was about a woman who was worried about her sister being abused, Calvin had countered that maybe the man was simply fighting back after his wife initiated the violence. Candace responded, “I will tell my son if a bitch hit him, tell me and I’ll beat the bitch’s ass. I know what’s it like to get pushed around, and that ain’t cool.”

I see the examples from Candace and Mercedes in particular as supporting the “laminations” or identity quilt/cube theory that identities are multi-layered and multidimensional, with different layers taking prominence or peeking through in different settings. Candace positions herself as both a mother and someone who experienced domestic violence in the same breath; similarly Mercedes positions herself as a daughter and a mother when she asks, “You can’t trust your mama? You can’t trust your kids neither?” Candace’s example also shows her taking a future position -- she is not talking about her two year old son, but rather the young man he will someday be. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) describe this kind of discursive imagining as a “figured world.” She may not be engaged in the day-to-day care of her son at the moment, but it is central to Candace’s current outlook that she will someday be in the role of advice-giver, protector, and enforcer. While she prioritizes the imagined future over the embodied past, both versions/layers/positions are very much interacting with each other in the way she takes up this topic of domestic violence.

These examples of negotiations among identity positions counter Luttrell’s (2003) theory that school-age mothers often practice “identity splitting.” Luttrell (2003) asserts that the different roles these young women play throughout their social worlds are seen as separate selves, rather than components of one complex, multi-faceted self, which she attributes to contradictions within dominant ideologies of motherhood and female sexuality. I saw no evidence that the mothers in my study ever separated from their mothering identities entirely,

any more than I “split” myself as a researcher for part of the day and mother for another part. Unlike the women in Luttrell’s (2003) or Coffel’s (2011) studies, in their classroom talk these students were not quick to categorize mothers as good or bad. In fact, they focused on themselves rather than conjecturing or passing judgment on the actions of other parents. The identity metaphors Luttrell and I operate under, however, may explain this conflict in our findings. As Moje and Luke (2009) describe:

Identity as position allows for people to tell stories about themselves, to represent themselves in narrative, but also to shift positions and tell new stories. At times, identity-as-position metaphors seem to make identities fragmented and in tension, but at other times coherent, dependent on the particular space, time, or relationship in which one is situated, recognized, and named. (p. 431)

I contend that at least in the classroom setting, the focal participants presented a mostly coherent narrative of themselves as individuals. For example, the stories Mercedes told related to her mothering position, such as about wanting her daughter to learn a second language and starting a bank account for her, line up with her overarching narrative as someone who is motivated and “not a statistic.”

Ebony’s story: silence and grief. While she played a central role in the dialogue from the first day of class, in the above discussion of classroom talk data beyond the first day, Ebony is not mentioned. She attended Ms. Price’s class for only one day from the third to ninth weeks of the semester. First her child’s paternal grandfather died, followed a few days later by the suicide of her child’s father. They were not officially a couple at the time of his death and he lived two hours away in her hometown, but she told me they talked every day. She stated, “It took me a while, probably like two months, to get my head right. There were days where I didn’t want to get out of bed, but it was my son who made me keep going. After he had his birthday, turned one, I knew it was time I better come back to school.” During her extended absence she collected work each week and “stayed caught up in her classes,” although for Ms. Price’s class

that apparently did not involve reading the novel she missed. When she returned to Ms. Price's class, she was not the bubbly participant from the first week. Most days she wore sunglasses and dressed in a hoodie that read "Mr. and Mrs. Robbins," with a picture of her and the deceased child of her father. She did not participate in any classroom discussions during the second-half of the semester, but she did appear attentive and followed along with classroom activities and reading.

The visible face of Ebony's identity cube shifted to a new hybrid identity as a grieving, essentially-widowed school-age mother. The drastic change in her demeanor and participation causes me to wonder about short- and long-term identity changes: I wonder if as a community college student in the year following this study, Ebony will be the playful, participatory student I saw in the first week of class; the quiet, somber one from the second-half of the term; or somewhere in between. I wonder if she will ever reference her loss in classroom talk and how she will speak of her parenting experience. Ebony's story also reminds me how complex individual experiences are, that significant life events outside of becoming a parent shape all of the this study's participants, even if I did not witness the changes this semester. A potentially rich, but logistically challenging, way to expand the research on school-age mothers would be a study that includes observations of students before pregnancy in order to trace short- and long-term impacts of parenting on student identities, performance, and classroom experience.

Conclusion

In summary, from the first day of Ms. Price's class, the school-age mothers enrolled were active participants in classroom discussions who referenced their parenting status in a variety of ways during classroom talk. In contrast to limiting expectations, motherhood did not make itself visible through fatigue or distraction, but rather often in the form of anecdotes or commentary drawing from parenting experiences to support or clarify a point in classroom discussion. Gloria and Mercedes also utilized informal conversations with peers or Ms. Price to express pride or frustration related to their lives as parents, as well as position themselves as

experts on topics related to child rearing and health. Ms. Price's classroom was a welcoming space for school-age mothers, where peers most often offered supportive comments and Ms. Price shaped her examples to reflect her student population, including non-stigmatizing references to school-age parenthood.

As opposed to “identity splitting,” as Luttrell (2003) and Coffel (2011) found, my data suggests that the participants did not separate their mothering identities from other roles or positions. Instead, the mothering students expressed hybrid identities that allowed them simultaneously to reference themselves in multiple relational identities, such as mothers and daughters or mothers and girlfriends, all while operating as engaged students. While the first self-references as parents came through a question about the “hats” they wear, I contend that motherhood is not an identity that was slipped on and off. Instead, a layered and multi-dimensional conception of identity better represents the ways that motherhood is sometimes at the surface and other times buried just below, but always present.

Chapter 4: Intention, Enactment, and Instruction in Third Period

"I was assigned to teach this course, and at first I thought, 'What am I going to do with this Power and Identity curriculum?' But when I really started looking at the texts and thinking about it, I realized there's a lot I already do with these themes. Now it's probably becoming my favorite course to teach.

I kept the first part with The Guardian basically the same, and the next unit on gender will start the same. But I'm definitely making some changes in line with what I like to teach and what I think the students respond to. Like, I'm going to cut Antigone and Othello. [according to the syllabus, she also cut Persepolis, and excerpts from The Kite Runner and The Color Purple]. I feel like with our group of kids, they turn off easily from things that do not interest them. In texts like Shakespeare, you have the problem with the language -- there's a language barrier. Is there a value to them having to struggle with that language? Nobody speaks like that today, and they'll push the text away. It's not relevant to them. But a book like Coldest Winter Ever still has some of the themes in a way that's relevant to them. They notice the poor choices she's making. The point is are you going to be like Winter, or are you going to bounce back from your mistakes?

Some scholars have issues with the sexuality and foul language in some African American novels. And also the reading rate, like they're not the most sophisticated books. That can be any book, but you hear more of that when it comes to black culture books because people tend to like to write about what's in high interest. But I think it's a good book to teach, especially with our kids.

I want the students to walk away with knowing a sense of who they are and have some kind of direction towards where they're going. That's my main goal. But I want the students to see it, of course, through what we've been teaching. I want them to be aware of the social influences of identity and the personal experiences that make up their identity. I want them to be aware of how much power they really hold.

At the end, I want them to develop their own voice and be able to articulate it."

- Ms. Price, interview during the third week of the term

Power and Identity, the course title for third period, is an example of the kind of curriculum WAC prides itself on: untracked and unleveled, semester-long English courses designed with full teacher freedom and creativity. In my first two years at WAC, there were some attempts to align the courses with more traditional high school English models, such as British Literature or Mythology, but with students enrolling from so many different high schools who had attended during parts of different semesters, we constantly faced students complaining about already having read a text or passing a class of this name; our progressive and creative

staff opted to rethink the traditional curriculum and design thematic courses like Power and Identity. For example, during my time at WAC I designed and taught courses including Crime and Punishment, African American Women's Literature, and Memoirs and Personal Expression. Ms. Price's contributions to course design were Multicultural Literature and Film and Literature. After another English teacher, who designed and originally taught Power and Identity, left when I did at the end of the 2013-2014 school year, Ms. Price and the new English teacher were assigned some of our historically successful courses. During the semester of my study, Ms. Price taught two sections each of Power and Identity, Reading and Writing Workshop (originally co-designed and co-taught with me), and Film and Literature.

As Ms. Price shared with students on the first day of class and discussed in our interview, she started with another teacher's curriculum map but put her own personal spin on the course. In this way, the enactment of the course follows the familiar model of high school English teachers around the country who are given general outlines but allowed to make choices in regards to specific texts, assignments, and activities. Although untracked, semester-long courses are not the norm, the central topic of Ms. Price's course also aligns with units that may be taught within courses like American Literature or Survey of Literature. As is true of most case study approaches, Ms. Price's third period class is not "the universe in a teacup;" however, as Geertz describes, only through in-depth consideration of a confined context can "megaconcepts" begin to be made concrete and realistic (Geertz, 1973, p. 23). In this chapter, I analyze the intended, enacted, and hidden curricula of Ms. Price's third period class, with the following research questions as my guide: In what ways do the curriculum and teacher practices silence or help give voice to school-age parents' lived experiences? How is parenting represented in the texts of the formal curriculum, and how is it addressed by the teacher in the enacted curriculum? What characteristics and traits do school-age parents value most in a teacher?

Curriculum as a Tool and Frame

Curriculum is often talked about as a reified object that can be designed and implemented; above I used such language, as it is commonplace and standard in schools. Curriculum theorists, however, posit far broader and less concrete conceptions of this basis of instruction. First, it is important to note that there is not an agreed-upon definition of “curriculum” (Au, 2012). While the historical definition is simply the course of study, the same course of study can be carried out and experienced quite differently in different classrooms, which leads to a range of more nuanced definitions. Bobbitt (1972[1918]) was the first to conceptualize curriculum as educational experience -- everything that happens in the classroom. While my study attempts to capture the holistic educational experience of Ms. Price’s classroom, this definition is too broad for my liking. My operational definition of curriculum is paraphrased from Au (2012): Curriculum is a tool for accessing knowledge and developing certain forms of consciousness within a classroom. I am particularly interested in the relationship between what is intended, what actually happened, and the possible knowledge and consciousness outcome..

The “intended” curriculum (Porter, 2006), also called the “overt” (Weisz, 1989) or “formal” curriculum is what is planned for -- the texts, instructional activities, and stated objectives that make up a curriculum map or course outline. I rely on the course texts and Ms. Price’s commentary in my interview to understand the intended curriculum because she did not write out lesson plans. In analyzing the course texts, I hope to bring to light the possible meaning students may construct on their own. In my approach, I am also inspired by Greene’s (1971) notion of curriculum as possibility, as I believe students are engaging in their own sense-making. Within texts, there are also messages that can be characterized as “hidden curriculum,” which Apple (2004) describes as “tacit preparation for relating to the process of production in a particular way” (p. 89). In other words, texts are situated within the web of dominant Discourses and act to perpetuate or counter hegemony.

Texts are not the whole curriculum, though. The teacher makes decisions in how to frame particular texts, through emphasizing certain points for discussion, introducing a text in a

particular way, or selecting what kind of understanding to assess. I draw from Weisz's (1989) framework of "enacted" curriculum, which combines the overt, hidden, and social (the interactions) curriculums. When I refer to Ms. Price's enacted curriculum, I mean the ways she and the students take up the texts together -- what they dwelled on, overlooked, and connected with -- and how that enacted curriculum reflects and informs their consciousness. Subsequent chapters build further upon how the focal participants took up the texts and assignments of the curriculum in their reading and writing practices.

Course Texts: What was Read, Said, and Left Unsaid

According to the course syllabus, the essential questions of this course were: 1) How is identity formed? 2) What kinds of power exist? Who wants and/or needs power? 3) What is the relationship between identity and power? How can identity be or give power to an individual? These questions align with Ms. Price's primary goal for the curriculum, as she explained it in our interview. First and foremost, the knowledge and consciousness that this curriculum intended for students to access was critical in that it emphasized power relations. Ms. Price framed the course with an emphasis on personal reflection, however, which the essential questions do not indicate. She wanted students to consider their own identities and power.

Content area goals were secondary, as Ms. Price did not mention any specific standards, skills, or specific English Language Arts understandings that drove her curricular planning. She seems to view literary texts, hand in hand with class dialogue, as the tools for creating a critical and reflective consciousness and assumed that through interacting with texts, students would improve as readers, writers, and thinker. The syllabus listed seven learning goals, however: 1) Determining themes and main ideas of texts; 2) Analyzing themes over the course of singular and multiple texts; 3) Summarizing and responding to themes within texts; 4) Figuring out meaning of words and phrases within the text (context clues); 5) Analyzing author's choices to structure text, choose genre, manipulate time, and use particular writing styles to achieve their goals; 6) Recognizing and considering points of view and culture experiences

reflected in world literature; and 7) Writing arguments to support claims made about texts that we read in this class.

As Ms. Price enacted it, the Power and Identity course consisted of three major units of instruction: race, gender, and “the streets”/urban adolescence. In this section, I offer an overview of the major texts of these units and describe Ms. Price’s framing of the texts, as well as a summary of the resulting enacted curriculum. I focus particularly on references to parenting, and somewhat sexuality, exploring how these topics are portrayed in the formal curriculum as well as discussed in class. As they were on the first day of class, throughout all of these units, the school-age mothers in Ms. Price’s class tended to be the most vocal participants throughout the course’s enacted curriculum.

Race, racism, and otherness. The racial identity unit lasted all of the first quarter, and class time was spent as such: 1 week for course introductions and “Thank You M’am,” 2 weeks of pre-reading for *The Guardian*, 3 ½ weeks reading *The Guardian*, 1 week for literary analysis essays, ½ week modern-day lynching mini-unit, 1 week for *Rosewood* film. As I see it, the center of this unit was really racism and how being of a “subordinate” racial identity impacts your power and identity. This theme was framed by a PowerPoint (created by the designer of the course) about the seven kinds of otherness and associated oppression, which Ms. Price showed on the second day of class. These seven categories were race/ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, and physical/mental ability. On my second observation (the third day of class), she summarized the previous lesson: “Yesterday we talked about dominant and subordinate identities in society. Dominate is the people in control, so we said like the police, government, white people. And the subordinate groups are the ones under the control of the dominant people.” In line with my study, I was struck by the silences around school-age parenting in this conversation. When talking about age, the relationship between age, parenting, and stigma was not mentioned.

While the otherness and subordinate identities clearly function as an anticipatory set for *The Guardian* (Lester, 2008), it actually segued into “Thank You, M’am” by Langston Hughes (1958) -- a story that primarily functioned outside of the racial identity unit. Ms. Price told me that she added this story to the course because “it’s a good one for the first week of a class. It’s quick and simple.” She called it a “filler” to round out the first week before starting work on *The Guardian*. This often-taught story involves a teenage male’s failed attempt to snatch a lady’s purse, and how that woman subsequently takes him to her house to wash his face, feed him, and give him money. Ms. Price introduced the story with an anticipation guide focused on relationships between adults and teenagers, as well as crime and justice. Statements included: “Older adults can’t really understand the problems of teens; Stealing is always wrong; When someone mistreats you, you should always treat them with kindness and respect.” As discussed in chapter 3, there was also the statement, “It takes a village to raise a child,” which elicited conversation about parenting. Although not explicitly linked to the seven kinds of otherness, I see connections with the idea of age as a part of identity. This story is also about poverty, obviously another form of otherness, but socioeconomic status was not mentioned in Ms. Price’s set-up or follow-up of the story. I see “Thank You, M’am” as auxiliary to the race unit -- the characters are unmistakably black, but race is not explicitly mentioned in the story, nor was it in class discussion. It was implied, though, that the students saw these characters as relatable and representative of their community. All students followed along as Ms. Price read aloud, and there was audible laughter at two points. Ms. Price performed the woman’s voice dramatically, inflecting it in the style of black speech.

In relation to my interest in parenting, “Thank You, M’am” is a fascinating example of two competing discourses. On the one hand, the young criminal suffers from a lack of parental support and guidance: an example of the dysfunctional family/ unfit mother narrative. But the story’s twist, that the almost-victim takes on a parental role, also relates to Hill Collins’s (1987) notion of “othermothers” and the “it takes a village” narrative. This very short story operates

within these popular discourses, but Ms. Price framed it as out-of-date, saying at the conclusion of reading aloud: “Things like that don’t too much happen now.” The bell rang almost immediately upon completion of reading, and the story was not revisited when the class reconvened four days later. As a first text in a course about power and identity, I appreciate that one-dimensional conceptions of identity (and power) are complicated: a female almost-victim seizes power; and without ignoring race, identity is constructed as much more than race. I also realized how discourses about parenting are present under the surface of many texts, and how those discourses weave together with race, class, age, and historical context.

After “Thank You, M’am” the next learning segment was framed as pre-reading for *The Guardian*. In fact, Ms. Price shared the prologue of the book and presented a PowerPoint about the book’s setting, the 1940s in the segregated South, before introducing a group project that assigned students a poem to analyze and historical topic to research and present. The poems for this assignment, although jigsawed so that each group only analyzed one, made up the next set of texts of the formal curriculum. They were: “America” by Claude McKay (1921), “To America” by James Weldon Johnson (1917), “The Struggle that Staggers Us” by Margaret Walker (1942), and “The Lynching” by Claude McKay (1922). All four pieces, written by black poets in the early Twentieth century, present struggles and hardship as central to America’s identity. Specifically, these struggles link back to slavery and its enduring legacy of racism and inequality. The poems, as well as the historical topics included in the assignment (Plessy vs. Ferguson, Jim Crow Laws, Civil Rights Movements, Sharecropping, and Lynching), directly address the historical context of *The Guardian*. They also frame identity as racial, as well as historically and geographically situated. There are no clear connections to parenting in these poems.

The major text for the first half of Power and Identity, *The Guardian* by Julius Lester, is a powerful, poignant young adult novel. To summarize, the protagonist is a 14 year old white male, Ansel Anderson, whose best friend is black. Ansel’s mother wants him to have a future

outside of their small southern town, and she gets her wish after a key turning point involving a lynching and his father's silence about the truth. This is a heartbreaking story, where even the conflict's resolution is deeply unsettling, as Ansel's mother kills herself after sending him away with his teacher to pursue life in the North. Of course this book is about racial identity and racism, but through the white protagonist it introduces white privilege and white guilt, components of racial identity often overlooked or silenced in the secondary classroom. As much as it is about race, this is also a story about family, specifically raising questions about when to escape or sever familial ties.

Ansel's mother, Maureen, actually marks the first example of a school-age mother in the course's formal curriculum. She became pregnant at 18, and as was customary at the time, a marriage resulted. Although this reference stood out to me, it went undiscussed or commented on in the enacted curriculum. While not intentional, her pregnancy was viewed as a way for a poor female to "trap" for a wealthy husband. Lester directly speaks to common narratives of female sexuality in his statement, "Her father, a crude and bitter man, said, 'I'm glad you put them big titties of yours to good use'" (p. 55). Candace made an audible sound of disdain when this was read aloud, but there was no larger conversation about this theme. Other conventional narratives about sexuality are also evident, such as that men are sex-focused and try to coerce females into sexual activity; a lack of female sexual desire; and females as responsible for maintaining their virginity. There are also significant examples of rape by one white male character, both chronic rapes of black girls (even in front of their families) and the rape and murder of the white preacher's daughter, which is subsequently blamed on a black man instead. Additionally, that white preacher also molests young girls, including his daughter. The web of relations -- or what Hill Collins (2000) calls the "matrix of domination" -- between race, gender, sexuality, violence, and power is clearly (and graphically) illustrated throughout this text, with white males as the clear dominators. The sexual violence component, because of comments

and questions by the students, was briefly discussed in the class, but not the conventional portrayal of desire, virginity, and female worth.

Similar to the conventional sexual discourses surrounding the novel's female characters, the mothers are portrayed as "good" mothers who nurture their children and sacrifice their own interests for the wellbeing of the family. Maureen, who avoids conflict with her husband and commits suicide, can be read as an example of a weak white heroine. In contrast, Willie's mother is a STRONGBLACKWOMAN (SBW) through and through -- providing for her family, enduring suffering, and showing no weakness (Morgan, 1999). According to Morgan, SBW is the central myth of black womanhood. She warns that although black women have embraced this image and it seems empowering on the surface, it has a darker side. Morgan asserts that SBW was invented by slaveholders to justify their treatment of black women; SBW camouflage their pain and ignore their individual needs; SBW icons are always connected to suffering. Similarly, there are no traditionally "good" fathers in the text, as the only one who is not morally corrupt (Big Willie, the black man who gets lynched) suffers from what is presumably Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder from World War II. Big Willie embodies the ENDANGEREDBLACKMAN archetype (the counterpoint to the SBW myth), while the white fathers show the other side of slavery's legacy: white men who think they still own the world (Morgan, 1999). While the school-age mothers were able to connect with the mothers in this text and see reflections of their existing views on parenthood (as described in the next chapter), I think the enacted curriculum could have interrogated the gender differences or at least openly discussed the fathers and ways in which they fall into archetypes, a conversation the could benefit all the students. A message of the hidden curriculum, at least one I take from the silences, is that parenting is primarily a woman's domain.

This novel resonated strongly with both Candace and Mercedes. Mercedes saw this story as "inspiring because the characters, well Ansel and Little Willie at least, were able to be successful in the end despite where they came from and the challenges they faced." Her

reference to “despite where they came from” indicates that she notices larger forces of oppression and dominant Discourses shaping their lives, linking with Ms. Price’s framing of the text with the pre-reading activities on racial identity and discrimination. Candace, on the other hand, read the text as more about individual choices. When asked what she learned from the novel, she told me:

“Life is crazy. You never know what’s going to happen. Like I felt like that dad could have done more. It just shows, like in real life situations, that people don’t always do the right things, and you have to suffer those consequences. He had to spend the rest of his life alone -- why would you want to spend the rest of your life alone when you could have just told the truth? You could still have your wife, have your kid. You could be an honorable guy. Instead, you let this man die for no reason. The book was crazy.”

In this comment, I see Candace pushing back on notions of identity as position -- she is focused on the father’s “core identity,” what Gee (2001) would describe as “what kind of person you are.” She also situates power within the realm of individual choices, rather than the matrix of domination. The contrasts in these responses indicate the role of subjectivity in making meaning from curriculum, where students’ consciousness and interests make it easier to embrace or resist a teacher’s point of emphasis in a text. Both Mercedes and Candace, however, indicate that reading *The Guardian* encouraged them to think about outcomes, choices, and power.

Ms. Price connected the novel with contemporary times by assigning a mini-research project on Modern-Day Lynching. She asked groups to write a definition for the term “Modern-Day Lynching” and find an article online about it to share with the class. In contrast to the rest of the formal curriculum, the texts for this assignment were student-selected. Most of the groups selected articles about unarmed black men being killed by the police, and all of the articles fell into the ENDANGEREDBLACKMAN narrative. In choosing to focus on the theme of racism in this way, I think Ms. Price shifted away from *The Guardian*’s emphasis on individual choices,

responsibility, and identity development that resists dominant narratives. On one hand, I can see this focus on how the students' racial identity is linked to oppression as counter to Ms. Price's stated goal: "I want them to be aware of the social influences of identity and the personal experiences that make up their identity. I want them to be aware of how much power they really hold." However, I also understand that this decision could make the text seem more relevant, and that this assignment boosts awareness of issues that must be understood before students can begin to realize and use their power. Ms. Price told the class in the discussion about Modern-Day Lynching, "I want to raise emotions. I want you to know what's happening, things in the national news about people who look like us, have our same complexion. And nothing is being done." There was no conversation, however, about what could be done. After this class session, there was no mention of Modern-Day lynching again when I was present. This curricular example reminds me of an ongoing struggle I felt as a social justice educator: when does exposing students to systemic oppression lead to action, versus when does it lead to feeling hopeless or helpless?

The last text of the quarter was the film *Rosewood* (Singleton, 1997), which the class watched in its entirety. Ms. Price's only introduction to the film was the statement, "It's a very good movie and has a lot in common with *The Guardian*." Students had an optional extra credit assignment to list similarities between the two texts, which only Mercedes and another student completed. This historical film focuses on the 1923 Rosewood Massacre in Florida, and the points in common with *The Guardian* include the Southern setting, a black man being wrongly accused of sexual violence against a white woman, an angry white mob, and a few white characters sympathetic towards the black community. A similar web of race, gender, sexuality, violence, and power is present as in *The Guardian*, although parenting discourses are primarily absent. Key differences in the two texts include the ages of the focal characters (no adolescent protagonist in the film) and the scope of the violence (at least eight people were killed in the Rosewood massacre). At the closing of the film, there is a statement about a 1990s lawsuit, in

which survivors won reparations from the state of Florida from the city's failure to protect its citizens. To me, this moment is key in shifting the narrative away from just reporting on oppression and connecting to an example of power dynamics shifting. The bell rang as the film was ending, however, so there was no discussion of this point.

In relation to my research questions, the curriculum for the first quarter of Power and Identity included very few direct connections to discourses related to school-age parenting. However, the level of participation and engagement by the school-age mothers, as will be further discussed in subsequent chapters, indicates that they still found ways to connect with their parenting experiences and other identity positions. Although the mothers in this class never explicitly connected stigma they had experienced related to school-age motherhood with these themes of domination and oppression, my evidence suggests that this could be another way in which parenthood operated as a fund of knowledge. Particularly for the female students in the class, I think the STRONGBLACKWOMAN narrative was an underlying theme -- although never discussed, somewhere within nearly every text were examples of black women enduring incredible hardship but staying strong. I believe this message validated and perhaps emboldened the school-age mothers to participate and speak out in the class.

Gender identity as equated with sexuality. After Spring Break, the second quarter of the course began, also marking the beginning of the second unit of instruction: gender identity. This unit lasted three weeks, and nearly every day included a different focal text or activity. These activities and texts were (in order): whole-class discussion of gender roles, "Raised By" poetry writing, PowerPoint on gender identity and bias, small group project analyzing gender in advertising, gender scenarios to discuss, news article about manhood initiations, and a news article on a gender-neutral preschool in Sweden. Just as race was positioned as a fact, gender was not explored as a social construct and no distinction between biological sex and gender were made in this unit. Data related to the whole-group discussion days and "Raised By" poems

are included in chapters 3 and 6, but in this section I will analyze the nonfiction texts and dig into the underlying messages of the unit as a whole.

The PowerPoint presentation, created by the teacher who designed the course, defined and presented examples of gender identity, gender stereotypes, and gender bias. The primary message focused on how fixed images of males and females are widespread, limiting, and harmful. While I agree with this message, I noticed a disconnect between the ways gender was constructed in the PowerPoint and students' worldviews. The stereotypes, particularly of females, seemed more true of white women than black. For example, statements such as "Women are expected to be passive and submissive" and "Women are expected to be small and graceful" conflict with dominant discourses and research around black womanhood. Race was not mentioned in the PowerPoint or in the surrounding discussion, however. As it was enacted, Ms. Price invited students to comment and discuss each slide, and several times students focused on counter-examples (such as women who do not maintain a clean house) or points of disagreement (such as Calvin's response to the emphasis on female appearance: "That shit don't mean nothing to me. I like a girl with a mind"). Ms. Price responded with statements like, "Well, according to research society values these things." At other times, students reaffirmed stereotypes, such as Ebony's statement that male nurses "must be gay," without any pushback from Ms. Price. I think the presentation's intended message was lost in the enactment; the resulting discussion mostly allowed students to assert their personal preferences in the opposite sex or conflate the relationship between gender stereotypes and sexual orientation.

A similar conversation resulted from the "Sweden's 'Gender-Neutral' Preschool" (Hebblethwaite, 2011) article, which students read a few days later. While introducing the concept of the school and describing its popularity, the article includes the voices of critics of the school as well. The argument presented against the preschool is just that the idea is naive or probably will not make a long-term difference. However, in their discussion of the text, Ms.

Price's students had an entirely different argument against the school, that it will create homosexual children. Once again the enacted curriculum strayed from the message of the intended curriculum, with heteronormative and even homophobic messages resulting. Although in this case, Gloria resisted the class's groupthink when she asserted she would send her child there. While she never specifically commented on whether she would send her child there, Ms. Price did say, "I can see both sides." I jumped in to make a case for the school, but the students did not really respond to my viewpoint. At the end of the discussion, Ms. Price commented, "It's fascinating how every time we talk about gender, especially gender-neutral, it turns into a sexuality question." She did not follow this statement with any probing questions or elaborating comments, however.

I was not present for the other text of the unit, "Pondering Manhood's Price" (Duffy, 2012), an article taken from the "Impact of Gender Role Stereotypes" *MediaSmarts* lesson plan. The article itself uses the author's experience with "the new boy initiation," in which first-year students at his secondary school were kneed in the groin by older male students, as a way to make meaning from a seminar he attended on how male masculinity stereotypes can be limiting and even physically painful. I appreciate that the author admits his ambivalence about the topic and is not didactic in his argument, relying on reflective questions in the conclusion instead of declarative statements. As a piece of the formal curriculum, this text's message is similar to the unit's larger focus on rethinking gender norms. When I asked Ms. Price how the conversation went, she said, "Oh you know, they were pretty hung up on the groin part and how it was gay." I can gather that the enacted curriculum once again deterred from the intended.

In relation to my research questions, this short unit offered a few key examples. Parenting was referenced in the PowerPoint, in regards to stereotypes of women as primary caretakers. In the preschool article, one set of parents from the school are described: "Pia Korpi, a metal designer, and her husband Yukka, a dancer and choreographer, have two children at the pre-school. Ms Korpi says she, and her husband in particular, had to battle to pursue their

chosen interests because they sat uneasily with gender expectations, and they want their children to feel free from these restraints” (Hebblethwaite, 2011). The unit, therefore, includes both conventional and non-traditional examples of gender identity and parenthood. As will be further discussed in the next chapter, the school-age mothers were active in conversations around these texts, often speaking from their position as parents. The web of relating discourses around identity and power, specifically around race and class, were much deeper under the surface in this unit, with only sexual orientation emerging frequently. While the direct connection between the unit’s text and parenting identities may have resonated with the school-age mothers and encouraged them to voice their opinions, I am more than a little worried about the messages of the hidden curriculum in regards to sexual orientation and gender identity. I am reminded that just because texts or practices help give voice to one marginalized group, it does not mean they do not simultaneously silence others.

“The Streets” as an identity-maker. The texts of the first two units primarily turned the lens outside of the students’ experiences, offering windows into other time periods or perspectives. In contrast, the last unit, in which Ms. Price steered entirely away from the course’s original curriculum map, was designed to function as a mirror. This concept of a curriculum of “windows and mirrors,” first theorized by Style (1988), has become a popular framework for curricular design, emphasizing the need for students to see themselves and also beyond themselves in order to explore “the essential dialectic between the self and the world.” Ms. Price never used this language directly, but her emphasis on relevance of *The Coldest Winter Ever* reveals she envisioned the text as a reflection of students’ own images and realities.

Although never formally framed as a unit by Ms. Price, the last two texts of the course clearly moved away from the focus on gender and turned to content focused on contemporary urban life. First, Ms. Price showed a documentary, *The Field: Chicago (Violence, Hip Hop, and Hope)*, released by WorldStarHipHop in 2014. This 40-minute film focuses on post-2000 Chicago, relating violence to the city’s “urban renewal” initiatives that demolished the projects.

Most of the footage shows black males discussing violence, often referencing their upbringing and the everyday violence they experience. The general premise seems to be that the violence has always been here, and the hip hop from Chicago just reflects that (rather than causes it). It ended with a section on the violence prevention organization Cease Fire and activists like Rhymefest. Messages on the screen before the closing credits first highlighted things going well, such as artists signing record deals or touring abroad, but the last two statements were RIPs to young men murdered between the shooting of the film and its broadcast. An unspoken connection to parenting is, of course, that these young men were sons; even though their voices were not included, somewhere are grieving mothers. Once again, whenever the ENDANGEREDBLACKMEN archetype is present, motherhood is linked with loss.

Direct references to parenting were woven throughout the interview-based documentary, from one of the featured rappers having two children to three different suggestions in interviews about the relationship between violence and lack of parental guidance. While the one rapper positioned as a father, Lil Durk, was framed as a potential provider for his family through his musical career, the dominant discourses in the interviews were those of unfit mothers and absentee fathers. “The streets is raising them,” was offered as an explanation of the current generation of Chicago’s youth and the city’s high crime rates. The viewing guide Ms. Price gave students did not focus on the relationship between parents/family and violence, but instead on the relationship between the destruction of public housing and violence, as well as perceptions of black youth regarding the value of music over education. In terms of enacted curriculum, the film itself was not actually discussed; the day following viewing was intended to be a discussion of the documentary, but the class period ended up being a session of personal story sharing about violence, particularly dating violence (this discussion became the focus of Chapter 7, where it will be described in detail).

After *The Field*, the remaining five weeks of Power and Identity consisted primarily of reading *The Coldest Winter Ever* (CWE) by Sister Souljah (1999). This popular young adult/

street fiction novel set in New York City in 1995 tells the story of Winter Santiago, a confident and materialistic 17 year old black female who is the daughter of a drug kingpin. Her luxurious life is transformed once her father gets arrested by the FBI and nearly all of the family's belongings are taken. Winter's mother gets shot in the face early in the novel, and she becomes a crackhead after her husband's arrest. Winter takes up several different residences, including living with a "sugar daddy," a group home, and Sister Souljah's house. She is constantly looking for ways to secure money. The novel ends with her leading a luxurious life as a drug dealer's girlfriend before she ends up in prison.

While a cautionary tale, through the protagonist's unapologetic and feisty voice, this is not a tidy turning point narrative of transformation. The author, who also is a character in the book and a well-known public figure, clearly asserts her purpose in the book's back matter, listing her eight goals for the novel: "a) To put drug use out of style, b) To put drug dealing out of style, c) To get youth to recognize their talents and convert them into business, d) To get the youth to use their time wisely, e) To recapture the black male identity, f) To redesign the black female identity, g) To put the black family back together again, and h) To expose how the American economy is fueled by drug dealing and drug money" (p. 466-470). An entire dissertation could be written on how well the book achieves these goals, particularly in the transaction between texts and readers; for my purposes, these statements reveal the ways this text is intended to weave together and explore the complexities of identity and power in a specific contemporary, urban, black context. Furthermore, there is the emphasis on money and its role in identity, both in how money affects individual choices and relates to larger systems of oppression.

Parenthood, and school-age motherhood in particular, are represented directly in this text -- in fact, as Kaplan (1997) describes, the book depicts school-age parenthood as part of "fabric of inner city life" (p. xxi). First, Winter's mother was fourteen when she had Winter. Winter points out that her parents are unusual in that they were young lovers who stayed

together. Unlike Maureen and Bert from *The Guardian*, the pregnancy did not force marriage or bond two ill-suited spouses together. Winter does not stigmatize her mother's young age; instead, Winter describes how beautiful and classy her mom looked even when pregnant, and she points out that her mom is young enough that they can party together. The novel's second example of a school-age mother, however, supports stereotypes of young mothers as unfit. Winter's friend Simone drinks during her pregnancy, goes to jail for shoplifting, physically fights Winter, and delivers a stillbirth. Simone's character is not so one-dimensional, though, as the shoplifting and fight are related to her desire to provide for her child (she fights Winter over money). The third example of school-age motherhood is a not-quite example, as Winter schedules an abortion as soon as she confirms she is pregnant. This abortion story is a counter-narrative to the ways abortion is nearly always discussed: Winter never second-guesses the decision, indicates no guilt or remorse, and portrays the procedure as quick and painless. While Winter waits at the clinic for her consultation appointment, a young woman strikes up a conversation and reveals this will be her fifth abortion and that she has "an abortion credit card." In this same scene, Winter characterizes the pregnant girls in the room as "idiots who decided to keep their babies" (Souljah, 1999, p. 397). Notably, earlier in the text, Winter wore a shirt with the text, "These are not my fucking kids" when she took her sisters to the mall (Souljah, 1999, p. 23). Clearly, teenage pregnancy is stigmatized throughout this novel, whether resulting in abortion or parenthood.

Another pointedly clear example of shame and stigma discourses around school-age parenthood comes from a scene in which Winter competes in an informal beauty pageant to earn the chance to spend the night with a hip hop celebrity, GS. His bodyguard, functioning as a "judge," asks contestants to raise their shirts and explains, "I'm checking for them nasty worms... Stretch marks. A lot of you sick bitches got nice figures and ugly stretch marks. You know you got four kids, your ass shouldn't even be here. GS doesn't want to be your babydaddy" (p. 304). In this comment, the bodyguard presents motherhood as something that

decreases female attractiveness, and also connects to good mother/bad mother discourses as he indicates that a good mother would not be present at this late-night party. Further, his statement that the rapper “doesn’t want to be your babydaddy,” illustrates themes in the novel around paternity as a trap. Also in the text an emerging drug kingpin was falsely framed as a father because the actual father was broke (p. 123). Throughout this novel fathers are depicted as clear financial providers. Winter’s mother teaches her from an early age that a woman should be taken care of by men. In fact, Winter frames her decision to seek an abortion along these practical, financially-based terms: “If it was Bullet’s baby, he would marry me, give me the whole world, the whole nine yards. But it’s Boom’s or the other guy’s. There was no way to be sure. I couldn’t front it off” (p. 400).

Winter simultaneously adheres to conventional norms about desiring marriage with a male provider and rejects conventional norms about female sexuality -- she desires, enjoys, and initiates sex. She also utilizes her sexuality to gain status and in exchange for financial support. Hill Collins (2005) characterizes Winter, who calls herself a “bad bitch,” as an embodiment of the the primary image of black women in hip hop culture: materialistic and sexualized (p. 126). The bad bitch is “a modern Jezebel repackaged for contemporary mass media” (Hill Collins, 2004, pp. 127- 128). Winter is not a sympathetic character, nor is she meant to be. While many of her ethically questionable actions (fighting a pregnant girl, manipulating men through sex, shoplifting) directly support her survival, she also beats a female senior citizen with a sock full of rocks in order to steal her money and designer shoes (p. 341). Souljah did not intend Winter to be the book’s hero; when Souljah asserts that she seeks “to redesign the black female identity,” the example she gives is of the Sister Souljah character, not Winter. I appreciate that Winter is not transformed, even a little, by her interactions with the Sister Souljah character -- the story feels more realistic in its avoidance of a savior character.

CWE enacted. Ms. Price’s content instruction focused on character analysis and symbolism. She presented a PowerPoint on character-driven vs. plot-driven novels on the

second day of reading and one on symbolism during the last week. The course's final exam, which consisted of five short-answer questions, is representative of her approach in teaching this novel. The following were the final exam questions:

- 1) How is winter an appropriate, extended metaphor for the main character's life in the novel?
- 2) Choose one character from the novel. Use 3 words to describe them and cite specific examples to support your answer.
- 3) If you could change one thing in the novel, what would it be and why?
- 4) What do you think is the overall theme or message from the novel? Explain.
- 5) What real-life people or events are you reminded of by characters or events in the story? Explain.

As these questions indicate, the enactment of this curricular segment emphasized reader response and focused on the identity of characters in primarily individual terms, without much consideration of contextual or sociopolitical factors. Ms. Price did not ask students to read any of the book's extensive back matter or discuss Souljah's purpose, nor did she spend any time talking about the characters in relationship to norms, archetypes, or literary conventions.

As intended, this book was perceived by students as a mirror text. On the second day of reading, Ms. Price asked what makes *Winter* compelling, and Gloria responded, "She's interesting because maybe like nowadays, this generation, this is how we think and act. So it's about reading about us." In response to the last question on the final exam Candace articulated the way she saw the text as a mirror: "This book reminds me of so many people I see every day, how they started off good and something in their life changes them for the worse. They become dependent on drugs, or they sell their bodies, and it's sad to see. But it's life." In class dialogue, questions of whether or not the text was representative of their generation were not really explored. Mirror texts, such as *CWE*, should do more than engage students or validate their experiences; I think there is great possibility for taking something that seems familiar and using

that as a starting point for self-analysis or beginning to consider themselves and their community in relation to the world. Ms. Price told me she wanted students to “be aware of the social influences of identity and the personal experiences that make up their identity,” and *CWE* could have been enacted towards this goal, but my observations suggest it was not.

Although Gloria claimed “it’s reading about us,” neither she nor any of the other female students verbally admitted to feeling a connection with Winter. Winter’s sexuality was by far the topic most discussed by the students in class and even in their final exams. Winter was characterized as a “ho” or “thot” and consistently criticized for her sexual desire, promiscuity, and use of sex for financial support. Calvin referred to the whole text as “that thot book” on more than one occasion. On her final exam, Ebony wrote, “Winter will never change because once a thot, always a thot. Those type of women won’t ever change into a housewife, sorry.” The term “thot” (sometimes described as an acronym for “that ho over there”) has become a go-to term for criticizing female sexual promiscuity, in the ways that “ho” or “slut” was used in the past. This term is particularly connected to poor black identities though, at least for the moment until it becomes appropriated by mainstream audiences (Hess, 2014). That this text was a “thot book,” was never countered or pushed back by Ms. Price or other students. That bothers me because the characterization positions a woman’s sexuality as her defining identity and falsely characterizes this book as a text just about sex, glossing over complex interplays of class and systemic oppression.

The ways in which this text was not actually a mirror of Ms. Price’s students’ lives was ignored. A glaring difference was in Winter’s wealthy upbringing -- until her father went to prison and all their goods were seized, Winter’s lifestyle was distinctly different from the students, many of whom receive government assistance, live in crowded conditions, and may be food insecure. Further, the portrayal of school-age mothers in the text, with no examples of independent and hard-working “good” mothers, contrasted with the images of Gloria, Ebony, Mercedes, and Candace. The mothers themselves, however, were critical of other school-age

mothers and viewed the text as largely accurate in its portrayal; references to school-age motherhood were silent in the enacted curriculum, missing opportunities to take a critical look at the predominantly one-sided model presented.

It was actually the portrayal of males, particularly through the character of Midnight, which resonated most strongly with students. Charles wanted to be like him, Gloria wanted her son to be like him, and several female students (including Candace) wanted to date him. Without articulating it, I think they realized that finally they found a black male in a literary text who was not endangered, nor did he lash out at females because of his own insecurities or feelings of powerlessness in the face of societal injustice. Midnight is strong but not aggressive, confident but not arrogant, and in the end of the book he chooses to become a father by adopting Winter's younger sisters. His character is an important disruption to the common narratives of black men. Whereas the Sister Souljah character was too preachy and espousing views far from students' worldviews, Midnight's success at staying out of jail and quietly exiting the drug trade created a more realistic hero.

In the final weeks of the semester when Ms. Price's class read this book, there were competing interests and disruptions, including Prom and the anticipation, relief, and simultaneous anxiety around graduation's fast approach. In order to reach the end of the 430 page book, some chapters were summarized instead of read and often whole periods were spent reading, with no time for follow-up discussion. As Ms. Price expected, however, students were interested in the text and eager to keep reading. In fact, on a few occasions Gloria asked if they "could get back to reading" instead of stopping to talk. All of Ms. Price's copies of the book disappeared, and she had to distribute photocopies of the chapters -- a sign that students wanted to take the book home and finish reading. Mercedes reported borrowing another book in the series from another teacher, and she gave the class updates about Winter's younger sisters from that story. Overall, the enacted curriculum was one-part reader response, with students sharing related stories to the text, and one-part productivity, with an emphasis on "how much

needs to get read today” or “getting to the end.” As may often happen at the end of term, finishing took precedence over making meaning -- but at least there was still excitement and enjoyment related to in-school reading, which is something too few students get to experience.

Course Reflections: Knowledge and consciousness impacted

“I think this class went pretty well, but it didn’t seem like I ever had enough time. And there were so many short weeks and days off. I guess when I really thought about it here at the end, I realized we only read 2 books. And we really rushed through Coldest Winter Ever. If I could change something, I would definitely like to add more stuff, different literature. I didn’t even get into a whole lot of power, like the different types of power. We basically stuck on identity. We never really went into power.

This particular class was good when it came to sharing experiences. That’s what I like about them -- when a teacher asks a class questions, you never really know, dealing with the class personality, like extremely quiet or talkative but they talk about a bunch of nothing -- but a majority of the people in this class actually had valuable shared experiences that went along with what we were talking about. It drifted off a little bit sometimes, but a majority of the time they were on track as a class, sticking the points we needed to get it and arriving at the conclusion I wanted them to get at.

As a group, they started a lot stronger than they finished. Here at the end, I feel like some of their heads were out of the game. And also so many of them went through crazy stuff outside of school. There was Ebony’s babydaddy, Charles getting beat up so bad, and then there was Candace and her new relationship and Lakesha who quit coming to take care of her mom. I don’t think I’ve ever had a class with so many real stories, so many struggles. What I will remember about this class will be the individual students. This was a tough semester for me personally too, just dealing with outside of school stuff that sometimes caused me to miss days or not be as prepared as I would have liked.”

- Ms. Price, interview after the last class

As in the first interview, Ms. Price revealed that the intention of the curriculum was to develop critical consciousness by way of texts and conversations. Keeping this goal in mind helps me make sense of what I saw as academic or content shortcomings, such as the lack of writing assignments or limited assessment of individual understandings. The statement that she wished she had time to include more texts further supports my inference that Ms. Price sees literary texts as the base of curriculum -- that the texts themselves function as tools to access knowledge and consciousness, almost regardless of the teacher’s instruction of them. She valued the time spent reading more than time spent on instructional mini-lessons, worksheets,

or writing assignments; she also valued open-ended class dialogue. While I did not observe many examples of Ms. Price linking the texts to the course themes or essential questions, the students' reflections reveal that they saw the relationship. (I created a course reflection that Ms. Price administered. This is included as Appendix C).

When asked how the themes of power and identity relate to the class, Candace expressed, "In the stories we read, people are trying to find their identities and also trying to find their own power." Gloria similarly focused on the characters: "All the books were about people struggling with their identity and having power over each other." Ebony and Mercedes, however, saw the themes in relationship to their own lives. Ebony wrote, "We talked about the identity of characters and our self. We talked about do we feel like we have power. I feel like I got power." Mercedes's response was: "This class was about developing who you are (identity) and understanding what you can control (power). Being in this class helped me think about my identity and the power I have." Although these responses do not indicate that the students' learning focused on the social components of identity that Ms. Price hoped to emphasize, they do all reference power, which Ms. Price felt like was missing from the enacted curriculum. Just as *identity* was never defined or explored as a philosophical or psychological concept, Ms. Price and her students never unpacked the term *power* either. Particularly in the comments by Ebony and Mercedes, power seems almost synonymous with individual choices. This conception of power does not indicate that Ms. Price's goal of developing a critical consciousness was fully realized because of the omission of macro systems and structures of power. However, I find it hopeful that none of the women directly indicate feeling powerless, as prevailing scripts of school-age motherhood suggest they might.

Specific to my research questions, a direct relationship between discourses of school-age parenting and the curriculum was less evident to the students. I did not address this on the year-end reflection, but in interviews I asked the mothers if anything about teen parents or parents in the texts that stood out to them. They either said no (Ebony) or focused just on the

examples in *CWE*. Candace stated, “Unfortunately, I know some moms like Winter’s friend who was drinking and fighting while pregnant.” Similarly, Gloria said, “There were some bogus teen moms in *Coldest Winter Ever*, but that’s how most of them be in real life too. They’re not in school and still doing the same things they did before they got pregnant. The book was realistic.” The curriculum functioned to reproduce dominant discourses of school-age mothers and reinforce the black, urban, welfare-receiving, unfit mother stereotype of teen parenthood. On a personal level, though, the curriculum also functioned as a tool for self-affirmation. The school-age mothers compared themselves against the stereotypical portrayal of young mothers, affirming their individual narratives of standing out.

I cannot really know the impact of Power and Identity because what students came to know or how they may have changed is difficult to express, especially without time to see how new experiences connect with thinking or learning related to the class. In classrooms more focused on pseudo-concrete results, such as gains in reading level or test scores, it would be easier to quantify impact. Ms. Price does not seem to value quantitative data beyond a final grade that reflects percentage of work completed (the emphasis here is on completed, not the level of quality, depth, or growth). I cannot say if students grew as readers or writers, but the level of overall engagement and enthusiasm indicates the course will leave some kind of lasting impression on most students. I am confident that the main impact was not a course text or even an interesting discussion; rather, Ms. Price herself was what students will remember.

When I asked all four focal participants about the class, all four answered in almost exactly the same words: “I love Ms. P’s class. I love Ms. P, period.” Gloria and Ebony had taken classes with Ms. Price the previous semester, and as Ebony explained: “Power and Identity or whatever class I took last semester, it doesn’t really matter what the class is, I like the way Ms. Price teaches. She is laid-back, cool. If you miss school, she give you enough days to make it up.” From first day to last day, the students I spoke with consistently placed Ms. Price as the center of their figured world of this classroom. The class’s short duration (4 meetings per week

for just one semester) and attendance patterns (average attendance of less than 70%) probably factor into this emphasis on the teacher over the peer community. The bottom line is that despite any critique I may offer, Ms. Price is an example of a teacher who embodied the traits and characteristics the school-age mothers of my study reported valuing most.

Floating, valuing, and mirroring. On the surface, it would be possible to infer that the students liked Ms. Price because they considered her class easy to pass. However, in their interviews, the mothers mentioned pointless, boring classes or “teachers who didn’t teach” at their previous schools, which indicates that Ms. Price’s class was seen as valuable. In fact, Ebony and Gloria both specifically told me that Ms. Price taught “important material.” They found value in the texts they read and the topics they discussed, specifically citing the conversations about gender and race.

My analysis of the data reveals three emergent characteristics of Ms. Price’s instructional practice and presence that resulted in the high levels of engagement and enjoyment of her students. First, Ms. Price was not strict, rigid, or focused on control. She described her approach:

“My philosophy is to float with the students. I’m making my presence known, but we’re all one big learning community. I usually don’t stand in front to teach. I’m usually sitting down with them to teach. I’m in the middle with the students. If you create that learning environment, it becomes this dialectic we get to have with the students. Instead of I’m the authoritative person, I’m in charge of this classroom, it gets to be all of our classroom. So I like to say I’m a floating teacher.”

Specifically for the school-age mothers, I believe this “floating” approach worked because unlike most traditional classroom structures, it positioned them like adults -- which is how they view themselves and are often positioned outside-of-school. Ms. Price was flexible and accommodating, two key characteristics that working parents in general value. (I know I look for these traits in a work environment as I deal with a young child’s frequent daycare illness). I am

also reminded of Kelly's (2000) study of a school's inclusion practices, in which the school-age mothers were purposefully placed with accommodating teachers; Ms. Price would certainly be a teacher selected for her willingness to accept make-up work and extend deadlines.

Underlying the way Ms. Price talks about her teaching is a clear sense that she values her students as people who have stories to share and opinions to express. This trait, valuing, is the second characteristic that is important for creating a conducive learning environment. Her choice of "dialectic" in describing her classroom indicates a philosophy of reciprocity, in which teachers and students learn from one another, further supported by choosing dialogue as the course's primary instructional strategy. The students I spoke with stated that Ms. Price "respected" (Mercedes) and "understood" (Gloria) them. Gloria explained, "I like Ms. Price because she let us express how we feel, from the outside and the inside. She talks to us. Other teachers don't." Ms. Price acknowledged the parents individually before or after class, such as asking if the baby felt better, and I know she had many private conversations with all four of the mothers (and many other students) that I did not get to see. When she spoke to me about the school-age mothers, she framed them as more motivated and mature through their parenting role, never using deficit or stigmatizing language. She told me, "All four of the students you were looking at, they're some of the brightest in the school and the best leaders."

While any teacher could take a floating approach and work to demonstrate that he/she values students, Ms. Price's body and life separate her from most teachers. Students, particularly the school-age mothers, could actually see a reflection of themselves in Ms. Price -- she shared their racial identity, she grew up in the same neighborhood as the school, and she was once a school-age mother. She did not explicitly focus on these points of similarity, other than some mentions of "our complexion" or "our race," and students would have to do some estimated math to realize she became a mother at sixteen; however, it was evident that the students read her as kind of an insider, at least more than their other teachers. She typically dressed in a similar style as the students, wearing jeans and sweatshirts. I also noticed how

students referenced television shows or radio stations, assuming she also watched or listened, while I recall my students knowing they had to provide more context for me, their white teacher from Indiana. Gloria directly told me, “Ms. Price will tell us how she feels about a situation because she’s been through it already, or she understands where we coming from. She was born and raised around here.” Ms. Price viewed herself as both an insider and outsider. While she grew up in the neighborhood, she came from a two-parent home and attended a magnet high school across the city. She told me, “I do think it helps to know about where the students came from, but these students have been through things that I haven’t. They have faced situations that my friends and I didn’t have to deal with.” Now thirty years old, living in the suburbs, engaged to the father of her second child, with a Master’s degree and established career, she told me she could not always relate to the students’ stories. None of the case study participants referred to Ms. Price as a role model directly, but both Candace and Mercedes mentioned knowing she had been a teen mom too, and I think it is very likely that they see versions of possible future selves in her. I want to be clear that her identity positions alone do not make her a favorite teacher -- and there are other staff in the building with similar backgrounds who do are not as well-loved; however, the combination of mirroring, floating, and valuing worked to create a teacher who is well-liked and whose classroom was a place of lively conversations about topics students find interesting.

Conclusions and Reflections

Just as the students will remember Ms. Price more than the texts or activities, when I asked Ms. Price what she would remember about this class, she told me, “the individual students and their stories.” I know what she means, as the same is true of my memories of nearly all classes I have taught. After all, it is the memories of school-age mothers from my classroom that inspired this project and shaped the original questions. While texts and lesson plans may be the foundation or springboard for a class, it is the people who embrace, resist, deepen, and deter from the intended curriculum to create what actually happens and what

actually has an impact. Ms. Price's reflection also stressed the temporal quality of the curriculum, as the duration, pacing, and flow of a course influences the learning. I shared her perception that the course felt short and somewhat fragmented; specifically, during the first month of the class there were five days off for holidays, a weather emergency, and logistics (report card pick-up). I also shared Ms. Price's view that the class started off stronger than it finished, as evidenced by student attendance and attention, as well as Ms. Price's own level of preparation for the lessons. I appreciate her admission, "This was a tough semester for me personally too," and I expect all educators can understand that some semesters even after the earliest years of teaching include obstacles or challenges that may come from outside the classroom.

I cannot say with confidence that Ms. Price's curricular goals for the semester were met, but my evidence does suggest that the texts of the formal curriculum and Ms. Price's approach resonated with the school-age mothers in the class. Even if transformation did not happen during this term, I think it is entirely possible that later students may harken knowledge accessed through the curriculum to make sense of new experiences. Perhaps that will be in regards to the bystander effect from *The Guardian*, considering kinds of otherness, or rethinking gender stereotypes. When considering the influence of experiences on the future, I always keep Freire's (2000 [1970]) notion in mind, that we have to consider "men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (p. 84). Although the students submitted their final exam to Ms. Price on June 8, 2015 and my data collection ended, the curriculum will continue to function as a tool in the minds and lives of the students.

Chapter 5: Reading with Their Bodies - Motherhood as a Reader Stance

"You have to think more, period, when you're a mother." - Candace

Candace's first day in Power and Identity was a month into the semester. As she enters the room just before the bell, she gives Ms. Price a hug and says, "See, you knew I'd be back." The only student with red hair (although these Kool-Aid red braids are clearly not her natural color) and eyebrows dyed to match, Candace's physical appearance stands out. She dons fake eyelashes so long they touch the lenses of her glasses (she is also the only student wearing glasses), has a piercing above her lip, and is wearing a low-cut, skin hugging black top that showcases her curves and the two tattoos on her upper chest (I later learn one is for each of her children). She takes the seat closest to Ms. Price's desk without acknowledging any of her peers. I'm watching her so closely, I forget to scan the room to see how her classmates respond to this new student.

Ms. Price initiates a pre-reading conversation about the bystander effect as she passes out copies of the *The Guardian*, and Candace is the first student to volunteer a response, despite missing the previous day's lesson on the bystander effect:

Ms. Price: Let me ask you guys this because it applies directly to the book we're going to be reading. Say it's the 1940s. We live in the South, and there's a lot of racism and lynchings. One of your family members got lynched. Would the bystander effect apply to that situation?

Candace: Sure, people would stay quiet because they don't want to get lynched too.

Mercedes: That's what I was going to say.

Candace is also the first to volunteer to read aloud from *The Guardian* and to identify the prologue as an example of personification: "There are times when a tree can no longer

withstand the pain inflicted on it, and the wind will take pity on that tree and topples it over in a mighty storm. All the other trees who witnessed the evil look down upon the fallen tree with envy. They pray for the day when a wind will end their suffering” (Lester, 2008, p. 1). She told the class, “The tree represents a suffering person.” Then, she also took on the perspective of one of the other trees to counter the author’s claim: “If I were one of those other trees, I wouldn’t feel envy. I’d feel pity for the one that couldn’t take it.” Ms. Price asks why the trees were suffering, and Mercedes infers, “I think they saw lynching, the lynching of black people.”

When the class period ends, I immediately rush up to Ms. Price to ask, “Who is the new student?” Ms. Price tells me, “Oh, you definitely need to talk to her for your project. That’s Demarcus’s babymama. She has two kids, and she’s about to age out of here.” I say, “She just jumped right in today, impressive.” Ms. Price responds, “Yes, I had her last semester too. She’s really bright and came from quality schools.” (These “quality schools” are suburban.)

Throughout the semester, Candace seemed to pop in every few weeks. I never saw her twice in the same week during my visits. However, when she was present, just over one-third of the time, she was always one of the most active participants, especially if the lesson involved reading. She volunteered to read aloud and answered comprehension and analysis questions with ease, even if she previously missed big chunks of the text. I was struck by the range of her vocabulary and speech styles, as she demonstrated both a strong academic vocabulary and affinity for curse words. For example, a few pages into *The Guardian* she declared, “Ohh, I think this is foreshadowing that his daddy is going to lynch Little Willie’s ass. It’s like he’s saying, ‘You can’t be friends with a fucking nigger.’”

Focusing on Candace’s attendance (39%) or final grade (D) would typically indicate she was not a successful student in Ms. Price’s class; additionally the parts of her story that involve “catching a case,” enrolling in school as part of her probationary sentence, and losing custody of her children seem to contrast the savvy, engaged reader I describe Candace as. My observations and conversations with Candace, however, indicate that she engaged deeply with

the curriculum and learned in the process. Although I certainly wish she attended more regularly, I see her example as a way to complicate -- or thicken -- the meaning of school success. I am interested in why she seemed so invested, or at least willing to participate, in reading literature in Ms. Price's class even though she did not reveal the same level of investment in school in general. I wonder, what can her transactions with texts tell me about who she is as a student and a person? Further, does being a mother impact her reading, and if so, in what ways? I am also interested in what to make of the significant difference in participation during classroom reading events of Candace and the other school-age mothers, in comparison to their non-parenting peers.

Candace, Mercedes, Gloria, and Ebony combined to answered over 70% of comprehension or recall-based questions about texts during the semester. They were also the most likely to share textual connections, predictions, and analysis: over 75% of analytical or meaning-making comments came from the mothers as well. Considering they represent only 25% of the class, the comparison of mothers to non-mothers is striking. Within these responses, they frequently drew from their experiences as mothers or positioned themselves as parents. In this chapter, I look specifically at this relationship between the mothers and classroom reading events, seeking to understand why the school-age mothers were particularly engaged and how their responses to texts might inform curricular decisions and literacy instruction.

This chapter builds on the previous one by exploring the enacted curriculum more deeply, focusing on transactions with texts. Here, I describe existing research, theory, and my findings related to the relationship between school-age parenthood and in-school reading. I bring together Rosenblatt's transactional theory and the Funds of Knowledge approach conceptualized by Moll and Greenberg to analyze how the participants in my study read, responded to, and made meaning from course texts in ways that specifically drew on their lived experience as mothers. Initial guiding research questions for the data discussed in this chapter included: How do school-age parents utilize literacy practices to explore their identities,

including their parenting identity? What is the relationship between how school-age parents report using literacy in relation to their parenting role outside of school and their classroom-based literacy practices? How do school-age parents bring their parenting identities into transactions with texts they read and produce?

School-Age Mothers and Reading: Research Review and Theoretical Framework

Although it is more common to the study the literacies of school-age parents in the contexts of intervention programs and outcomes for their children, a few key contemporary researchers have previously explored the literate identities of school-age mothers. In summary, existing research has found that school-age mothers employ literacy practices for a variety of purposes. Coffel (2011) organized a book club for three school-age mothers from an alternative high school, focusing on reading young adult texts about teen parenthood including *Imani All Mine* and *Make Lemonade*. In Coffel's (2011) study, the participants reported reading more outside of school since becoming mothers, both for self-improvement and to improve their child's chances of success. The mothers in her study also described social purposes for reading and writing, including reading books and articles with a husband or writing letters to a father in jail. She noted that the participants were "conventional" readers, who read uncritically and focused on personal points of connection with main characters.

Similar to Coffel's findings, Lycke (2010) reports that the two case study participants in her study at an inclusive alternative high school reported changes in their home-based literacy practices, as well as their identities. One case study participant began to utilize reading for education about parenting and started writing notes and lists as ways to organize her thinking and direct her actions. Lycke (2010) also found a "critical reciprocal relationship between teen mothers' literacy practices and children's emergence into literacy," as both case study participants reported engaging in literacy activities with their children (p.80). She further asserts that school-age mothers value education and have literate lives outside of school, often enhanced by having a child. These literacy practices, and especially the changes that emerged

during parenthood, correspond with identity shifts as well. The participants reported now considering themselves adults, with more focus on practical matters and ability to use literacy for self-advocacy. Missing from the current research is a study that focuses on school experiences and school-based literacy.

Transactional theory: Reading across and through bodies. While motherhood is an identity position rooted in the body -- physical processes such as stretching, birthing, nursing, holding -- previous literacy research on mothers has not been explicitly framed with theories that account for the relationship of the body to reading. Dewey's (1925) notion that the body is not just ruled by skin, but rather is a pattern of behavior, is particularly useful in considering the bodies of mothers. Especially during the earliest months of motherhood, the boundaries between mother and child are blurred as newborns adjust to life outside the mother's body. I contend that even for mothers whose skin bears no traces of pregnancy or birth, whose bodies return to "pre-baby weight and shape," whose children grow older and no longer ask to be carried everywhere, or mothers who adopted rather than birthed -- their bodies remain inextricably connected to their mothering identities, and their bodies hold the visceral memories of the pregnancy/birth/new mother experiences. In Dewey's rejection of the mind-body duality, there is no need to differentiate between how motherhood is perceived and experience in the brain versus the skin or nerves.

Atwell-Vasey (1998) asserts, "We read as bodies," explaining, "thought is inextricably bound to the body and the body is inextricably bound to thought...The body is also what takes up attitudes for us, and so it is pivotal in memory and in reading" (p. 70). Similar to Sullivan's (2001) notion that we live across and through skins, I believe reading happens across and through bodies. When the school-age mothers of this study approach texts, they read with those bodies that have been changed by motherhood, bodies that have been classified and marginalized by ideological conceptions of what it means to be poor, unmarried, black, and a mother. My understanding of reading is based in Rosenblatt's transactional theory. This

framework includes the idea that any reading event, which Rosenblatt (1978) calls a “poem,” is “embodied in a process resulting from the confluence of reader and text” (p.16). She crafts a metaphor between reading and a live electric circuit to highlight the very active transaction that occurs when the bodies of readers meet the words on a page (p. 14). The theory’s name comes from Dewey’s (1949) distinction between an interaction -- between two distinct objects -- and transaction -- in which knower and known are blurred and evolving.

For Rosenblatt (and me), meaning only happens in the transaction between reader and text. This means that the meaning of texts is not static or definite, but it also means that the reader does not create the meaning by himself/herself. Readers bring knowledge and personal experiences to texts; readers select what to attune to based on their purpose for reading (Rosenblatt 1978; 1993). I personally have noticed how my selective attention is often connected to my mothering identity, as I pay closer attention to parents in texts and find myself imagining future identities for my daughter based on a character or theme. I construct meaning from texts differently today than I did five years ago because of the meaning I bring to texts. This is not to say that all mothers would construct meaning in the same way as I do or tune into the same ideas in a text, as we all read from multiple identity positions and as part of a complex social nexus. I am interested in the ways readers who share some identity positions -- such as the mothers in this study -- construct meaning from the same texts and what their transactions with texts reveal about the relationship between school and life as a school-age mother.

Motherhood as a fund of knowledge. Building on the idea that school-age mothers read with their bodies and lives, I see their parenting experience as an opportunity for enriching and deepening their transactions with texts. A specific theoretical contribution I hope to make with this study is the application of a “funds of knowledge” approach as a way to view school-age parents’ lived experiences as potential assets as readers and students. As conceptualized by Moll and Greenberg (1990), “funds of knowledge” (FoK) refer to the out-of-school skills, resources, and networks that households draw from in order to function and thrive. Such a

framework rejects deficit notions that marginalized students' home lives impair their abilities as students, focusing instead on uncovering the untapped knowledge and skills that students actually bring with them into classrooms. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) argue that schools should develop curriculum based on ethnographic studies of the FoK of their students' worlds.

Although over the past twenty years, a sizable body of FoK work has accumulated in the fields of early childhood, family, and even adolescent literacy, no one has yet specifically framed such a study on the classroom implications for school-age parents. Johnson (2009) investigated the ways in which teen mothers of Puerto Rican descent learned to parent, with a focus on how parenting education programs could better connect with these community and cultural sources of knowledge. In contrast, I am interested in ways school-age parents may be using their parenting funds of knowledge to their benefit in school, particularly as readers, as well as ways teachers may capitalize on this experiential knowledge. Without citing her findings as "funds of knowledge," Lycke (2009) reported examples of these literacy-based changes for her case study participants, which leads me to wonder if there is a transfer to the school setting. While my project does not follow the typical home-study approach of most funds of knowledge research, I attempted to use interview questions about students' lives, students' writing, and careful examination of classroom actions and interactions as "windows" into FoK (Street, 2005). This approach sets my study directly in opposition to deficit-model research that perpetuates largely unfounded stereotypes of who school-age parents are as students and people. Such a frame also honors community and cultural knowledge in ways that schools tend to ignore.

Linking with neuroscience. My theoretical framework is further supported by recent neuroscience research that focuses on how motherhood influences the brain. Beyond my anecdotal experience that becoming a parent changed my reading life, it turns out that MRI brain scans and rat studies indicate that brains shrink during pregnancy as a result of neural pathways actively remapping (Kingsley and Lambert, 2002 as cited in Ellison, 2005).

Motherhood does, in fact, change the body in lasting ways, specifically through changes in the brain. In dominant and popular discourses, “mommy brain” refers to ways that motherhood decreases a woman’s mental capacity. In contrast to this stereotype, Ellison (2005) argues that although some studies find correlations between pregnancy, early motherhood, and lapses in memory, after the first few months of parenting, mothers’ brains appear to be boosted in five key areas: perception, efficiency, resiliency, motivation, and emotional intelligence. These findings link to ways that mothering experience may function as a resource for students; when reading with their “baby-boosted brains,” the mothers of this study may be reading with increased capacities and skills. As Candace told me when I asked her if being a mother had influenced who she is as student, “You have to think more, period, when you’re a mother.” I do not disagree.

Reading Events and Reader-Response in Ms. Price’s Classroom

During fifteen of my thirty-one visits, reading was a central activity of the class. As described in the previous chapter, these texts included two novels, *The Guardian* by Julius Lester and *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah; one short story, “Thank You, Ma’am” by Langston Hughes; several poems, and two news articles. In this chapter, I focus on data collected related to these reading events, as framed by Rosenblatt (1988): “Every reading act is an event, a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular configuration of marks on the page, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context” (p. 4). A majority of students’ analysis and response was oral, as Ms. Price’s approach prioritized dialogue over written response. I also draw from interview data, as I included questions about course texts when I spoke with case studies.

Thinking more, reading more, responding more. As discussed in this chapter’s introduction, the school-age mothers enrolled in Ms. Price’s class were the most active classroom participants during reading events. This level of heightened participation intrigued me all semester, and I can infer a few possible reasons for the phenomenon. As Lycke (2009) and

Coffel (2011) found, I believe the mothers read more now than they did before parenthood, and reading more might connect with increased comfort and skill reading and responding to texts. At first they each responded in interviews that they did not have much time for reading, but upon further questions I discovered that all four mothers read quite a bit and for a range of reasons; they just do not read many novels at home. Only Mercedes had reported reading a book outside of class during the semester (it was the sequel to *Coldest Winter Ever*). The other three mothers did not regularly read novels before parenthood, either. However, all four mothers reported reading to their children every day (Candace reported reading to hers every time she saw them, which was not every day). Ebony told me, “I don’t even pick up a book if I’m not in school, unless I’m reading to my son. He has like a book collection and a lot of books, and I read him books that like help him learn ABCs and stuff like that. I read to him every day, and he just loves books. When he wants to read, he’ll pick up a book and bring it to me, saying ‘Ma, Ma, Ma.’ I’ll be like, I don’t feel like reading, but he’ll sit on the floor reading until I just pick it up and read it to him.”

All four women also told me they constantly referred to the Internet with questions about their children, mostly medically-related. For example, Candace laughed as she told me, “Google is my best friend.” Additionally, they reported spending time on social media each day, noting that they kept up with news through Facebook. Three of the four (Mercedes, Candace, and Gloria) also referenced reading magazines. When asked to estimate how many minutes they read per day outside of school, the answers ranged from Gloria’s 60 to Mercedes’s 180. Gloria and Mercedes both mentioned that they spent more time reading after having a child because they were at home more. Gloria explained, “I was never one to sit and home and just read a book because I preferred to be out with my friends. I still don’t really read many books, but I do find myself reading more magazines, reading stuff online, and reading to my son because now I stay home all the time. After school my friends will always ask why I’m not coming out, but I feel like mothers are supposed to with their children after they’ve been at daycare all day.” I do not

have data on their reading level before becoming mothers, but I believe there is a possible correlation between the increased outside-of-school reading and strong recall and comprehension abilities in-school. In the final exam on *Coldest Winter Ever*, which focused primarily on character and theme analysis, the mothers performed better than nearly all of their classmates -- they all earned As, and Ms. Price told me that Candace and Mercedes gave the most specific and detailed responses of the class.

At the very least, there seems to be a strong connection between the mothering students' involvement in the class and their motivation. Ellison (2005) identifies motivation as one of the key characteristics of a "baby-boosted" brain, and she specifically focuses on how low-income and teenage mothers transform their lives in positive ways because of motherhood. She also reports that mothers feel more confident and often experience power for the first time through motherhood. Research comparing rat mothers to non-mothers not only finds that mothers act more assertively, but also the fear centers in their brains show far less engagement when exposed to stressors (Kinsley and Lambert, cited in Ellison 2005). These studies support that it was in fact the students' mothering identities that caused them to take such an active role in the classroom, and I think they were particularly motivated as readers because they felt a clear purpose for being in school and saw the reading events as important to school success. In addition to operating as a fund of knowledge, motherhood clearly seems to be a fund of motivation.

In interviews, all four mothers spoke of feeling motivated by their children. Ebony's sentiment reflects what they all told me:

"When you're a teen mom, you want to make something of yourself. You're trying to make it for your baby. I know with me being a teen mom, I got pregnant my sophomore year, it made me encourage myself. Because you know, you got to get up and take care of this baby. If you don't take care of this baby, who's going to take care of it for you? Ain't nobody going to treat your baby like you do. That's how I feel. So everyday I get up

and go to school, it's for him. You know, to make him better so he don't never got to struggle; he don't never got to ask nobody for nothing. I better myself to make him a better person."

Ebony's message mirrors the themes of memoirs such as *Life After Birth: A Memoir of Survival and Success as a Teenage Mother* (Owens, 2010) and research by Zachry (2005) and Coffel (2011).

Although Ebony and Mercedes both cited their children as sources of motivation, they reported being "Honor Roll students" throughout their school histories. Gloria, on the other hand, told me that before becoming a mother she was always skipping school and getting suspended for fighting. Candace told me that even when she returned to school after having her first child, "School wasn't that important to me, just the social aspect. I clowned around in class. I was Miss Popular." She told me that she gave up on school because she was far behind, and she thought making money was more important. She explained:

"The only thing I was focused on was getting money to make sure I could provide for my daughter. There are so many temp agencies out where I lived, so that's what I was doing. I was thinking like, oh there's this warehouse, I'm making \$9.75. Then I had another kid, and that \$9.75 didn't do nothing. And I had this man, and he didn't want to do nothing. I was trying to take care of a family of four, and I realized I was never going to make enough unless I went back to school. So when I started here, I was a much more focused student."

Her description as a "focused student" was true when she was present, but her attendance patterns indicate that she still did not necessarily consider school her main priority. As Luker (1997) found, Candace is an example of a school-age mother who was not very engaged in school before becoming pregnant and who showed some level of increased motivation after (although in her case, it really took having two children for this change to occur.)

As Lycke (2010) describes, the participants in this study also reveal a “critical reciprocal relationship between teen mothers’ literacy practices and children’s emergence into literacy” (p.80). My evidence suggests that motivation is the root of this relationship, as the mothers’ desire for success leads them to value literacy practices, probably prompted by early literacy initiatives connected with teen parents programs. All four mothers mentioned reading pamphlets and attending parenting classes as part of teen parents programs; they told me the topics focused on nutrition, health, reading to your kids, and discipline. Reports from the Illinois Early Childhood Prevention Initiative Program reveal that language-literacy development is the third most common topic of workshops for teen parents (2008) and that 81.6% of teen parents report reading to their children more often as a result of parenting programs (2013). When I asked Candace if she read to her children, she responded, “Of course, absolutely. I try to do all the things my mother didn’t do. I try to do everything by the book.” I believe this statement reveals how she has embraced the message of the literacy initiatives. I also think the emphasis on literacy, and particularly reading, of these programs may increase the motivation of school-age parents towards school-based reading events.

I worry, however, that the focus of most of this motivation is on “doing school,” rather than on learning. As I noticed in the portrayals of school in popular culture, the mothers in this study emphasized “getting the work done” in order to graduate -- all four also mentioned that the work in Ms. Price’s class was “easy.” I noticed that when they shared responses, either literal or interpretive, Ms. Price never probed them to explain further or challenged them to consider another perspective. Ms. Price’s framing of most reading events focused on productivity, emphasizing how many pages needed to be read or how many minutes they would read that day. The students liked her approach and considered her to be a “motivating teacher” (Ebony), but I wonder how teachers can tap into students’, particularly mothers’, motivation in ways that goes beyond “getting the work done.”

Funds of knowledge: oral reading and research skills. Related to their literacy practices outside-of-school, the data from Ms. Price's class reveals two skills-based funds of knowledge. First, the mothers are efficient at conducting Internet searches. Just as they reported frequently referring to the Internet with parenting questions, I saw this skill transfer in the ease and quickness with which the mothers completed research-oriented tasks. I noticed that when working with a partner in the computer lab, the mothers completed all of the research for their assignments and did not ask for any assistance in generating search terms or narrowing down content. In one instance, I witnessed Ebony explain to her partner that the website they had opened didn't look right -- "didn't seem legit." She was relying on her knowledge of website credibility from her Internet searches of medical information about her son, noticing that the page was a forum rather than a professional looking site.

The sub-finding of this example is about mother's knowledge of medical conditions, treatments, and general health and nutrition information, which is a potential area for teachers to consider as they develop curricula related to FoK. Specific to English classes, teachers should consider opportunities to allow students to use technology, look to the Internet for supporting information, and also possibly educate their peers on topics such as website credibility. Building in short research assignments or research-oriented options to projects would be a good practice to appeal to school-age parents' expertise.

Similarly, another practical fund of knowledge that my data supports is oral fluency in reading. While Ms. Price did most of the reading aloud, when students volunteered, almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the time it was one of the mothers. Three of the four mothers (Ebony was the exception) read aloud during the semester, whereas only two members of the rest of the class volunteered. I noticed that all of the volunteers read with clear enunciation, few miscues, and even used tone, volume, and pacing to create desired effects with their voices; in short, all three mothers who read aloud were skilled oral readers. I believe the amount of time the mothers spend reading to their children has probably enhanced their confidence and competence with reading aloud. This

finding indicates that classroom strategies that connect with performative aspects of literacy, for example readers theatre, may particularly appeal to school-age mothers.

Selective attention and perspective taking. Digging deeper into the kinds of responses the mothers gave during reading events, I see clear evidence that their selective attention and constructions of meaning are shaped by motherhood. For example, as the class approached the end of *The Guardian* by Julius Lester, the following conversation resulted:

Candace: I can't believe she [Maureen, the mother] wouldn't go. She's not going to make it. He's [Bert, her husband] going to kill her.

Gloria: My mamma finally shot my daddy. I thought they would kill each other, but when she shot him in the arm he finally left her alone. He threw her down the stairs, he broke my grandma's finger trying to get to her.

Mercedes: I think she's going to kill herself.

Candace: She [Maureen, the mother] ought to kill him [her husband], or he'll kill her.

Mercedes: But it's not like he even cares that much about Ansel. Is he just mad because it's with Esther?

Candace: If I was going to start over, there's no way I wouldn't be with my kids. No matter how much you trust someone else, you need to be there.

Mercedes: Too right.

In this exchange, the transaction between reader and text is clear; the students' experiences and identity positions shapes their response. Notably, only mothers responded aloud. First, Gloria connects the characters to her own parents with her graphic anecdote about her mother shooting her father. Her response is essentially a text to self-connection based on a dysfunctional relationship. The social nature of reading is also apparent: although Candace does not acknowledge Gloria's statement directly, she revises her initial prediction that Burt will kill Maureen to reflect the possibility that Maureen could kill him instead.

Mercedes's responses are the most closely rooted in the text. It turns out that she is correct: Maureen does kill herself. She told me in an interview that Maureen reminded her of "some lady in a Lifetime movie" she saw, calling her "passive," and that is how she came to the conclusion Maureen might kill herself. Although not stated in the class dialogue, Mercedes relied on a text to text connection to make an inference. Mercedes's question about Bert's motivation went unanswered, though, as Candace followed up by placing herself in Maureen's shoes and speaks directly as a mother with the statement that began, "If I was going to start over, there's no way I wouldn't be with my kids." Because I know that Candace did not have custody of her children at the time, I find this connection particularly powerful. She knows firsthand what it is like not to be with one's own children, and she draws on this experience to adamantly criticize the character's action. In an interview I asked Candace to reflect on *The Guardian* and what she took away from it. An abbreviated version of her response was included in chapter 3, as I found her response particularly thoughtful and interesting:

"Life is crazy. You never know what's going to happen. Like I felt like that dad could of did more. It just shows, like in real life situations, that people don't always do the right things, and you have to suffer those consequences. He had to spend the rest of his life alone -- why would you want to spend the rest of your life alone when you could of just told the truth? You could still have your wife, have your kid. You could be an honorable guy. Instead, you let this man die for no reason. The book was crazy.

I actually was a bit disappointed at the end. I couldn't believe Maureen killed herself. That was crazy! I would have packed my son up, told Burt we're leaving, and I would have left with him. There's no way I would have sat there and killed myself. But everybody doesn't have that fighting spirit in them.

That's what I learned from that too, not everybody is a fighter. Everybody's not willing to put in that extra work to survive. She wasn't. She thought her life was over; I

don't know how, she had this son to live for and he was going to go start over. How can you let him leave with somebody you kind of know? I would never!

It was a good book. It definitely left an impression on me. I want to do better. I want to be honorable, a stand-up person. I wouldn't want to be a wuss."

Most interesting to me is how clearly her selective attention is focused on the parents, rather than the protagonist of the book. There is also an emotional intensity to her response that stems directly from her identity as a mother, particularly a mother who has faced a difficult separation from her children. Although Candace took on Maureen's perspective, she did not feel a strong similarity with her beyond the ties of motherhood. Unlike Maureen, she is a "fighter."

This example of taking on the perspective of a character, usually an auxiliary character in a text, was a clear pattern during reading events. Most often, these characters were the parents in a story. As part of the mini-unit on modern day lynching, one group of students presented a summary of an article about the mysterious death of high school student Kendrick Johnson. Gloria was particularly moved by this story and asked Ms. Price if she could look on the computer for more information, finding a video by activist Jeff Nation about the incident. Several times, both during reading and after viewing, Gloria repeated, "I just can't imagine if that was my son." Once Candace responded to her, stating, "If it were my son you better believe I'd kick all their asses, anyone who might have known something." While all of the students appeared interested in the topic, the mothers were once again the most outspoken and the only students to offer comments that were not clarification questions.

Only when prompted by Ms. Price did any non-mothers take on the perspective of a parent. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the class read an article about a gender-neutral preschool in Sweden as part of the gender unit. There was general agreement that "gender-neutral" was a bad idea, and the conversation quickly jumped to sexuality and claims that such a school would lead to homosexual children. Mercedes asserted that the school was a "Bad idea, period. When she gets older, my daughter can do what she wants, but when she's little I'm

not putting those ideas in.” Ms. Price asked, “Would anyone let your child attend that school?” There were many “hell no” murmurs, but only Gloria spoke in opposition: “I’ll send my kid there. It doesn’t mean you would end up gay.” Calvin retorted, “If it were my kid, especially a boy, no way I’m taking that chance.” Gloria’s willingness to speak up for a viewpoint not shared by her classmates connects with her self-narrative as someone who stands out among her peers and resists their norms. I was not entirely sure she meant it, as she also likes to take the jokester role. In an interview, she confirmed that she would probably “consider the school,” though.

As I find myself doing as I read, the mothers also projected future selves of their children onto characters. When reading a passage from *The Coldest Winter Ever* about a character refusing to talk to authorities and killing a snitch in prison, Gloria shouted, “That’s how I want my son to be!” Similarly, on the final exam, which consisted of short-answer questions about *The Coldest Winter Ever*, Gloria selected the character Midnight to analyze for one of the questions, and she stated, “He the kind of man I hope my son become someday, strong, wise, and about his business.” In these examples, Gloria seems to be imagining her son as a future criminal and drug dealer (Drugs are Midnight’s business). However, I see how my white middle-class biases shaded my initial reading of her comments, and that Gloria is instead able to separate the career from the personal characteristics. From my conversations with her, as well as her willingness to share that she briefly sold drugs but stopped, I do not actually believe Gloria’s vision for son’s success centers on criminal activity, but rather on the ability to maintained focused on goals.

Candace chose Santiago, Winter’s father, to analyze for the same question on the final exam. She responded: “Santiago is a hustler, devoted dad, and serious. Santiago always made sure his girls were straight money-wise, and the made sure they know how to be strong, smart, and about business. He was a businessman and a hustler, but at the same time he was a family man.” I notice how her selective attention is focused on this father character, and from the criticism she offered about her ex-boyfriend, I think she is clearly contrasting the father in the

text with her own children's father "who don't want to do nothing" and did not provide for their family.

In contrast, Mercedes' selective attention focuses on the sexual life of the novel's female protagonist as a warning for the mother of a daughter. On two occasions during *The Coldest Winter Ever* when Winter initiates sex and mentions losing her virginity at age 12, Mercedes commented to the student next to her "Oh, my daughter better never even think of that!" These examples reveal that although still adolescents or young adults, the mothers often read with their "mother hats" on and were more likely to connect adolescent characters to their children's future selves than their own present selves.

What is perhaps more interesting than these examples of reading as mothers are the instances of perspective-taking and connecting that did not directly relate to parenthood. While a few other students made text to self connections during class discussions, no other students directly took on the perspective of a character or stated that they knew how a character felt. Both Mercedes and Candace, however, responded from multiple perspective points over the course of the term. In relation to *The Guardian*, Mercedes put herself in the shoes of the main character, Ansel, stating, "I can sort of imagine how he feels. He has to betray his daddy or his friend, and even if he's wrong, that's still his daddy." At the end of the semester, her response to *The Guardian* focused instead on another character, Little Willie. On the course reflection she wrote "Little Willie is the one character I sort of relate to. He's smart, he's different, and he's going to be successful. He doesn't let his race or where he's from stop him. I was glad the book ended up okay for him."

As described in this chapter's opening, on her first day in Ms. Price's class, Candace imagined the perspective of a personified tree: "If I were one of those other trees, I wouldn't feel envy. I'd feel pity for the one that couldn't take it." In this response, I see a parallel with her characterization of Maureen as "not a fighter;" as Candace reads with her body and life, she particularly notices when characters do not have her fighting spirit, when they can't "take it." She

referenced being a “fighter” in her analysis of Winter from *CWE* on her final exam as well: “I feel like winter is an appropriate metaphor for the character because of all her struggles and trials she always remained a fighter. In the winter you have to fight to stay warm, and she had to fight for her survival. She had to learn to be harsh like that winter air.” To me, Candace’s thoughtful responses about the “fighting spirit” of characters indicate a level of emotional intelligence.

Funds of knowledge: Perspective-taking and emotional intelligence. The fact that students who are parents can identify with parents in a text is not surprising, but this ability reveals another way that the parenting identity position enhances transactions with texts. Ellison (2005) explains that mothers tend to be more empathetic than non-mothers, as well as more likely to be experts in Theory of Mind -- “the art of figuring out what someone inherently different from you is thinking” (p. 133). Compared to their peers, the mothers in Ms. Price’s class have more practice imagining what another human being is thinking and feeling; after all, they are constantly “reading” the cries, nonverbal cues, and in some cases the barely coherent first mutterings of their children to find out what they feel, want, and need. The frequency of perspective-taking comments in this study’s data indicates that this experience is transferring into their transaction with the characters in literary texts as well. A clear practical implication of this finding is for teachers to ask questions from multiple perspectives, including the parents of main characters, and allow writing options from different perspectives, in order to help school-age parents tap into this asset.

Limitations, Untapped Funds, and Conclusions

As supported by their active participation, Ms. Price’s approach worked well for engaging all four school-age mothers in reading events. Her approach was very “low-key,” as described by both Ebony and Candace. Nearly all reading events began with a quick pre-reading recap of what was read before or preview of a new text, followed up uninterrupted reading aloud (usually by Ms. Price), and then a discussion prompted by a few follow-up questions. Daily assessments were informal and collective. Although it was easy for me to take a critical stance and desire that

she would incorporate a wider range of instructional strategies, I have to admit that the case study students found enjoyment and value in the class. I appreciate Ms. Price's emphasis on the aesthetic stance, which is often de-valued in school. Rosenblatt (1983) first conceptualized the continuum of aesthetic and efferent reading -- on one end the reader is focused on during reading, at the other end the focus is on what will be done after; put another way, reading for pleasure versus information. As the students became accustomed to not having study guides or written assignments to complete about a reading, they were probably more able to concern themselves with the "emotions, needs, problems, and aspirations of themselves and other human beings" in the text (Rosenblatt, 1983, p. 274).

Because of Ms. Price's "low-key" approach, my data was primarily limited to classroom talk about texts (with some support from interviews). This dialogue did not include many follow-up or probing questions, and much less time was spent discussing texts than on the general classroom talk described in the Chapter 3. The complex processes at work during transactions between readers and texts largely remained internalized; the vocal role of the school-age mothers, however, provided significantly more insight than if I had chosen to study any other students in the class. I realize that their almost-hyper-involvement could be questioned as an anomaly; however, my classroom at WAC usually showed a similar level of active participation from school-age mothers. In fact, it was this vivaciousness, willingness to speak their mind, and level of motivation that I observed in my mothering students that first led me to this study. When I think back to the opening vignette of Chapter 1, I see the connections between Shante's perspective-taking and the findings in Ms. Price's class. In preparation for this study, I also aggregated data from a semester of my teaching to compare the grades of students who were mothers and non-mothering female students and found that the parenting students had higher grades (55% of mothers earned an A or B and 92.5% passed, while 45% of non-mothers earned an A or B and 87.5% passed).

I worry that a school with a different culture and curriculum focus, such as those following trends based on New Criticism-centric Common Core standards and the over-testing and over-policing of bodies, the school-age mothers who thrive at WAC would not fare as well. All of my experiences with these students has come from English classrooms rooted in Rosenblatt's transactional theory, which allows them to read with their bodies and lives. Although they would certainly still benefit from "baby-boosted" motivation, I expect they would struggle more when their skills such as emotional intelligence and perspective-taking were not valued; I expect they would participate less when their personal connections and stories were not embraced. At the same time, I worry that often their experiences in English classrooms -- especially because low-income mothers of color are likely to attend chaotic or "struggling" schools -- do not include enough intellectual challenges or adequately prepare them for college English. I also believe there are additional FoK that remained untapped during my classroom observations and that further research involving home visits and observations of the mothers with their children would be a valuable next step.

Candace's story in particular leaves me with questions about the relationship between grades, learning, motivation, and impact. Here is a young woman who demonstrated that she was an academically strong and emotionally intelligent reader, one of the most verbally engaged participants despite her attendance, and someone who found personal meaning and potentially lasting lessons from in-school reading; yet, she barely passed this class. That is not meant to say that she deserved a higher grade, but to raise the question of what a grade in an English class means, or what "success" looks like. I do not know if there is anything else a classroom teacher could do to help with her process of getting "stable," but I believe in the power of reading to help with the process. On her final exam, she provided a beautiful, hopeful response about the overall message or theme of CWE that I am optimistic relates to her future: "You have to take life as it is, and sometimes it's a blizzard. But all seasons change.

Everything in life does not go as planned, but you got to learn to move on, grow and adapt.
Everything will be alright when you put that effort in to make things better for yourself.”

Chapter 6: Writing as a Way of Being a School-Age Mother In-the-World

Essay by Mercedes:

Does experience shape your identity? Yes, I believe everything you go through changes your identity. For example when I had my daughter I experienced a big change in my life. I became wiser and more mature. I became more focused on my goals. Life may bring big challenges but anyone can get through the obstacles to accomplish their mission in life.

In the book The Guardian by Julius Lester, Ansel experienced things in life that changed him. After he witnessed two people he knew get murdered Ansel said "I understood that life could be extraordinarily cruel, that life was intrinsically unfair, and that there was no justice." Ansel's experience taught him he didn't want to be small-minded and a coward like his father. He grew up to help innocent people who became victims of hate and racism as a lawyer. The guilt weighed on him that he had not spoken up, and eventually he had his mother's and Mary Susan's bodies dug up from Davis and moved to his town so he could go and talk to their graves and work through his guilt.

Another person in the novel that changed because of the murders was Maureen. She started standing up for herself and her son. At first she let her husband disrespect her son and even put his hands on her. At the end of the novel before she killed herself, she stood up to Bert and spoke her mind. She also finally followed through with her goal of sending Ansel away from Davis. My last example is Bert. After he chose to let Big Willie die, his life changed because he lost his family and spend his days alone.

The author is saying that your experiences do have an important role in how you live your life. In the book it says "You always have a choice; it's just that some people make the wrong one." I believe in second chances and that everyone deserves another chance. Some people take life for granted and do not change and they end up not achieving in life. That won't be me.

In this example, the only formal essay assignment from the semester, Mercedes not only positions herself as a mother and connects motherhood with her identity, she also presents herself as goal-oriented and determined. This essay also reveals that for Mercedes at least, rather than situated within macro systems and structures of oppression and power, the first unit of Power and Identity was about personal responsibility. I hear echoes of the "good choices" discourse that Kelly (2000) found swirling around the school experiences of teen parents. Here Mercedes embraces and reproduces that discourse.

As Mercedes describes herself in this essay, I also saw her as wise, mature, and focused. Mercedes always sat in the back corner of the class, wore her hair covered with a wrap, and wore dark, unflashy clothes. Charles usually sat in front of her, and she appeared to keep him on track at times, such as reminding him to follow along or turn around. Ms. Price told me that Mercedes “mothered” other students in the class, and I saw an example of this when she told another student he was not speaking up loudly enough during a group presentation. As the semester of this study began, Mercedes had already completed enrollment paperwork for a community college and was set to begin a pre-nursing program. She told me, “I’m going straight through to get my RN. Too many people say they want to be RNs but just take the CNA or the LPN and get a job and never go back to school. Then give up before they get to the level they wanted. So I may get a part-time job, but I’m going full-time until I finish my degree.”

Mercedes told me she had always been a good student, but having a baby got her “off track” -- she failed classes for the first time following her daughter’s birth. Of the strict charter school she was attending, she said, “That school was a good school, but not a good school for parents. They didn’t make any effort to help me out or give me special arrangements when I had my baby, or when I missed days because she was sick.” She told me she never was going to drop out, but she was interested in switching schools so she would “get back on track.” Just as she referenced “second chances” in her essay, she considered WAC a second chance.

Mercedes’s essay relates to larger themes across the writing of the focal participants. Through their writing assignments, the school-age mothers take up and push back on dominant discourses and negotiate identities. In this chapter, I explore existing research, theory, and my data related to school-assigned writing. The writing assignments of focus are one analytical essay, two journal entries, and one poem, which was all that Ms. Price assigned during the term. I analyze the journal entries and literary analysis essay of the case study participants and then delve deeply into the students’ “Raised By” poems, which offer significant insight into the relationship between identities, literacy practices, and community discourses.

Research and Theory on School-Age Mothers and Writing

By crafting separate chapters on classroom talk, reading events, and writing, I do not mean to imply that these are separate processes. Ms. Price's approach, which predominately focused on either discussion, reading, or writing in a single class period, makes it slightly easier to tease apart these literacy practices, all of which offer windows into how the students construct and negotiate their realities. Only Coffel's (2011) work similarly analyzes multiple aspects of school-age mothers' literate identities, including orality, reading, and writing. Her writing data came from asking the two mothers in her book club to write autobiographies and stories about giving birth. Coffel draws from Yagelski's (2000) notion that writing is about struggling with various discourses to analyze the negotiations present in the mothers' writing. She notices the interplay of public and private spheres, the ways the texts are conventional in their portrayal of birth as joyous and life changing, and how the writers also push back on stereotypes based on their age.

Hallman's work (2012) offers the rare example of studying the school-based writing practices of school-age mothers, although not in an inclusive setting. Using three case study examples, Hallman (2012) illustrates how the school-age mothers utilized writing, based on assigned journal prompts, for self-exploration and responding to societal discourses on teen motherhood. She specifically emphasizes how their writing served as "rhetoric of the future," allowing them to imagine future selves and future societal discourses. Hallman (2012) found examples of the writers pushing back on the wrong-girl and wrong-society frames that Kelly described (2000), arguing that the school-age mothers produced counter-narratives to these frames. It is also notable that motherhood or pregnancy was the central and most common topic of the students' writing in this school for pregnant and parenting teens. Missing from the current research is a study in an inclusive school environment that focuses on students' writing across genres.

Writing across and through racialized, gendered bodies. Just as I argued in the previous chapter about reading, I believe we write with our bodies. Similar to the way transactional theory eschews the separation of mind-body or text-reader, Yagelski's (2011) ontological theory of writing, "writing as a way of being," rejects the writing-living split. For Yagelski, the relationship between consciousness and the world is dialectical. He explains, "In the act of writing, our consciousness and the world (both in terms of the subject of our writing and the situation within which we are writing) become one; thus, our experiences of our self as a being-in-the-world is intensified as we make meaning through the act of writing" (2011, p. 115). I see "selective attention" at play here as well -- writers have to choose from a muddled assortment of thoughts, pruning their arguments and narratives to the right words on the page for the perceived audience. In contrast to common claims that writing is a reflection of the self, for Yagelski writing reflects the collapsing of the duality of self and world. Drawing on Yagelski's ontological theory, in this chapter I focus on how the students' writing offers a glimpse into their relationship to places, discourses, and people. I also tried, when possible, to capture the experience of the writing, not just the written product, by taking ethnographic notes as the students wrote.

The relationship between these writers and their world is inherently racialized and gendered. Ebony, Candace, Gloria, and Mercedes write with their black female bodies, and their writing reflects the web of mythology surrounding black women (Morgan, 1999). I draw from black feminism, particularly Richardson's (2003) work on African American female literacies, in my analysis of their writing/their world. According to Richardson (2003), black women's communication patterns and literacy practices are linked to black discourse more broadly, but ultimately focus on the charge of "love of self and others," specifically the struggle to retain self-love in the face of pervasive distorted images of black womanhood (p. 78). According to Richardson, the three dominant archetypes that black women face are money hungry heartless bitch, Jezebel (overly sexual and immoral), and Mammy (selfless and subordinate). For the

mothers in this study, there is also the distorted image of black teenage motherhood to struggle against, and I look to their writing for signs of acknowledgment and resistant of these stock narratives while also exploring the ways in which black discourse practices inform their ways of knowing and being-in-the-world.

The black feminist writings of Hill Collins (1987, 2005) further provide insight into central themes and concerns of the case study participants' writing. Hill Collins (1987) describes that contradictions in expectations and definitions exist between three competing worldviews on motherhood: the Eurocentric "cult of true motherhood," oppressive stereotypes from whites about black motherhood, and matriarchal African perspectives. Her Afrocentric ideology of motherhood, derived from cross-cultural research on West Africa, offers a reconciliation of these tensions, and such an ideology is characterized by four themes: providing, social activism, power, and women-centered networks that have fluid boundaries for mothering. Particularly when Ms. Price's students write about their experiences being raised, the Afrocentric ideology of motherhood provides a compelling frame for making sense of their experiences and worldviews. Because I am not a black woman and the students in this study are, I find black feminism particularly important for informing my understanding of their work. Without this frame, I fear I might whitewash their words or otherwise mis-read because of limitations in my own experience that I bring to their texts.

Writing About and Through Identities: Essay and Journal Writing

The first texts produced in Ms. Price's class were two journal assignments. The purpose of each was clearly to prepare for discussion, and more time was spent talking about the topics than writing. The first journal assignment asked students to identify an area of their identity that was "dominant or subordinate," based on a list of categories Ms. Price previously reviewed: race/ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, and physical or mental ability. Mercedes wrote that her socioeconomic status was subordinate, but her mental ability was dominant. About socioeconomic status, she explained, "We do have the power to

change our class, but it takes a lot of perseverance.” She went on to write, “My mental ability is dominant, and no one can take my knowledge away. With mental ability and education, you can become anyone you want to be.” In other words, Mercedes described herself as poor but smart, and her explanations fit into the larger narrative of individual good choices -- she believes because she is smart and determined, she can eventually overcome her subordinate socioeconomic status. Ebony wrote that in age she was “dominant” because people always call her mature. Gloria did not write about herself, but instead wrote about how people need to “get over it and deal with their issues about gays, bisexual, and lesbians;” she shared in class that she was upset about things people had been saying about her homosexual cousin. Candace was absent and did not complete the assignment. All of the journal entries were brief, and only Mercedes used end mark punctuation to differentiate sentences. While their responses did not mention their parenting status, it is notable to see other negotiations of power and stigma in their lives.

Only Gloria and Mercedes were present for the second journal assignment, which asked about the importance of race. Mercedes wrote, “Yes race is a part of everyone life. It comes with culture, tradition, and trials. Race is important because it defines who you are. It defines you by how you carry yourself and your attitude on situations.” Gloria wrote, “Yes I do think race is a big part of someone’s life because you need to know your identity and who you are no matter what race you is. Still know you have worth just because you have a shade of color on you don’t mean anything.” I find both of these descriptions fascinating, as both women situate race as central to identity. They also present race as a non-negotiable fact, rather than a social construction, as well as synonymous with culture. Gloria’s response hints at racism and perhaps even colorism within the black community with her comment about having worth despite having “a shade of color on you,” and similarly the mention of “trials” in Mercedes’s response indicates racial oppression. Through their writing, I am reminded that my analysis of their mothering identities cannot be separated from other central identities, particularly race.

While the journal assignments prioritized personal knowing about identity, the formal essay assignment took an expository approach by asking students to analyze the theme of identity in the novel, *The Guardian*. The expectation was at least three paragraphs, with three pieces of specific evidence included in the body paragraph. The prompt was: “Does experience shape your identity? What experiences changed the characters in the novel? Ms. Price devoted two days of class time to the assignment, and only asked for students to submit a final draft (as opposed to some teachers who include peer editing or ask to see signs of the writing process such as revisions or prewriting). Mercedes was present for both days of class time and submitted a four-paragraph essay, as provided at the beginning of this chapter on page 126. Candace was only present for the second work day but submitted a complete essay of three paragraphs. Gloria was also only present for the second work day and submitted a partially completed essay (one and half paragraphs). Ebony was not asked to write this essay as part of her make-up work. Mercedes and Candace both received grades of “A,” and Ms. Price told me that Mercedes’ essay was the best of the class. I believe Gloria received a “C” for her incomplete submission. I was only present on the first day of writing time, observing Mercedes begin the composing process at the computer. She began with the introduction, writing it quickly, and then paused to look through her book. I noticed that she selected two quotations and typed them at the bottom of her Word document before continuing with the body of the essay. Ms. Price offered no instructions about using direct quotations, and Mercedes was the only focal participant to do so. Although not as developed as might be expected in a college course, Mercedes’ essay reveals that she has a foundation in literary analysis writing: she located specific examples and supporting evidence in the text, and she analyzed rather than simply summarized.

While Mercedes was the only focal participant to write in first-person or reference her role as a mother in her essay, both Candace and Gloria wrote about identity in ways that connect with personal experiences they shared in classroom talk or interviews. When Candace

writes in her concluding paragraph, “The author is saying that your experiences do have a important roll in how you live your life. It all depends on the person because some people have been through hell and back and take the hurt and frustration and anger and turn it into something great. They become doctors and lawyers and millionaires, etc.” I see clear connections between the message she took from the book and her life experiences. I am confident that Candace would describe herself as someone who has “been through hell and back,” and she was open about the “hurt and frustration and anger” she felt. Gloria, on the other hand, started off her essay by defining identity: “Identity what is it? Do you know your true identity, ask yourself do you know who you really are? Most people believe identity is your appearance and how you carry yourself when in reality identity is knowing who you are on the inside and out.” Just as she described herself on the first day of class survey as someone “lovely in the inside but [with] a brick wall up on the outside,” she saw similar characters in the text. She wrote, “In the text some people knew who they were on the inside but was afraid to show the people on the outside their true identity because of they would have been called ‘nigger lovers.’” As discussed in this chapter’s opening, Mercedes connected the author’s message with her life story directly, concluding her essay with the statement: “Some people take life for granted and do not change and they end up not achieving in life. That won’t be me.”

The students tell a consistent narrative across their classroom talk and analysis essays about how they see the world. At first, I took that to mean that students were simply using writing to record the same ideas they had said aloud. However, after examining my detailed field notes on class discussions, I realized that these beliefs were not referenced orally in relation to *The Guardian*. Therefore, writing was utilized as a tool to negotiate and mediate the relationship between the world and the text in a way that talking did not. This finding is not necessarily surprising, but I am relieved that even when students receive little instruction and few opportunities, they still -- almost innately -- manage to use writing to explore their relationship to the world.

Poetry as Exploration and Celebration of Identities

Christensen (2009) asserts, "Through poetry, the mirror we hold up in class reflects students' lives. When we write 'Raised by Women' poems, for example, we celebrate students' roots, multiple heritages, and languages that tie them to their families" (p. 15). Ms. Price included a "Raised By" poetry assignment at the beginning of the second quarter of the class, as a part of the unit on gender identity. As Christensen describes, this assignment elicited celebration of students' home lives; in the students' words, I also see complex explorations of the relationship across and through identities. The model for this assignment was the text "Raised By Women" by Kelly Norman Ellis (2003).

Raised by Women

I was raised by
Chitterling eating
Vegetarian cooking
Cornbread so good you want to lay
down and die baking
"Go on baby, get yo'self a plate"
Kind of Women.

Some thick haired
Angela Davis afro styling
"Girl, lay back
and let me scratch yo head"
Sorta Women.

Some big legged
High yellow, mocha brown
Hip shaking
Miniskirt wearing
Hip huggers hugging
Daring debutantes
Groovin
"I know I look good"
Type of Women.

Some tea sipping
White glove wearing
Got married too soon
Divorced
in just the nick of time
"Better say yes ma'am to me"
Type of sisters.

Some fingerpopping
Boogaloo dancing
Say it loud
I'm black and I'm proud
James Brown listening
"Go on girl shake that thing"
Kind of Sisters.

Some face slapping
Hands on hips
"Don't mess with me,
Pack your bags and
get the hell out of my house"
Sorta women
Some PhD toten
Poetry writing
Portrait painting
"I'll see you in court"
World traveling
Stand back, I'm creating
Type of queens

I was raised by women

After reading Ellis's poem, Ms. Price asked students to write about the men or women in their lives "who made you who you are today." Because of its place within the gender identity unit, the poem was supposed to focus on how students learned "what it means to be a man or woman." The length requirement was fifteen lines and no other criteria for assessment were given. Two class periods were devoted to writing these poems, which Ms. Price compiled in an anonymous class anthology that she read aloud from and distributed a few weeks later. I love this assignment and included it, with a broader frame of who or what raised you, in one of the courses I taught at WAC. In my experience, even students who are resistant to poetry find Ellis's use of repetition and quotations as an inviting template to follow. Ellis also incorporates features of AAVE/Black English into her writing, encouraging students to write in their "home" voices, as opposed to the academic voice of an essay. The influence of Ellis's poem as a model is clear in the form, incorporation of dialogue, and specificity of details of the students' pieces.

All four case studies completed this assignment, and three of the four positioned themselves as school-age mothers. Below, I introduce the poems individually, describe the process of each writer, and comment on the quality. Then, I provide a larger analysis of themes across the four poems written by the school-age mother participants. Finally, I describe themes and discourses from the class anthology of poems.

Ebony.

I was raised by a pretty woman
A kind, reliable
Type of Woman
I was raised by a fun lady
“My baby girl is thicker than a Snicker”
type of lady
A hard working, loveable, enjoyable
My kinda lady
“Babygirl Having Kids is Hard”
Type of Woman
You is a Great Mom to be a Teen Mom
Type of Lady
Enjoy your Life but Finish School
Type of Woman
She is the best Mom you can have
Type of mother

I will be upfront and state that I consider Ebony’s poem the least developed in its word choice and specificity of ideas. I do not have a clear sense of what her mother is like because of her reliance on vague adjectives like “pretty,” “kind,” and “fun.” While sweet, her declaration that her mother is “the best Mom you can have,” lacks any consideration of complexity. I saw similar trends in Ebony’s other written work throughout the semester. She spoke with more detail than she wrote, and she told me that writing is not her “thing.” Ebony prefers math to English, and I could see how this preference was reflected in her approach to writing. She wanted steps to follow to complete the task; quality was a matter of correctness; and if you get a “right answer,” there is no need to spend any more time on it.

When the class went to the computer lab to begin drafting their poems, Ebony immediately stated aloud, “I don’t know how to start” and asked for help. Ms. Price told her to describe her mom. She wrote the first four lines of the poem within the next five minutes, and I noticed that she self-edited for spelling errors as she went, first misspelling “reliable” and missing a letter in “raised.” She called me over and asked what to write next (Ms. Price was talking to another student). I referred her back to Ellis’s poem, pointing out the dialogue, and asked her to include examples of things her mom says to her, reminding her to use quotation marks. With about five minutes left in the period, she called me over (Ms. Price was out of the computer lab at that point) and asked if she was finished. She had fourteen lines written -- the existing first fourteen lines -- and I encouraged her to think of a way to wrap it up more clearly, and she quickly wrote the last two lines. The following day the students returned to the computer lab, but I was not there to observe. Ebony made no revisions to her poem after she deemed it “finished.”

In her defense, the poem drafting class session was Ebony’s second day back from her extended absence. Some of her need for reassurance and guidance could certainly be symptoms of larger anxieties; however, in the first weeks of the term she also frequently asked for individual help and wanted Ms. Price or I to tell her if she was “finished.” It is striking that her poetry does not reflect any of her situation. Ebony does not use this assignment -- or any form of writing, according to my interview with her -- as a way to express emotion, explore big questions, or mourn. I do not mean to criticize her or infer that Ms. Price should have pushed her to do so, and I also want to acknowledge that when I was assisting her with the assignment I was consciously focusing on validating her work and reducing her anxiety in light of her loss, rather than challenging her. Ebony seemed satisfied that she completed the assignment, and when a student is in the midst of personal crisis, I see that as an important outcome. In fact, writing a happy poem when she was struggling with depression reveals something pretty

remarkable about Ebony's strength and resilience. Her writing is the least developed of the group, but her spirit is not.

Candace.

I come from a world where I am seen for less than what I am
"All you want is money," they say. "Going out clubbing, are you coming?"
"Drink this, smoke that, don't worry, it's nothing"
Brown eyes and thick thighs, wide hips, perfect lips.
Met a man, had two babies that I'm stuck with.
Society sees me as a charity case,
as welfare is my only option
because I couldn't afford an abortion
and couldn't go through with adoption.
Here on my own feeling lost and confused, something I've never known
but when I look at the two of you I have no choice of being distressed.
It's just the three of us.
I'll do it by myself.
I am a woman, strong and free
taking the world by storm.
I am a woman and a woman is me.
I am a woman loving and real,
overcoming the stereotypes and every fear.
I am a woman,
and a woman is me.

As in other data sources, Candace's (counter-)story here is the most complicated. She strays the farthest from the model poem and Ms. Price's prompt with her first-person emphasis. I notice there are significantly more "I"s in her piece compared to the others. I am also left with several questions about her intentions and how to interpret her words accurately. In the poem's opening, is she adopting the wrong-society frame and blaming her surroundings for her choices? There is a definite shift in tone from the poem's dark beginning to the resolute conclusion, but the fact that she has *two* children muddles the common narrative of becoming-a-mother-as-turning-point. In writing that she was "stuck with" two kids because she "could not afford an abortion," is she avoiding taking agency, giving a brutally honest description of her initial feelings about motherhood, or both? In the last third, Candace's poem is an example of "rhetoric of the future" (Hallman, 2012), where she imagines "taking the world by storm." Still, I

am also struck by what I see as a contradiction in back-to-back lines: “Here on my own feeling lost and confused, something I’ve never known/ but when I look at the two of you I have no choice of being distressed.” Is the “no choice” a positive, meaning that looking at her children takes her stress away, or does it indicate she does not have the time/energy/resources for focusing on her feelings because of her children? The raw emotion of Candace’s poem directly contrasts Ebony’s writing, and I see the tensions and dissonance present in her writing as a direct expression of her current struggles to define herself as a mother, student, and woman. I admire the risks she took, and I think she gave the assignment the most effort and probably took the most value in return.

Candace’s process was much less visible than Ebony’s. She did not ask any clarifying questions about the assignment or for feedback on her writing. Because she wrote first on paper, I could not observe her composing process as easily, and in fact when she saw me glancing over her shoulder, she said, “Now come on, you can see it when I’m finished.” I saw her cross out words and lines a few times, so I know she was revising as she wrote, but I do not think she returned to the poem for additional revision once she reached the last line. She took longer in the composing process and did not finish her poem on the day I was there, but I noticed her stopping to talk to a student sitting next to her and logging onto her email when she first entered the computer lab. Candace is a more confident writer than Ebony and considers herself a good writer; in an interview she told me, “I can just sit there and focus and knock it out. I don’t have any trouble sitting and writing a paper, and it’ll be a good paper too.” I am not sure if I would call her poem a “good” poem, but I think it shows a lot of capacity with language. For example, she crafts a rhythm on the page and provides examples of vivid description. Candace has a solid skills base to draw from, but as her poem reveals, the unresolved and ongoing negotiations between her and her world muddle the clarity of her promising ideas.

Mercedes.

I was raised by
black eye pea eating, healthy cooking
“you better eat everything on your plate
or you ain’t getting no cake”
type of woman.
Yellow bone, dark skinned,
I love the skin I am in
type of woman.
“You grown enough to lie down and have a baby,
you grown enough to raise them”
sorta woman.
Go get a JOB and “treat yourself
don’t cheat yourself”
kind of woman.
“Don’t never depend on nobody but yourself
I love you and want the best for you”
My type of woman.

Mercedes’ poem closely mirrors the model poem in its form and the types of examples she includes, such as references to food, appearance, and advice. She focuses just one one woman, however, unlike Ellis’ plural “women.” While Mercedes deals in specifics and avoids generalities, nearly all of the dialogue in her piece verges on cliché -- I have heard all of these statements from students before. There is more of a rhythm to her piece than in the writing of Ebony or Candace, and I think she utilizes line breaks and punctuation effectively. The all-caps “JOB” especially stands out, showing an attention to emphasis.

Mercedes was absent during my visit. When I returned two days later and asked Ms. Price for the submitted poems of my four focal participants, Mercedes’s was included, so I can infer she worked fairly quickly in class the next day. Although a strong poem, I do not think Mercedes outshined all of her classmates in this genre, like she did with in the essay assignment. She told me, “Poetry writing isn’t really my thing,” and stated she felt more confident in her essay writing abilities. She does not consider herself a writer, but said if she had more time, maybe she would keep a journal. She also mentioned she would like to make a picture book for daughter, with pictures from their life, which was the only reference any focal

participant made to writing directly in relation to motherhood. (I then told her about the informal and formal examples of such books I make with and for my daughter, and she said maybe she would go home and make one with stickers and markers like I described.)

Gloria.

I was raised by
Hard hustling
Get it by any means
Don't need a man for nothing
Kind of Women.
"Plug in the flat irons"
Keep a fly up do
Nice blouse
Cute clutch
6 inch heels wearing
Everything on FLEEK
Kind of Ladies.
Working a 9-5
Car paid for
Not hiding from the repo man
Rent paid up
Not dodging the landlord
Real business handling Women.

Gloria's poem is very similar to Mercedes' and also closely mirrors the model poem. In my opinion, Gloria's is the highest quality poem of the whole class (not just the case studies). Her economy of language is strong, and she utilizes line breaks to bring a snappy voice and rhythm to the piece. She similarly utilizes all-caps to bring emphasis to the word "FLEEK," and this term also situates the poem very directly in its cultural context -- five years ago (and maybe five years from now), a reader would not understand what it means to have "Everything on FLEEK." Gloria's poem stands out among the focal participants because it is the only one that does not mention her status as a mother, as well as the only one framed by women in the plural.

In the computer lab, Gloria worked with laser focus, not speaking to anyone around her or leaving her Word document until she was finished. She did not ask questions or for any

feedback, but when she finished she told Calvin, “I just snapped on this” and showed him the finished piece. (He responded, “Hell yeah” after reading). She was one of the first students to complete the assignment, and she proceeded to shop for Prom dresses online after printing her poem. Gloria’s approach was more like Ebony’s task-management than Candace’s internal negotiations, but like Candace she revealed confidence and competence in her writing abilities. I see her pride in the finished product as a sign that she found value in the experience. Although Gloria does not consider herself a poet, she did mention enjoying hip hop and “playing around with rap,” which may explain the skill she demonstrates in this example.

Being raised as a black woman. While Ms. Price never mentioned race or culture in her explanation of this assignment, the poems reflect the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in understandings of the self. Given no information about the authors, I expect that a majority of readers would quickly conjure a racialized, and probably class-based, vision of each poet due to both the features of AAVE/Black English in the writing itself and the content of the messages.

Ebony is the only one to clearly name her mother as the woman she is describing, but I confirmed with Mercedes that she also wrote specifically about her mother. Gloria writes in the plural of “ladies” and “women,” reflecting a “woman-centered network,” which I deduce from interview data includes her mother, grandmother, and two older sisters (Hill Collins, 1987). Candace has the most tenuous relationship with her mother, only living with her for a few years during her early adolescence, and she notably does not describe any key individuals, but rather broadly focuses on “the world;” even the quotations are attributed just to “they,” who do not sound like parental or role model figures.

When pregnancy and parenting is referenced by Ebony, Mercedes, and Candace, it is specifically framed by discourses of resistance/defiance and responsibility. Candace directly posits that “society sees me as a charity case,” but goes on to say that she is “overcoming the stereotypes and every fear.” Her earlier reference to welfare frames the expectations she seeks

to defy as economic. Ebony's parenting statement is more veiled, "a great mom to be a teen mom," but under the surface is the same idea that teen moms are negatively stigmatized and stereotyped. By acknowledging the deficit view and pushing back, Ebony and Candace produce counter-narratives to the wrong-girl and wrong-family discourses, much like the students in Hallman's (2012) study.

Mercedes's poem includes the most overt reference to responsibility discourses, "You grown enough to lie down and have a baby, you grown enough to raise them." This responsibility is also primarily framed financially in the subsequent line-- "go get a JOB." Without connecting it to her status as a mother, Gloria also emphasizes the role of woman as financial provider as she praises the financially secure, "real business handling women" of her life. As mothers and through their mothers, all four writers echo Collins's (1987) argument that self-reliance is the primary value of black motherhood, as well as the idea that nurturing is both economic and affective. However, the prevalence of money references also speaks to the "ghettoized" image of black womanhood, "money hungry heartless bitch" (Richardson, 2003). Candace directly speaks to the struggle to invent herself in the face of such public expectations, with the line, "All you want is money' they say."

In contrast to traditional white norms but in alignment with an Afrocentric ideology of motherhood, these young women do not see men as providers, nor do they seek financial stability through marriage. Parenthood and romantic partnerships are presented as separate domains. Men are absent in the poems of Ebony and Mercedes, while Gloria overtly disses the value of men -- "don't need a man for nothing." Candace is the only mother to mention the father of her children, albeit without any positive associations -- "Met a man, had two babies that I'm stuck with" -- but he is clearly not considered part of the family unit, as she writes, "It's just the three of us/ I'll do it myself." At first I was puzzled by her use of "free" to describe herself in light of her responsibilities as a mother, but considering how often she spoke of the break-up with her long-term partner, I believe she means that she is "free" from a violent and tumultuous romantic relationship. Mercedes, through

her portrayal of her mother's voice, similarly espouses self-reliance when she writes, "Don't never depend on nobody but yourself." As the only mother still in a relationship with the father of her children, it is notable that Mercedes continues to emphasize the value of independence, supporting the centrality of this discourse to black womanhood beyond single motherhood.

I also notice that all four poems reference physical appearance and standards of beauty as an important component of identity, particularly female identity. Of course, some of these details were clearly influenced by Ellis's poem, which includes details about hairstyle, skin color, body type, and fashion. For Ellis and the WAC students, the physical references are culturally-specific, where "thick thighs" and being "thick as a Snicker" are desirable characteristics, as opposed to white America's obsession with thinness. The writers present themselves and their mothers as attractive and confident. Mercedes's refers to her mother's dark skin, which is typically not considered ideal, but pointedly follows up with her description of her mother as a "love the skin I am in/ type of woman," revealing the importance of self-love. Rather than embodied characteristics, Gloria, who is undeniably the most fashionable of the mothers, outlines lessons about dress and hairstyle that she learned growing up.

The strongest point of connection across these four poems is the portrayal of themselves and the women in their families as **STRONGBLACKWOMAN (SBW)**, as also described in Chapter 3 as an underlying message of the course curriculum. (Morgan, 1999). Morgan (1999) asserts: "When you're raised to believe the ability to kick adversity's ass is a birthright -- a by-product of gender and melanin -- you tend to tackle life's affliction's tenaciously. This is a useful quality, no doubt. However, this myth also tricks many of us into believing we can carry the weight of the world" (p. 104). Only Candace's poem includes suffering and pain, but she throws that aside with her SBW message at the end. The other three poems assert strength and ignore vulnerabilities. The omission of men in their poems further supports Morgan's claim that the counterpoint to the SBW myth is **ENDANGEREDBLACKMAN** and that

SBW may love their men, but they do not respect them (p. 87). There are echoes of this finding in the whole-class anthology as well.

The Class Anthology: Collective insights on community and culture. My study is not framed by an “identity as difference” metaphor or prevention model, so I am not comparing the mothers to their classmates in order to uncover relationships between upbringing and their parenting status. However, bringing the poems of the four mothers into conversation with the other eleven poems in the class anthology provides insight into the discourses that dominate their particular community. These poems, more than any other piece of writing or classroom conversation from the semester, offer insight into students’ individual home lives and perceptions of self, as well as collective experiences of what it means to grow up black in a major American city in the twenty-first century. Of the eleven other poems included in the class anthology, eight were written by female students, five of which focused solely on women, just as the poems by the mothers. The other three, however, included one that discussed both a mother and father, one focused only on being raised by men, and one about her “people” collectively. Three of the five poems written by female students about women included messages of self-reliance and “women as provider” that the case studies emphasized. As Collins (1987) asserted, this self-reliance discourse is central to black womanhood.

The representation of males was more complicated. The poem about both a mother and father positioned the father as the provider with the lines, “I have to provide for my family if nothing else/ kind of guy” while still espousing female independence through the lines, “Independent/ ‘don’t need no nigga’/ type of woman.” Of the poems by male students, one explicitly discussed his father’s lack of involvement in his life, one focused collectively on “people” of his community, and one discussed men in the plural. Men were not clearly positioned as providers in any of these examples and no strong similarities connected the representation of men across the poems. In the poem about men written by a female, the men who raise her tell her “Don’t trust these niggas.” As Paschal (2006) concluded in her study of

African-American teenage fathers, what it means to be a black man and specifically a black father is not clearly conceptualized in the community and most often is redefined by oppression and alienation. This connects with Morgan's (1999) conception of the ENDANGEREDBLACKMAN as well. In contrast to the self-reliance message from mothers to daughters, the communication from fathers to sons seems to lack clarity and consistency. Charles's poem poignantly expresses this tension:

If my Pops was really a man
He would have made sure he showed me how to be a man
My mother was there when I fucked up in school
Or did the things I wasnt spose to do
But at the end of the day
Momma cant teach me how to be no man

Charles did not position himself as a father in his poem, and no wonder -- conceptualizing his identity or role as a father is complicated by tensions about what it means to be a man.

Common themes in the poems from the non-mothering students were religion, education, and fighting/weapons. None of the mothers mentioned God or church, but four of their classmates did with lines such as, "going to church and learning to keep God first" and "God worshipping woman sometimes judgemental." The prevalence of church references is not surprising given the strong tradition of Christianity in the African American community. I do not know much about the religious views of my focal participants, as none of them referenced church or religion in our interviews or in class talk. I am very cautious to mention this difference between the mothers and *some* of their peers, as I do not want to indicate a relationship of causation between religion and becoming a parent. In Kaplan's (1997) research, black school-age mothers reported feeling judged and criticized by their church communities, and perhaps this contributes to the silences about church in the mothers' poems.

Of the other most common themes, only education appeared in any of the mother's poems. While Ebony's poem included "Enjoy your life but finish school," three other pieces specifically stated, "stay in school." Silences about education in the majority of the poems do not

necessarily indicate a lack of value on education, of course. Emphasizing not dropping out of high school could in fact be read as having low expectations, in contrast to the one poem that includes the line: “The ‘college ain’t an option, you better get ya degree’ type of men.” This solitary reference to college is striking and reveals much about the education levels and aspirations of the students’ community.

Four poems referenced either fighting (“men that knew when to fight and when to walk away;” “where the saying ‘if someone hits you hit them back’/ never leaves the memory”) or weapons (“you need to be carrying a glock and machete;” “Them walking around with mase and tazers/ type of girls”). At first I wanted to categorize this theme as violence, but I believe “protection” is really more of the central message, as even the fighting advice focuses on responding to violence from others. It is also interesting that none of the references is attributed as advice from mothers or other women, but instead specifically from men or “people.” The silence of this discourse in the mothers’ poems makes sense to me because the voices of men are not present in their writing. Based on interview data and classroom talk, however, I know that violence and fighting are very much alive in their home lives and even school histories.

Stigma discourses. The most striking finding related to this poetry assignment was the prevalence of school-age pregnancy stigma across the class anthology. When I was teaching at WAC, I would have said that there was no shame attached to being a school-age parent at the school. Mothering students never seemed to hide their status, other students “oohed” and “ahhed” over pictures of their babies, and several years even the Prom Queen was pregnant. In Ms. Price’s class, I never observed any individual shaming or disparaging comments specifically about teen parents. The students’ “Raised By” poems, however, revealed that dominant discourses about shame and stigma are very much alive in the students’ households.

Here are the references, from five of the eleven poems:

1) Always yelling, “books
Before boys because boys brings babies”

2)"Keep ya legs closed or you'll be sorry"

3) I was raised by better not bring no babys home or
If I say it again type men

4) Learning the ways of life with these women.
Those don't have kids,
Come help in the kitchen,
Stand straight up type of women

5) Them grandma by thirty
type of people

While public perception holds that the black community, particularly in urban areas, is more accepting of teen parenthood, scholars such as Kaplan (1997), Luker (1996), and Elise (1995) contend that acceptance is not the same as approval and that the community still stigmatizes young mothers. All five examples place the locus of blame on the individual, although the framing is broader than just "wrong-girl." The first example positions males as the ones really deserving blame, but still places the responsibility on the individual girl to make a "good choice" (Kelly, 1998). Number three is from a male's poem, so here fatherhood is also stigmatized. Number five is less direct in its warning and also operates within the "wrong-family" frame, indicating that school-age parenthood is a repeating cycle.

Ebony, Candace, Mercedes, and Gloria grew up with these stigma discourses, too. How they portray their families does not contrast with their classmates -- they are of the same community and cultural group. However, the school-age mothers in this class focus on how they are defying stereotypes instead of reproducing stigma. They focus more on the present (and even future) than the past, trading messages of prevention for responsibility. Until I compared the mothers' poems with their classmates, I did not appreciate how intentional they were in using writing as a form of resistance (Hallman, 2012). Even Gloria's insistence that she was

raised to be financially secure (not a welfare mom) and attractive (resisting taunts from other girls about losing her good body) functions as resistance without direct reference to parenting.

Curricular and pedagogical reflections. As a learning segment, the “Raised By” lesson met Ms. Price’s overarching goals of engagement and productivity. The rate of completion was higher than for any other major assignment and complaints were minimal. Although none of the case studies cited it as a favorite memory from the class, they expressed satisfaction and even pride in their work. I would also argue that this assignment aligned with Ms. Price’s purpose of identity exploration more than any other component of the curriculum. I appreciate that she did not focus just on form or literary elements, as often happens with poetry, but emphasized the ideas of the model poem. Specific to the school-age mothers, this particular assignment met Hallman’s (2007) call for curriculum that encourages students to define themselves through multiple identity positions. Ebony, Candace, and Mercedes in particular positioned themselves as both daughters and mothers, which Hallman (2007) considers a key component to educating school-age mothers. The students also took up this assignment as a tool for negotiating the competing discourses of their lives.

Ms. Price’s decision to share the poems in an anonymous anthology gave students an authentic audience for their work and brought their voices into the formal curriculum. I think this was an excellent pedagogical move, but I wish she would have taken it even further. When she shared the anthology, there was no discussion of individual poems or emergent themes. She only read the first four poems before time was up (Ebony’s and Gloria’s were in this group), and then did not revisit or reference the others; students did receive a copy of all fifteen, though. There was some co-signing in the form of finger-snapping and “alrights”, especially during Gloria’s poem. Gloria also announced, “This is mine, so ya’ll better stop talking” before Ms. Price read her work. Anytime an adolescent shows public pride in something they wrote for a class, I think teachers have clearly done something right.

Conclusions

I want to read more work written by Mercedes, Gloria, Candace, and Ebony. Their writing not only complemented their classroom talk, but also shed light onto their roots and past experiences that even interviews did not reveal. Despite limited writing opportunities, all four young women revealed the ways they were learning to use writing to explore, synthesize, and push back on narratives and discourses that defined their lives. Particularly in their “Raised By” poems, the focal participants presented working definitions of what it means to be a black mother, emphasizing self-reliance and responsibility. Through their self-representations in writing, they also actively resist stigmatizing dominant discourses about school-age motherhood.

As Mercedes enters college in pursuit of a nursing degree, I wonder about the types of writing she will be assigned and the ways she will continue to tell (and revise) her story on the page. I wonder about her self-description as “mature,” and if she will continue to use that apply that label as she grows older -- it seems at some point that “mature” takes on a different connotation. I hope she has further opportunities to use writing to explore the ideas, “You always have a choice; it’s just that some people make the wrong one” and “Does experience shape your identity?” I also hope she uses writing in her life as a mother, creating that picture book about her daughter that she imagined.

Chapter 7: More than Mothers

The folders that Ms. Price promised arrived by the second week of class, and about a week later I noticed the writing all over Gloria's. The front featured five R.I.P. statements -- memorializing family or friends she had lost, all remembered by their street names such as Lil Quan and Joker. The bottom of the front read, "R.I.P. Daddy" with the date of his death. The back featured the following: "9-9-11 Lady Tee + Lil Tee" and "9-23-14 Baby Tee" (the date she and her child's father became a couple and the date of their son's birth), and her son's full name written across the bottom. I am particularly struck that she refers to herself as "Lady Tee," establishing her connection to Lil Tee, because I know from our interviews and classroom comments that she and her child's father were not considered a couple at the time of their child's birth; yet, five months later (when she decorated this folder) she still publicly proclaimed the relationship. It is not only that they were no longer dating -- they broke up during her pregnancy when she learned that her child's father was expecting another baby, due less than a month after her due date. Through her decoration of this folder, Gloria represents herself as proud, but also mourning; she positions herself as a mother, partner, daughter, and friend. I thought about the emotions and stories that must have been going through her mind while she sat in English class and made these markings, as well as the ways that this folder visually represented the web of love, loss, and conflict that wove itself throughout the lives and stories of Gloria and her classmates.

There was one classroom conversation in particular that stands out most from my time in Ms. Price's classroom for the ways it highlighted how parenting was often entangled within tumultuous and even violent relationships. What started as a side conversation between Candace and Gloria about a conflict between Candace and her children's father evolved into personal disclosures about experiences with interpersonal relationship violence. As I listened

(and later could not stop thinking about), I realized that my research questions and framework were not capturing all that was going in the participants' lives as mothers, students, and humans. Particularly for Gloria and Candace, telling the story of who they are as school-age mothers necessitates also telling the story of violent relationships that have shaped their outlook and identities.

The class period was supposed to focus on reactions to *The Field* documentary, but before Ms. Price finished passing out the discussion guide, all eyes and ears had turned to Gloria and Candace, and their dialogue lasted most of the period with only a few other participants chiming in. The following is an abbreviated version of their conversation, edited for clarity.

Gloria: *That's how females get their asses beat. She's [Candace] over here talking about busting out the windows in her babydaddy's car.*

Candace: *What kind of man thinks he can play me? I will bust those windows, slash those tires, burn those clothes. You bet I will. I tried to kill to my babydaddy; I tried to run him over.*

Gloria: *Bitch, you going to get killed.*

Candace: *If you be with a motherfucker seven years, and now they don't want to see their kids or take care of them? No, No!*

Gloria: *A babydaddy can get up and leave anytime. You can't be like, I don't want this child, so I'm fixing to leave. You can't do that. A nigga can.*

Candace: *Of course not.*

Ms. Price: *You can't say never, but it's rare to hear of a mom just abandoning their child. It's kind of rare, but it does happen.*

Gloria: *She (about Candace) just got my adrenaline going.*

Candace: *You don't know what happened, though. He stole my car and went to see a bitch. I got back into that car, I saw red, and I tried to run him over. That's just what it was. Don't steal my car and go see some bitch.*

It gets loud, and multiple students are talking at once. Ms. Price jumps in, "What are you saying, Gloria?"

Gloria: *Nothing. I cut my baby daddy up before, but it wasn't like, I'm fixin' to kill you. Yeah, I kicked him in the face with a heel, but...*

Candace: *You could have killed him! That shit could have gone right through his eye or his head. You could have killed him.*

Gloria: *I apologized to him after that.*

Candace: *I apologized too, for running him over.*

Ms. Price: The problem is some women don't know how to direct their emotions. Like if we find out something that happens, we grab something. Guys will be like, I'm done with you, I'm not talking to you anymore.

Calvin: When you call the police, I ain't fuckin' with you any more.

Candace: It just depends on the relationship, because our relationship was about crazy. I was crazy about him, and he was crazy about me. I was crazy to him, and he was crazy to me. If I do something to him, then he would do something to me. If I cut his shit up, he cut mine up.

Calvin: You can find another nigga, and he can find another bitch. You should have moved on.

Rhea: If you did nothing wrong, you were faithful the whole time, and then you find out that he cheating?

Ms. Price: You could just walk away?

Rhea: No!

Calvin: It's not usually just one female, they bring their friends.

Students murmur in agreement and multiple conversations pop up at once about fights. Ms. Price redirects the class, asking Gloria what she was saying.

Gloria: Me and my babydaddy were together for 4 years. We only had like 3 fights. On every one of them, I forced him. Like I kept running up on him and he kept telling me to be gone.

Calvin: He was like, "Sit your ass down," and then sat your ass down.

Gloria: Literally. I would never be around her (motioning to Candace), if I was her babydaddy, saying she would kill him.

Candace: When you love somebody you love hard. If you love somebody with all your life and they cheat on you, what are you going to do?

Charles: I'd leave her.

Candace: That's not real love.

Calvin: If you're a real bitch, he's not going to cheat on you. If you keeping him satisfied, he's not going to cheat.

Ms. Price steps in to bring it down: That's a whole other thing."

Gloria: I just feel like with that killing stuff, niggas already be in the streets so hard. They already have to deal with motherfuckers trying to kill them in the streets. So if your bitch say she's going to kill you, like what the fuck? I would be done with her. I wouldn't be messing with that.

Calvin: I'm gone.

Candace: I was crazy when he met me. He liked this crazy little bitch.

Gloria: I'm not going to sit up here and lie. Once I was mad, and I didn't say I'd kill him, but I was like, I hope your ass gets hit by a bus.

Candace: Why would you say that?

Gloria: He goes, "Mom, if I die, this bitch has something to do with it." Because he

doesn't trust people like that.

Calvin: *I don't trust for real. I stay to myself. These females, for a little money they will set you up.*

Gloria: *You talking like, get my hair done, get me some inches, I'm going to set him up, baby?*

Calvin: *That's happened to my homies.*

Gloria: *I would never set my babydaddy up. You would have to kill me first.*

Calvin: *That's what happened to my cousin. His babymama, she had some niggas come to the crib and take everything.*

Candace: *I wouldn't do that to him, even though I don't like him. If anyone's going to kill him, it's going to be me.*

Ms. Price quietly to Candace: *It's okay not to like him.*

Gloria: *I can't wait til my son gets to her age. I swear to God if a bitch said that to my son, you don't even have to touch him. I'm going to pop her ass, period. I'd go to jail. That's mine, nobody's going to take him out of this world but me. I wish a bitch would say, "I'll kill you." I'm on my way. I promise you, if my son got run over or stabbed on by his girlfriend, and he don't tell me...*

Candace: *Girlfriend or babymama? That's two different things. If that's just his bitch...*

Gloria: *If they're just arguing, don't put me in that type of shit. But if she's trying to harm you. If she tries to poison you, run you over, that's when your momma gets involved. Listen, she run up on you, tell her, no. She keep running up on you, knock that bitch out.*

Candace: *Everyone teaches their kids differently. I'm not going to teach my son that way. I don't want my son to be like that 'cause his daddy was. His daddy used to put his hands on me. He used to smack my shit, for real. I'm going to teach him to never, ever touch a woman.*

Gloria: *This is why I'm like this. My daddy's wife set him up and got him killed. She was one of them crazy girls that like; she poisoned my daddy.*

Candace: *What did your daddy do to her?*

Gloria: *My daddy never did anything to her. She was pregnant, and they were married. My daddy left my mom for this lady. He always wanted a boy, and it turned out to be a boy. But then they did a DNA test, and it wasn't his child. He said he wanted a divorce, and she thought, if I can't have you, nobody can have you. She busted out my grandma's windows. My daddy used to have to sleep on the floor with us to make sure we were okay. The bitch was like real life crazy. Like how you (Candace) talking, that's how she was talking. That's why I got so upset. Now my daddy is dead because this bitch had somebody kill him, over some shit. That's why that shit you talking, running over and stuff, that made me mad.*

Calvin: *My homie killed himself over a bitch.*

Gloria: *It's not that serious. Male-female stuff should not be that serious. I used to tell that to my momma. My momma always used to say what goes around comes around. I'm not going to lie, he beat on her too. But he sat down and had a*

conversation with my sister and me. My mom used to allow it, until when she shot at my dad. What goes around comes around, so then he met this crazy bitch.

Candace: *I think that may have just been karma. Your momma didn't deserve to get her ass beat.*

Gloria: *I'm not going to say she didn't. Like I said, she allowed it. One day my momma told my grandma, "I feel like a man doesn't love me if he doesn't put his hands on me." She said that out of her own mouth. My momma knew how to fight back, but she liked it.*

Calvin: *She thinks that's how he shows real love.*

Gloria: *She thinks if he hits her, he loves her. Now she has another man, and it's like she wants it. She will be arguing, picking to get hit on, but he's not that type. He brushes it off. When she told my grandma that she feel like a man don't love her unless he put his hands on her, my grandma cried.*

Candace: *But you're right about the crazy shit, girl. That shit happened a long time ago, but it's still happening.*

Ms. Price: *A lot of women have that mentality. They may never speak it or tell it to somebody, but they feel like it's not a relationship unless we have drama. You can be in a relationship with somebody, and it be drama free.*

Gloria: *Like my momma and daddy, the last big fight that they had, they both tried to kill each other. My momma stabbed him; he stabbed her back. They were going back and forth, back and forth. My momma was like, "Get your shit and get out." They were both bloody; the whole house was bloody. One of them was fixin' to die. She said, "If I come back down these stairs and you're not out, I'm fixin' to shoot you." She came back down the stairs, and she shot my daddy for real. After that they left each other alone. They damn near killed each other. It was back and forth. It was like: I'm going to stab you; bitch I'm going to stab you. I'm going to hit you over the head with a pot; bitch, I'm going to hit you over the head with a pot. It was back and forth. It was crazy. My daddy threw my momma over a bannister. My childhood was crazy. We couldn't run anywhere, like go outside. Everybody knew our business. They used to fight outside. They used to do all type of shit, crazy shit. Then they would be like, Baby, I love you.*

Candace: *That love-hate shit is real. It's real, especially when you're with somebody for a long time.*

The class was quiet for a beat. After a pause, Ms. Price nodded and said, "Okay, I think we should move on. I'm going to pass out a class book of our Raised By poems for us to look at."

Gloria, with her bleached blond hair, form-fitting name brand clothes, and slender frame, sat poised with no visible signs lingering of the emotional narrative she just shared. She proudly claimed her poem in the class book, flashing the wide, captivating smile that I saw during nearly

every visit. I sat in awe that she could appear so collected after the outpouring of her painful past, my mind swirling with violent images that her words conjured. I knew immediately that these past traumas were an essential part of who Gloria was across all spaces, whether in a role of student or mother.

In the dialogue Gloria positioned herself as a mother, and so did Candace, but this was not really a conversation about parenting -- this was a conversation about a web of personal relationships; it was also about rage. Becoming a mother, especially for adolescents, is often cast as a turning point or transformation; however, such a narrative tends to ignore the impact of an individual's history on her present self. Researchers, myself included, tend to assume that identity as a mother automatically supersedes all other identity positions, especially other relationship-based identities like girlfriend/lover or daughter. This conversation reminded me that this is not necessarily true. In the lives of Gloria and Candace, to be a mother is also to be involved in a tempestuous, often violent, possibly lethal relationship.

As I conceived of this study to examine school-age mothers' in-school experiences, I overlooked the complexity of roles and relationships that are bound together within the construct of school-age mother. In this chapter, I look beyond my initial research questions to explore the blurring boundaries of motherhood and other identity positions, as they were revealed in classroom talk during third period English. Through the conversation between Gloria and Candace, I also explore the concepts of rage and wounded healing, offering a new way to understand the impact of Ms. Price's instructional practice. Further, I acknowledge gaps in my data and lingering questions that could inform future research projects.

It seems serious: Male-female relationships and conflict

Similar to a majority of school-age mothers, all four focal participants of this study became mothers in the context of long-term heterosexual romantic partnerships (Coffel, 2011; Furstenberg, 1981; Kaplan, 1997; Paschal, 2006). The fathers of their children were all African-American males between the ages of 18 and 22. Because none of them are married, all four

would nearly always be called “single mothers.” This label, however, does not account for the range of co-parenting relationships the mothers of this study are involved in. Even categorizing them by whether or not they are still dating their children’s father does not necessarily represent levels of support and involvement on the part of their co-parents, nor does it describe the lasting impacts of relationships once they have ended. For all four mothers in Ms. Price’s class, their identities as girlfriends/ex-girlfriends are deeply interwoven with their mothering identities; in class and in interviews, they spoke of their (ex-)lovers frequently. The literature on school-age mothers has not paid enough attention to the central nature of their contested girlfriend/ex-girlfriend/babymama identities, which turned out to be central themes for the focal participants of this study, as well as critically important to school attendance patterns.

As Gloria and Candace shared in this chapter’s opening dialogue, relationships with their children’s fathers were typically characterized in classroom talk through conflict. In interviews, however, loss was the primary theme related to their ex-boyfriends. While Gloria made it clear that she was not in a relationship with Lil Tee, she told me that he provided a little financial support to his son, although he visited less and less often. Gloria described his involvement:

“Being a teenage parent is stressful because at the end of the day, just because you have a baby by somebody, it doesn’t mean they’re always going to stick around. When I first had him, things were okay. Me and my baby’s father, we were okay even though we weren’t together. He was around. But he’s a rapper, and now he’s got shows and he’s on tour, so it’s just me by myself. I feel like the guys don’t understand how hard it is on a female to have a baby at a young age. I tell him, I just need a break. It doesn’t have to be a day, just take him for a few hours. But he will be like, ‘No, it’s hot outside.’ My baby needs love. He is so happy when he sees his dad. I wish he was here to see him more. It hurts me that he doesn’t come to see him. I feel like, what can I do? I struggle day by day; I don’t look for handouts. I had to buy a car because I couldn’t afford to keep asking people for rides. It was like, I had to find a way because I had this baby. ”

Gloria's situation follows a typical trajectory for adolescent couples with children, according to research which shows that father involvement decreases over time and over 80% break up within the first three years of becoming parents (Gee & Rhodes, 2003). Gloria emphasized that she was not upset about the break-up, just his lack of fatherly involvement. She told me, "I'm not going to stress over my babydaddy. We're both young. Why should we be fighting over something we can't control? Maybe when we're like 30 years old, then we'll be ready to settle down and get married. That's what other females don't understand. You're going to go through a lot of fights and arguments over something they don't want to do. A lot of females in this school try to force boys into being faithful, and that makes all the stress." Gloria has seen first-hand through her parents how stressful -- even dangerous and traumatizing -- relationships can be, so I understand why she does view adolescent romance as worth a lot of stress. At the same time, the narrative she weaves of her relationship is full of contradictions. In this chapter's opening dialogue, she changes the number of times and nature of fights she had with her ex-boyfriend and she criticizes Candace's actions but admits to stabbing Tee with a shoe, all while contending that "Male-female stuff should not be that serious." In her statements to me, she casually mentions that maybe when they're 30 she and Tee will get married, indicating that her feelings for him run far deeper than she typically makes it seem. When I really listen to Gloria, beyond coding for my research questions, I realize how Gloria's self-portrayal as a STRONGBLACKWOMAN, such as in her Raised By poem, is not just about being a mother who is a provider -- it is also about overcoming being cheated on and let down by a man without letting bitterness take over, as well as about overcoming being raised in a violent household to actively reject relationships that mirror her parents'. She prided herself on thinking differently than her classmates, and she attributed her outlook to what she had learned from watching her parents, as well as other family members and their conflicts with men. She told me, "Girls are so stressed over these dudes that don't want to be with them or hurt them. I don't get it. I'm like, 'Girl, you just need to leave.' It's so sad that girls be wrapped around these guy's fingers. Girls

need to show that they do have some control.” Gloria was adamant when she stated, “I refuse to allow these guys to beat on me, cheat on me, or take my money and think they can get away with it. I refuse.”

On the surface, Candace’s relationship status seems similar because she and her children’s father also broke up within the last year, and she reported significantly decreased parental involvement on his part. However, as indicated in the opening dialogue of this chapter, her perspective on the relationship was not in line with Gloria’s “It’s not that serious” mindset. She told me that she was trying to be “cordial” with her ex-boyfriend, for the sake of their children. She explained, “It’s hard, though, when you’ve given so much of yourself to someone and you can’t make it work. I don’t like him, but I feel like my kids need him in their lives, so I have to push that anger aside.” As Candace indicated in the class conversation, her seven year relationship was characterized by violence, infidelity, and “crazy.” Their conflict continued after the break-up, as she missed the end of the first semester and the first two weeks of this term because her ex-boyfriend poured sugar in the tank of her car and destroyed it. While she was still in the midst of this tumultuous break-up, during the semester of this study she also started dating a new boyfriend. He also attended WAC, and their relationship included at least once instance of heated shouting in the school’s hallway that led to an intervention by the Dean of Students. Ms. Price told me Candace’s new relationship “seems to be following that same crazy path as her last one.” At the end of the semester, Candace’s attendance was averaging less than once a week, which she attributed to “relationship drama.”

Even Mercedes, who was dating her child’s father at the beginning and end of the semester, missed a chunk of school due to relationship drama. She and her boyfriend broke up for a month mid-semester, and she only attended school twice during that time. She told Ms. Price that since he was her ride to school, she could not get there. She did not offer many details about the nature of the break-up, but I overheard whispered infidelity rumors on the part of her child’s father, who was both a WAC student and a semi-professional athlete. Mercedes

disclosed conflicts in her relationship during classroom talk, but unlike Candace and Gloria she never discussed physical altercations. She was absent on the day that the chapter's opening dialogue occurred, so it is possible she would have joined in to share a different side of her story. Instead, the examples of conflict she gave were minor and more commonplace. For example, she explained, "My man gets mad when we're on the bus and somebody is being loud, and I'm like, 'could you please be quiet.' He always tells me to stop." For Mercedes, the role of girlfriend was a central component of her identity. On the first day of class survey of "hats," girlfriend was the second hat she listed. Over three-quarters of the time that she mentioned her daughter, her boyfriend was also included in the comment or story, indicating a clear contrast with the other focal participants. Despite the differences in their scenarios, Mercedes's attention to her love life further supports the importance of these relationships in the consideration of school-age mothers as multi-faceted people and students.

Ebony's case is, of course, the most extreme example of the importance of considering the relationship with the child's father. She was the only mother who did not mention her child's father in whole class discussion, but as referenced in chapter 3, she wore an airbrushed hoodie with his picture on it most days after his death. The writing on the sweatshirt was similar to Gloria's folder, as it proclaimed their status: "Mr. and Mrs. Robbins." While she was not officially still involved with her child's father when he died, Ebony told me that they usually talked every day. The sense I have of their relationship -- and all of Ebony's relationships actually -- was that it was not as contentious or violent as the ones Gloria and Candace described. Yet, there were almost certainly ripple effects from his depression, as committing suicide cannot be understood as an isolated event. She did not speak much about their past, though, and I did not probe her to share. Ebony's post-high school plans were also influenced by this relationship. She told me, "The day after graduation, I'm moving back to Indiana so I can be closer to his grave. I'm going to community college there." She also told me that the hardest part of dealing with his death was trying to explain it to her son: "My son, every time he see a picture of his daddy, he be like

'Da Da.' Then he'll pick up the phone and say 'Da Da,' like pretending to call him. I say, 'You can't call Da Da'. And then he'll be like, wahhhh. It's hard to help him understand and to know that his daddy won't be in his life anymore." I cannot fully fathom how hard this is. What Ebony grappled with this semester is beyond anything I could have anticipated in planning a research study -- while I was concerned with how she was reading and writing as a mother, she was just trying to live through tragedy.

Contextualizing and theorizing their stories. The young women of this study are typical adolescents when it comes to their preoccupation with romantic partnerships. From developmental psychology to pop culture mythology, the central story of adolescence is often about experimentation with romance, sexuality, and intimacy. When these relationships or encounters result in pregnancy, however, the stakes and dynamics change. As Candace pointed out, "Girlfriend or baby mama? That's two different things." It is no wonder that on *Teen Mom* and *Sixteen and Pregnant*, a majority of the plot focused on tensions in male-female relationships, whether the parents were romantically involved or not. Educational researchers Coffel (2011) and Luttrell (2003) both call romance a "ruling passion" in the lives of their school-age mother participants, mentioning that the mothers spoke often of desire for romantic partnerships and turmoil in their romantic relationships. The students in Luttrell's (2003) study often spoke of love as having a violent, dangerous edge, similar to the conversation between Gloria and Candace. I want to be careful to point out that becoming parents did not cause relationships to suddenly become violent or contentious, as both Candace and Gloria clearly indicate that fights and "crazy" happened throughout their romances; however, becoming parents did link them to ex-boyfriends in real, lasting ways that cannot be undone and will continue to bring tension. I propose that researchers and teachers need to take a step beyond acknowledging this "ruling passion" and seek ways to actively address this stressor in the context of schools and classrooms. My next chapter will focus more on how teachers may begin to do so.

It is important to note that the mothers were not the only students in Ms. Price's class to share stories about intimate partner violence. During the dialogue between Gloria and Candace, I caught murmurs of side conversations that included story sharing about fights with boyfriends, and Rhea shared with the class that she tried to cut her boyfriend up once. On another day, I overheard a conversation between Charles and a female student about a recent physical altercation, in which the female told Charles that her boyfriend punched her. During my time at WAC, relationship violence was a common theme of classroom conversation -- in fact, I tried to address this topic through the curriculum because I was disturbed by the stories I heard. One part of the unit included hosting a "relationship panel," in which I brought in three other staff members and created an open question and answer session about romantic relationships. I am still haunted by the nonchalant assertion of one of my students, Janell, who stated, "Every relationship involves some level of violence. Every female has been smacked around sometime." Myself and the four panelists -- two males and a female -- adamantly disagreed, to which Janell responded, "You all come from some different world then."

This "different world" that Janell perceived is primarily race and class-based, and while domestic violence crosses all race, class, and culture lines, the pervasiveness of everyday aggressions and resulting physical actions that Janell is familiar with contrast my experiences as a middle-class white woman. Research reveals that African American adolescents, particularly those who live in low-income urban areas, experience a higher rate of intimate partner violence than other teens (Love and Richards, 2013). Hill Collins asserts, "Currently, one of the most pressing issues for contemporary Black sexual politics concerns violence against Black women at the hands of Black men. Much of this violence occurs within the context of Black heterosexual love relationships, Black family life, and within African American social institutions" (p.224-5). She theorizes that the root of partner violence is the "weak man, strong woman" thesis that defines black gender roles, just as Morgan (1999) described in the scripts of the *STRONGBLACKWOMAN* and *ENDANGEREDBLACKMAN*. Hill Collins (2005)

characterizes partner violence as part of a “triad of male aggression,” also including violence against other men and abuse of their children. All three types of male aggression were referenced by Candace and Gloria, and male-on-male violence was a recurring topic of conversation in the class. In fact, during this semester Charles was hospitalized as a result of being physically attacked by a group of males over some “street drama.” Calvin also referenced “his lost homie” on more than one occasion, stating that his friend’s murder was the reason he returned to school. The root of this male aggression is, according to Hill Collins (2005), that “so many African American men lack access to the forms of political and economic power that are available to elite White men, the use of their bodies, physicality, and a form of masculine aggressiveness become more important” (p.190). She also connects this aggression to the high rates of police brutality experienced by African American men, as well as the prison-industrial complex and violent nature of prisons, which disproportionately impact the African American community.

My data supports that intimate partner violence is a reality for some, but not all of the focal participants. I want to be careful not to over-generalize that school-age mothers, particularly black low-income ones, are part of violent relationships. For Gloria and Candace, however, this theme is a central component of their figured world of romance, dating, and co-parenting. When they read and write with their bodies, these are bodies that have used physical violence to assert power and bodies that have been injured by male hands. I wonder about how these past (and present) experiences influence transactions with texts that include scenes of relationship conflict and even violence. While the texts of Power and Identity’s curriculum included a few examples of physical aggression, I do not have any clear data on the reactions of Gloria and Candace -- nothing was said aloud, nor did I notice any explicit physical reactions. A potential extension of my research would be a study asking school-age mother participants to think-aloud as they read a text, looking for the ways past experiences mediate textual

transactions and offering implications for ways teachers could select or frame texts to support students' internal negotiations of ruling passions.

Other Relational Identities: Daughters and Friends

While they talked the most about their parental and romantic relationships, the focal participants in this study were also negotiating familial and social relationships. Nearly all mothers are also positioned as daughters of course, but school-age mothers are typically more dependent on their parents and possibly grandparents or other family relations-- financially, for housing, and in the eyes of schools and the state. Gloria, Ebony, and Mercedes live with their mothers; Candace's mother has custody of her children. Support was the primary discourse around the ways these women spoke of mothers, grandmothers, and aunts -- similar to their "Raised By" poems. Neither Ebony nor Mercedes ever made a critical comment about their families, and both relied on daily childcare from either an aunt or grandmother. They also both mentioned their children's paternal grandmothers as sources of additional support, which indicates a level of female solidarity in mothering that aligns with Hill Collins' (1987) Afrocentric ideology of motherhood.

Candace and Gloria, on the other hand, shared criticism of their mothers while praising their grandmothers and aunts (and never mentioning their children's paternal grandparents.) The issues with their mothers were described as long-term and in existence before Candace or Gloria became pregnant. Previous research has explored predictive factors for teenage pregnancy from childhood, and the stories of both Candace and Gloria align with findings that domestic violence, family histories of teenage pregnancy, and a lack of maternal attachment correlate with teenage pregnancy outcomes (East, Khoo, & Reyes, 2006; Kirby, Lepore, & Ryan, 2005). Gloria's two older sisters both also became mothers before the age of 18, but she did not connect their childhood circumstances with this trend. Gloria's criticism of her mother focused on the violence in her household, particularly how her mother "allowed" and encouraged it. In contrast, Candace directly blamed her mother's parenting style as causing her

to become pregnant. She told me she “clung” to her children’s father because, “I thought I had to have love from a guy. I wasn’t getting any love, support, or guidance, so I looked for it from a guy.” Until she was thirteen, Candace was raised by an aunt, and when she started living with her mother, her mother “acted more like a friend than a parent.” Candace elaborated, “What did she think was going to happen when she let my boyfriend spend the night? I didn’t really know better when I was 14, but she should have.” However, she told me that as a grandmother her mother was “finally doing right.”

While they did not speak of their mothers in class often, both Candace and Gloria spent significant time talking about their mothers when I interviewed them, as included above -- without any questions from me about their parents. I now realize how central the conflicted identity position of daughter is to these young women. I propose that internal negotiations such as what it means to be both a parent and child or how to accept support and establish independence were strong themes under-the-surface of their transactions with texts. While they did not explicitly articulate the connection, I suggest that one reason that the focal participants were so actively engaged in conversations about class texts was the recurring theme of parent/child relationships and family dynamics. For example, like *Winter of Coldest Winter Ever*, they experienced more pressure to support themselves financially, as well as more independence from their parents.

A third key relationship of adolescence, friendship, was rarely discussed by any of the focal participants and even de-valued by some. None of the mothers ever used the term “friend” in classroom talk. In interviews, there were only a few references to friendship. Ebony told me that her friends collected work from her teachers and brought it to her during her extended absence. Gloria contradicted herself, telling me in the first interview that her friends always asked why she was staying home all the time now that she has a baby, but then stating in the second interview, “I don’t consider anyone a friend.” Research has shown that school-age mothers report significant drops in their social activities after becoming parents (de Anda and

Becerra, 1984; de Anda, Becerra, and Fielder, 1990), as well as a correlation between considering oneself a “loner” and becoming a school-age mother (Gregson, 2009). I did not explore questions of the mother’s social lives or friendships in my study, however my classroom observations showed all four frequently interacting with peers but only Mercedes appearing to have a close friend in the class (as supported by her always sitting next to Tiffany and choosing to collaborate with her on projects, as well as frequent side conversations between the two). Both Gloria and Candace told me they did not trust others, especially other females.

On one hand, I worry about the implications of not having friends on their development and social-emotional well-being. At the same time, all of the participants had clear social ties throughout the school, eating lunch with small groups of peers and frequently engaging in hallway talk, so I know they were engaged in social relationships. Friendships and peer relations appear to be fruitful areas for further research concerned with understanding the school experiences of parenting students. I wonder if the academic success (in terms of final grades) of Mercedes and Ebony could relate to their stronger peer supports in the school. I am also interested in the differences in social relationships of school-age mothers who attend schools for pregnant and parenting students in comparison with those who attend alternative settings like WAC, and how social relationships look for mothers who continue attendance in mainstream settings before and after pregnancy -- and how peer relations mediate student identities.

Wounded Healing: Getting the anger out

Throughout my analysis of their relational identities, I found a divide between the stories of Candace and Gloria, who focused on conflict, and Mercedes and Ebony, who focused on support. The central role of anger in the narratives of Candace and Gloria almost certainly has roots in adverse childhood experiences. In a side conversation early in the semester, the two young women discussed that they had both attended anger management classes but did not find them valuable. However, while I saw parallels in the stories of Candace and Gloria, the women themselves did not. Gloria differentiated herself from “these other moms at WAC,” and

all of the points of comparison seemed directed at Candace: “court ordered to attend school,” “always getting high at lunch,” never spending time with their children, and “missing days for no reason.” These statements about Candace were mostly supported by Candace’s own admissions.

I see Gloria as further along in her journey of healing than Candace, particularly because the trauma of her parents’ abusive relationship is further in the past. Gloria told the class that after her father died, she started selling drugs. She also told me that until she found out she was pregnant, she was constantly fighting and getting arrested. Having a baby at seventeen marked a turning point for Gloria, sparking an end of fighting and a new “determination to finish school.” Her parents’ abusive relationship ended five years before she became a mother, and her father died three years before. I think this time allowed her to cope and heal in ways that Candace has not yet experienced. Candace became a mother at fifteen in the context of an abusive relationship. She was still adjusting to living with her mother, whom she was resentful towards because of childhood emotional neglect. During the semester of this study, Candace was not stable -- she said this herself -- and she was making the kinds of rash choices that Gloria described in her early teens. School was not Candace’s priority during the semester of this study; she attended school less than $\frac{1}{3}$ of the time, and Ms. Price’s class was the only one she passed.

While all four the focal participants stated that they loved Ms. Price and her class, Candace and Gloria were especially fervent and specific in their praises. I believe the class, particularly the class period detailed in this chapter’s opening dialogue, at times functioned as a space of wounded healing. I am indebted to Gloria for first pointing this out: “We get our anger out in there.” The idea of a classroom as a space of wounded healing comes from Hill (2009), who described the ways his Hip-Hop Lit classroom became more than just an English classroom: “Within this space, people bearing the scars of suffering shared their stories in ways that provided a form of release and relief for themselves and others” (p. 249). He describes

such a space a “storytelling community” formed through exposing wounds in the form of narratives (2009, p. 249). Hill (2009) noticed that students were reluctant to share their stories at first, and that while only a core group engaged in sharing, everyone in the class listened and supported. The same description matches Ms. Price’s class, although only a few class periods (3 that I observed) truly fit the wounded healing model, in that students’ painful personal disclosures became a central piece of the curriculum. Ms. Price floated with them, mostly letting them talk and only interjecting agreement.

Hill (2009) argues that through individual storytelling, students begin to recognize the commonality of their experiences, which is especially critical for oppressed groups. In the case of the stories shared by Gloria and Candace about violence, I observed the connections that many classmates were making through their nods and side comments of agreement. Through realizing these commonalities, students “gain insight into their problems, and access new ideological perspectives” (Hill, 2009, p. 265). Gloria told me that she believed the thinking of some of her classmates changed because of the story she shared about her father. She elaborated: “There’s too much relationship drama in this generation, for no reason. I think when I told about how my daddy was poisoned and set up, that made some people stop and think about how this male-female stuff can get out of hand.” She told me that in most classes, “The teachers talk too much, and nobody really listens. Or when students get to really talking, the teacher shuts it down. But Ms. Price is different.”

From my conversation with Gloria, I realized that in addition to valuing a teacher’s flexibility and respect, what she needed most during this semester was a space for wounded healing. While I believe that probably all students can benefit from such a space, the need was less urgent for some of the focal participants. Mercedes and Ebony, with their supportive family and friend relationships, placed less value on Ms. Price’s class as a space for personal disclosures. Neither participated in sharing narratives, nor did they mention the classroom conversations as their favorite element of the class. While Ebony certainly has wounds to heal,

either she did not choose Ms. Price's class as a space to do so, or her pain was still too open and fresh to process with peers. She was present and silent during Candace and Gloria's conversation, and I wondered how she felt about it -- did the arguments with their ex-boyfriends sound petty in comparison to the loss she experienced, did hearing these stories make her miss her child's father more because he was not like the men they described, or was she making her own connections with violence? I did not interview her until nearly six weeks later, and she did not cite that class period as significant in her discussion of the class.

Does Hill's (2009) call for classrooms as sites of wounded healing offer a model for rethinking the English classroom that would work well for school-age mothers? Perhaps Mercedes and Ebony would have become more involved in the communal process if the class was specifically structured to draw upon students' stories. Hill (2009) posits that his class also included rich literacy skill development, showing that it is possible to still meet academic and content goals alongside the social-emotional ones. I am interested in the possibilities of such a class and can imagine a follow-up study focused on the experiences of school-age parents in a classroom intentionally structured as a space of wounded healing -- perhaps as an elective or special course for students selected for the potential benefit.

Conclusions

When I recall the class session in which Candace and Gloria shared their stories of "love and trouble" (a common theme of African-American relationship narratives in popular culture, according to Hill Collins, 2004), I remember feeling deeply unsettled. While it may have been a moment of wounded healing for some students, for me it was uncomfortable. I wondered how a teacher might begin to address the rage that was evident in both young women; I worried about how this anger could impact their children; I noticed while they both spoke of changes and lessons learned, they also seemed to lean right into limiting stereotypes. The contrast between my own experiences and theirs was so striking, not just that I have never been physically violent towards another person or been on the receiving end of violence, but also that I have never felt

the level of anger they expressed. I struggle to reconcile the image I have of these young women as thoughtful and polished with the images of stabbing men with shoes or running them over with cars.

While I entered this study interested in ways to better meet the needs and capitalize on the strengths of an underserved group of students, these students reminded me that they are more than just one identity tag. In previous chapters, I looked to common strengths and literacy practices to identify ways school-age mothers might be reimaged as English students. These findings are important in reshaping the deficit narrative around school-age motherhood; however, here I acknowledge that meeting the needs of these students must take more than their parenting status into account. I also realize that in my emphasis on rejecting deficit narratives, I may have overlooked some of the grimness of their realities. Candace is a student in crisis, Gloria is overcoming childhood trauma, Ebony is grieving, and Mercedes is worried about her future (primarily financially). Differentiated social-emotional supports are easier to envision at a school-level, such as including Gloria in a trauma support group or including Mercedes in small-group sessions on college and career topics. I worry that too often schools group all school-age mothers together and focus the support on parenting topics. My evidence suggests that the participants felt supported in their parenting decisions and knowledge from women in their family, the school social worker, parenting classes outside of school, and Google. However, they all had real (and different) social-emotional and financial concerns. I am not exactly sure how to ease these worries. As much as I do not want to focus on large-scale policy, some of these issues seem bigger than changes in classroom practices can address. I do not claim to know exactly how to help Candace get stable or to encourage Gloria to examine contradictions in her understanding of relationships. However, I believe English as a content area offers an opportunity to explore the self and the world in a way that can foster social-emotional well-being. According to Gloria, Ms. Price's third period class was such a space. In

the next chapter, I offer additional pedagogical and curricular suggestions drawn from this study's findings.

Chapter 8: Schooling School-Age Mothers

Parts of this chapter were previously published as Kindelsperger, A. (2016). Baby mamas in literature and life: School-age parenting as a generative theme. In Rethinking Gender, Sexuality, and Sexism. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools, pp. 254-262; and Kindelsperger, A. (Fall 2015). Baby mamas in literature and life. Rethinking Schools, 30 (1), 42-47.

In my conversations with the focal participants, I asked about their experiences in schools, especially what they found valuable or lacking. Collectively they attended seven high schools of various types before WAC -- Gloria attended urban public and suburban public settings, Candace attended two suburban public schools and one alternative setting, Ebony attended an urban public school in another state, and Mercedes attended an urban charter school. Gloria spoke most favorably about a special program she was part of:

The best thing I was ever a part of in school was this group called WOW (Working on Womanhood) at my first high school. [Researcher's note: WOW is a school-based counseling and social-emotional program that targets female students deemed "at-risk."]

The group I was in was really open to discussion, but in most classes you don't know who to trust. You don't know who is judging you or going to tell other people. Schools need more places for open conversations about what's going on in students' lives.

As she described it, WOW sounds like an example of Wounded Healing, as discussed in the previous chapter (Hill, 2009). A space for open conversation, sharing, and "getting the anger out," is central to Gloria's conception of an ideal school, both before and after becoming a parent.

Mercedes stressed an entirely different priority for school. She told me:

My last school was a college prep school, like we had a class all four years focused

on actually getting ready for college, from researching schools to filling out FAFSA. I think there needs to be more of that in schools because for a lot of us our parents may not know how to help because they never went to college. The work was a lot harder too, like more essays and reading homework.

Comparing the statements of Mercedes and Gloria highlights tensions over the purpose of school that are reminiscent of the therapeutic haven versus real-world microcosm models that Kelly (2000) describes. Although not mutually exclusive, it is a challenge for schools to provide all of these supports and address past traumas, present stressors, and future goals. I also notice that becoming a parent did not change Mercedes's prioritizing of college preparation, while research suggests that most programs for parenting students emphasize vocational training or parenting advice over such components (Burdell, 1998; Kelly, 2000).

Candace was the only focal participants who attended a separate setting for pregnant and parenting students. She told me:

When I was fifteen and pregnant with my daughter, I went to an alternative school that was actually for pregnant moms and people who had just had their babies. I completed a semester there. There was a daycare there, so you could take your kids with you. It was really slow paced. We just sat in a room with big tables all day and stayed with one teacher. We did like packets of work and could eat when we wanted. It was easy. It wasn't terrible, but I did get pretty bored.

As Candace indicates, having on-site daycare is commonly lauded as the most helpful support for parenting students (Coffel, 2011; Kelly, 2000). Candace's comment about food interests me, as it indicates an often-overlooked physical need that pregnant and parenting (especially if nursing, sleep deprived, or not eating regular meals at home) students may face. Her description of the school's curriculum and instruction, however, aligns with the common criticism

that separate settings tend to offer less rigorous and rich educational experiences (Burdell, 1998; Pillow, 2004).

When Ebony was pregnant, her school counselor suggested she take online courses instead of attending school. Increasingly online courses or even online schools are replacing alternative settings like the one Candace attended (Wells, 2014). Ebony declined the online option, and she explained:

Don't give me online classes. Maybe they work for some students, but not for me.

School is good because you've got somebody telling you to do this, do that. If you give me an online class, I'm going to get up when I want to, do it when I want to, and if I don't feel like doing it, I'm not going to do it. That's not good. Also what if you don't get something? When you're in school you're with a teacher who can help. I just don't like online school.

WAC resisted the trend towards online classes, while many other schools in the same charter umbrella replaced in-person courses with online ones to save money. Further research on the experience of students, including school-age mothers, in online settings should be conducted to explore the impact of this trend.

While the focal participants were quick to offer visions for school structures and policies, they were not as able to describe individual classroom practices that they valued -- other than Ms. Price's overall approach. WAC was seen as a suitable, but not ideal option because it lacked a daycare and strong college preparatory curriculum; however, all four students favored such a setting to a single-sex environment for pregnant and parenting students and most valued the school's flexibility on attendance issues. Similar to the focal participants' commentary, school-wide supports and accommodations for school-age parents have been the focus of more research and discussion than individual classroom teaching practices. Rather than policy or program changes, I am interested in what teachers can do to best support the needs and capitalize on the strengths of school-age mothers *in their classrooms*. After a semester of

observations, interviews, data analysis, and reflection, what suggestions do I have for the new English teachers at WAC? How can the lessons of my study extend beyond WAC to impact English teachers in a range of settings with a variety of student populations? This chapter delves into these questions. I offer concrete curricular suggestions, as well as general strategies and principles supported both by my data and my experience as a teacher of school-age mothers in an inclusive setting.

School-age Mothers in Literature and Life

Lesko (1995) and Coffel (2011) have both suggested that school-age motherhood could be explored from a social justice lens within the curriculum, such as critically analyzing young adult novels or media portrayals of teen parents or reading about political topics that directly impact their lives, such as welfare reform policy. I agree, and for teachers who have curricular flexibility and a willingness to explore “taboo” topics, my first suggestion is to read and talk about school-age parenthood with your students. Not only are there examples of school-age parents in nearly all communities, as I established in Chapter 2, teen pregnancy is also a hot topic in popular media. In schools, however, discussions of pregnancy (and sexuality in general) are nearly always reserved for health class or Sex Ed. Throughout literature, as seen in both novels from Ms. Price’s class, there are examples of adolescent pregnancy. I expect that most often these examples of school-age mothers are overlooked or ignored, just as in Ms. Price’s enacted curriculum.

As a starting point, I suggest noticing these examples in the existing curriculum and discussing them with students. Ask about how the pregnant or parenting teen is portrayed, what stereotypes are supported or rejected, and how the historical and cultural context matters. For instance, when reading *The Guardian* (Lester, 2008), discuss why it was expected that Maureen and Bert would get married when she was pregnant and in what ways cultural mores regarding single parenthood have changed over time. In some classrooms, the resulting dialogue may prominently feature deeply ingrained deficit-mindsets towards young women who become

pregnant, and I urge teachers to resist and (gently) challenge students to examine this thinking. For example, give a quick lesson on Kelly's (2000) four competing stigma frames, introducing the idea that not all people view school-age pregnancy the same way. The focal participants of this study struggled against and within these discourses in their classroom talk and writing, without necessarily having the theoretical language to help make sense of the tensions they felt. I imagine learning about the stigma-is-wrong frame might feel validating and prompt rethinking of responsibility or redemption discourses that often characterized their writing. Further, the contradiction between the supportive comments of their classmates with the stigma discourses present in the class "Raised By" anthology supports that this topic would have been fruitful for Ms. Price to explore.

When I was a teacher at WAC, I decided to bring more examples of school-age mothers into my curriculum, planning a mini-unit focused on school-age parenthood within the larger "motherhood" unit of my Women's Literature class. Inspired by Paulo Freire's emphasis on curriculum that dialogically explores generative themes of students' lives, I wanted to disrupt the traditional silencing of school-age parenthood in classrooms and reframe the issue as an investigation of gender, race, class, and power. I offer a description of my unit as a potential starting point for other practitioners. The first semester I enacted this unit, I was pregnant and nearly half of the students enrolled in the class were mothers, and these factors probably contributed to the rich, transformative dialogue that transpired.

We started with reading an excerpt from Maya Angelou's *Letter to my Daughter* (2008), which detailed her unplanned pregnancy at the age of sixteen. I chose to start here because it immediately presents a contrast to the common deficit-based narrative of teen parenting; Angelou was an extremely respected and successful woman, not identified by her status as a teen parent. Before reading, we made a list of what we knew about Maya Angelou (no one knew she had been a school-age mother), and after reading, students were eager to fill in details about her pregnancy, personality, and relationship with her own mother. Students also selected

quotations to respond to in a double-entry journal, and the most commonly selected quotation was “There is no reason to ruin three lives; our family is going to have a wonderful baby.” Students shared their agreement with this statement and their approval of how Maya’s mother handled finding out about the pregnancy, many comparing their own experiences with this difficult conversation. For example, Deanna wrote, “This reminds me of when I thought my mom was going to be so mad when I told her I was pregnant, but she was actually really happy.”

To set up a contrast with the genre, style, and content of *Letter to My Daughter*, I selected an excerpt from the young adult novel *Imani All Mine* by Connie Porter (1999), as the second text. This fictional story involves a 15-year-old narrator whose mother is not supportive of her pregnancy. The narrator is only a freshman in high school, whereas Angelou did not have her baby until after graduation. The novel is written in a conversational style, with consistent features of Black English. The reading level made this text accessible for all students to read independently, and they completed another double entry journal to respond directly to quotations. I was struck by the tensions that student responses revealed, from joy over a baby’s birth to the challenges that come later. In response to the line, “I wasn’t expecting nothing for my birthday this year,” Marquitta wrote: “I don’t be expecting nothing for my birthday ever again because I have a child.” In response to the narrator’s mother saying she had it easy, Tianna reflected: “I disagree. Things be hard on us. Having a baby young ain’t easy. At all.” Our subsequent classroom discussion focused on the double-edged nature of school-age parenthood, as mothers affirmed that becoming a parent was a positive life change but also acknowledged that they would focus on preventing younger siblings and their own children from becoming parents in high school. My students were clear that pregnancies like mine, later in life and with a supportive partner, were the ideal. They—not I—pointed out the difference between us.

Imani All Mine ended up being students’ reported favorite text of the semester. I gave out all eight of my copies of the book after we read the first chapter for class, and I heard back

from many students about finishing the book later. From a sheer engagement standpoint, two days spent on this text were successful. In retrospect, I wish I had included more of the book in order to provide a more complex picture of the baby's life that could have pushed the discussion deeper into issues of poverty and violence. Both of these themes came up in our discussion, but we did not pursue them with as much attention as they deserve. I also want to note that rich classroom talk occurred alongside work on specific content skills, such as using context clues to infer the meaning of unknown words and using textual evidence to support a claim. For example, after reading Angelou's piece I asked students to use context clues to infer the connotation of the term "enormity" and the possible meaning of "recalcitrant." I also asked students about genre conventions: "How do you know this is a memoir? How would you describe the narration?"

There are many other texts that could have easily been added into my unit or replaced the ones I chose. Later in the semester we read *The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor (1982), which features more than one example of an adolescent mother. I like *The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson (2003) for its focus on an adolescent father. I also worry that only focusing on African American characters perpetuate racial stereotypes, so I also suggest bringing in *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Euwer Wolff (1993), or *Slam* by Nick Hornby (2007), to explore teen parenting in different racial and cultural contexts.

Following the textual study, we moved towards a more critical and political approach by unpacking some of the language about adolescent parents that came up frequently in the classroom. I passed out an anticipation guide with the following statements:

1. Is there a difference between being called a *baby mama* and a *mother*?
2. When you hear the term *baby mama*, do you associate it with a certain race?
3. Is *baby mama* a negative term?
4. Do you use the term *baby mama* to refer to yourself, members of your family, your close friends, or your girlfriend?

Students could choose yes, not sure, or no for each statement, with a box for answering at the beginning of class and a separate one for the end of class. We tallied our initial yes and no votes, and the discussion was lively from the very beginning. A few outspoken students were adamant that they were *mothers*, not *baby mamas*. A father in the class, however, argued that he uses the term in a positive way to differentiate his child's mother from other females. Some students agreed that maybe age mattered in who was called a "baby mama," but no one argued that the term was racist. I let the initial discussion go on without giving much input, although students pointed out that they would not call me a *baby mama*, leading a few students to question their initial reaction to the race difference. One student identified the difference as class, saying that maybe you would call a poor white woman a baby mama, but not someone like me.

Then we listened to the song "Baby Mama," by Fantasia Barrino (2005), and used text-marking strategies on the lyrics to find statements we agreed with, disagreed with, or were confused by. Then I provided two articles with contrasting points of view: one critical of the song for celebrating a term that should be derogatory and the other describing Fantasia's response to the backlash she faced. Although students primarily agreed with Fantasia, they were struck by the definitions of baby mama offered in Gregory Kane's (2009) commentary on Black America Web, which basically states that a baby mama is a woman who got pregnant by a loser. The class certainly did not reach a consensus, but a few students did start to question the term's connotations.

To address the potential racial implications of the term, I offered a second example: a video clip from Fox News in which Michelle Obama is referred to as "Obama's baby mama." "Bogus" was my students' common refrain, with many pointing out it seemed purposefully disrespectful. Some of the students decided that Fox was being racist, and that maybe the term has racist connotations.

I often find that students do not share my belief that language is political. As in the beginning of the “baby mama” lesson, students push back on the power of specific words, even derogatory terms. This lesson, however, elicited the most meaningful consideration of different viewpoints and even some changes in opinion. In the column for responses at the end of class, more than one-third of the students changed at least one opinion. I am not advocating for an approach to education that seeks to change students’ opinions, particularly not one that leads to them thinking like the teacher. I think this example shows, however, how commonly held conceptions often change as part of a critical approach to education.

There are many more layers to this issue that could be explored, from consideration of Black English (*baby mama* versus *baby’s mama*) to the similarities and differences with the term *baby daddy*. Later in the unit, we looked at hip hop songs about mothers, and certainly a whole class period could be spent considering the contradiction between how some rappers talk about their own mothers versus the mothers of their children. It would be worth specifically exploring how mothers of different races and cultures are portrayed in literature and popular culture (the MTV shows *Teen Mom* and *Sixteen and Pregnant* offer a potentially rich opportunity for exploration). In previous classes, I have addressed adoption by pairing *The First Part Last* with a *Sixteen and Pregnant* episode, and this is robust route for consideration.

While teaching this mini-unit the first time, I was struck by a series of *New York Times* articles reporting on a \$400,000 anti-teen pregnancy ad campaign New York City launched on buses and in subway stations (Taylor, 2013). I showed my students an example featuring a crying toddler (who is not white) and the text “I’m twice as likely not to graduate high school because you had me as a teen.” I asked the students to respond in writing about how they felt. The students were unanimous in finding the ads offensive and a waste of money that could be spent in a positive way. Although I did not include it, a civic engagement follow-up to these lessons could include writing letters of protest for offensive ad campaigns, harmful policies, or negative media portrayal.

Another example of investigating school-age parenthood as curriculum is described by Schaafsma, Tendero, and Tendero (1999). In this case, middle school students in the Bronx formed an inquiry group around the topic. They read nonfiction and academic texts about teenage pregnancy, conducted interviews with teen parents in the community, and created a forty-page booklet of stories and poems “of desire, waiting, warning, survival, and growing up” inspired by their study (p. 31). They distributed their booklet to health clinics, politicians, and other classrooms and conducted a follow-up workshop with fifth grade students who read it. This example emphasizes that even younger students need teachers to encourage the study of real, pressing topics in their lives -- and that school-age parenthood is one of these themes.

Curricular Study Beyond Motherhood

As Gloria desired, I intended the lessons in my school-age motherhood unit to include open dialogue about issues in the students’ lives. What I realized from the deep consideration of the cases of Gloria, Candace, Ebony, and Mercedes, however, is that consideration of other identities and themes in their lives are just as important as opportunities to explore their mothering positions. As I discussed in the previous chapter, contested and changing relational identities were at the forefront of these students’ minds. Romance and sexuality in particular were ruling passions of not just the focal participants, but all of Ms. Price’s students. While obviously common themes in literature, in my experience few high school English classes actually approach romance (and even fewer approach sexuality) as a central topic. For example, Ms. Price’s students picked out these topics within the texts of *Power and Identity*, but the guiding questions of the course focused on much broader, harder to contextualize notions of power and identity. Why not root a study of power within romantic partnerships or frame a study of power around gender and sexuality discourses in the media? My data suggests that such an emphasis would be engaging and potentially transformative for the focal students.

Much like my suggestion of noticing and addressing school-age parenting in the existing curriculum, I encourage teachers to help students notice ways that texts represent gender roles

in relationships or reproduce hegemonic discourses around sexuality. As Fine and McClelland (2006) call for, teachers can help reshape the discourse around desire to that of “thick desire,” which critically examines the intersections of sexuality, power, and justice. When Ms. Price’s students characterized *Coldest Winter Ever* as a “thot book” and criticized Winter’s sexual choices, a dialogue could have followed about gendered double-standards in regards to sexual desire, as well as critical consideration of the term “thot.” Introducing literary criticism of classroom texts, particularly feminist or Queer Theory, offers another opportunity for critically engaging with this topic. For example, Hill Collins (2004) has written about the representation of female desire in *Coldest Winter Ever*.

What I think the focal participants of this study need even more is a curriculum of intersectionality, including in-depth consideration of romantic partnerships. As discussed in chapter 7, conflict in dating relationships was a central theme of classroom talk and interview data, clearly a generative theme of their lives. I envision a course where literature is utilized as a tool to help students consider what it means to be in love and what a good relationship looks like, with examples across race, class, history, and sexual preference. Such a class would explore infidelity and domestic violence through literature, popular culture, and public policy. Furthermore, the class would include reading and discussion of core feminist texts. Beyond WAC’s flexible curricular planning, I envision this kind of curriculum in a more traditional school as a unit within an upper-level general English course or as a separate Gender Studies elective.

Such a class is described in an interview with visionary educator Liza Gesuden, published in *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality* (Sokolower & Butler-Wall, 2016). Her Gender Studies elective at a Bay Area high school allows the student to choose the themes and topics to explore after beginning with an introductory unit. Gesuden explains:

People often think that gender studies is about women. But patriarchy affects everyone. On a basic level, I talk about it as a system of oppression -- a system where men are dominant over women. The boys say, ‘I don’t feel dominant.’ But then we bring up

examples: who's in power, how much money men make compared to women, the media's portrayal of men and women. We look at how patriarchy functions in schools and in families. (pp. 169-170)

Her class uses multimedia texts from around the world, and the final project requires students to teach a lesson to their class and to a ninth or tenth grade English class. Ms. Price's class did include a brief gender unit, which Gloria cited as the best part of the curriculum -- I have no doubt she and the other focal participants would enjoy and benefit from the type of class Ms. Gesuden teaches.

Targeted social-emotional support. As I suggested in the previous chapter and discussed by Gloria in this chapter's opening, there is also strong evidence that some students would benefit from a space in school to more directly express their anger, trauma, and concerns. Often these needs are met through targeted support groups run by a social worker, psychologist, or youth development worker (such as Gloria's experience with WOW or the young mother's group the WAC social worker led some semesters). I also see English classrooms as possible sites for such interventions, with selected students taking such a course as an additional English or social studies elective. Candice Valenzeula, a teacher in Oakland, described such a course in an interview with Sokolower (2016). Her women's studies course was designed specifically for African-American female students "who might benefit from community, who might need support to develop as leaders or to come into their voices" (p. 321). Valenzuela reported that some students were resistant to a space that felt so different from a usual classroom and that it took time to build the kind of community of sharing she envisioned. Using reflective writing and journaling as the starting point for curriculum, the first theme of study was conflict. Students' lives were the starting point of curriculum, with community resources brought in for support. When I read about this class, I think particularly of Gloria and Candace, and how they would benefit from a sisterhood space.

Classroom conversation-starters. As I wrap up my curricular suggestions, I also want to offer a few points of consideration that would benefit school-age mothers in the classroom. Just as I looked for connections between identity positions and responses to literature, what about asking students to reflect on the ways their lives impact their reading? Such a practice could foster self-analysis and also boost metacognitive awareness. Similarly, a rich conversation could result from introducing the notion of Funds of Knowledge to students and asking them to reflect on their own FoK. From a research standpoint, both of these routes also offer potentially robust methods to include in future studies. Additionally, Luttrell (1997) has studied how knowledge, particularly women's knowledge, is characterized as "school-smarts" or "mother-wisdom," passed down and absorbed through the home. In Ms. Price's class, "street-smart" also came up multiple times as a type of knowledge. I am interested in how students see the relationship between these types of knowledge and if they can collectively identify ways to capitalize on out-of-school skills and knowledge within the classroom.

Strengths-based and Strengths-building Strategies

In addition to the curricular implications, I have also identified four areas of instructional practice well-suited to build on strengths associated with motherhood. All of these suggestions can certainly benefit all students, regardless of parenting status, but my data suggests they may be particularly valuable to enhancing the classroom experiences of school-age mothers. First, as discussed in chapter five, the mothers in this study excel at perspective-taking. I suggest crafting assignments that encourage students to think and write from the perspective of characters in texts. In cooperative learning structures, school-age mothers are likely to function as group leaders, helping support their peers' ability to try on different points of view. To further develop this skill, a strategy such as writing a multi-voice poem asks students to consider multiple perspectives on the same topic. To align with Common Core standards or support specific content goals, teachers can focus on asking students to support their claims with direct evidence from the text.

The second suggestion, drama and role-play, could work as an extension of the first if students are asked to embody characters. The potential value of drama is supported by the eager participation, confidence in sharing their opinions, and fluent oral reading skills that the school-age mothers demonstrated in Ms. Price's class, in addition to their perspective-taking abilities. In fact, Gloria engaged in a role-play of her own design at the beginning of one class period, when she pretended to be the mother of the class, criticizing her "disrespectful children." Although Ms. Price did not include any drama activities in this class, when I was her colleague I witnessed her incorporate strategies such as creating a "talk show" with the character of a text or tableau to interpret a scene. I expect the students in third period would have been eager participants in such activities. In Luttrell's (2003) work with pregnant and parenting students, she asked them to recreate real scenes from their lives, such as telling their mothers they were pregnant. Through self-presentation, Luttrell (2003) argues that the participants wrestled with multiple positions as a way towards reconstructing their own narratives. As Coffel (2011) theorizes, dramatic activities are an extension of relationship between bodies and reading, and classrooms tend to ignore this connection.

A third strength to consider relates to accessing and assessing knowledge from outside sources, particularly the Internet. As previously established, the focal participants relied on the the Internet as a source of information regarding parenting, and they demonstrated efficacy at research tasks that Ms. Price assigned. To further develop this capacity, I suggest that teachers assign larger-scale research projects that require synthesizing and comparing information from multiple sources, as well as instruction in locating and understanding denser academic sources. I would love to see additional research skills, such as conducting surveys, interviews, or ethnographic observation also included as sources of evidence in the English classroom as well; the focal participants noted already using such methods to gather information about parenting, and they could be taught how to apply these skills to academic tasks. Such practices

not only prepare students for post-secondary academic work, but also could directly impact their ability to make informed parenting decisions.

Fourth, school-age mothers have rich stories to tell and tensions to explore through writing and benefit from frequent opportunities to write for a variety of purposes and audiences. I find particular value in personal and creative assignments, such as the “Raised By” poem from Ms. Price’s class, because of the self-reflection and self-development associated with such tasks. Further, personal writing can be shared with classmates or a broader audience to illustrate and complicate understandings of human experience, as in the booklet about teenage pregnancy students created in the inquiry group described by Schaafsma, Tendero, and Tendero (1999). I also believe that the students need opportunities to develop their argument and explanatory skills -- and that school-age mothers in particular would benefit from freedom to select topics relevant to their lives, intended to inform real decisions or reach actual audiences. For example, I imagine students’ using a comparison essay as an opportunity to analyze childcare settings, school options, or future careers. School writing assignments could function as advocacy if it is designed to reach real audiences, such as in the form of a letter arguing for or against a particular policy or program for themselves or their children.

Conclusion: Teaching Towards Liberation

According to my focal participants, the teacher’s overall approach matters more than the curriculum or instructional practices. I am not sure these three components can actually be separated, as Ms. Price would not be the same Ms. Price if she were lecturing on Shakespeare. A teacher’s philosophy and personality inform every other component of their pedagogy, although some settings offer more or less freedom in text selection and lesson planning. A teacher who rejects deficit notions of school-age parents and views them as capable will naturally use affirming language, challenge limiting discourses, and demonstrate his/her underlying beliefs. Ms. Price did not feel sorry for the school-age mothers in her classroom, nor did she judge them; in fact, she told me from the beginning that she believed mothering

students tended to be “more mature and good thinkers.” Such teachers will be perceived as supportive and motivating, even if their curriculum or instructional practices miss opportunities for capitalizing on strengths or investigating students’ lived experiences.

Teachers should be aware of students’ parenting status but avoid publicly positioning students as parents; rather, as Ms. Price did, reference parenting as a possible position and create opportunities for students to speak of their lives. As Pillow (2000) encourages, teachers can privately give explicit encouragement to pregnant and parenting students. Hill (2008) stresses the value of personal disclosures from the teacher, describing the connection he made with students when he shared news of an unplanned child on the way. When I was pregnant and later parenting, I also shared anecdotes from my experiences that built rapport with students and shifted power dynamics so that some students were “experts” for a moment. It also helps to be empathetic, remembering that these students in particular may be sleep-deprived -- repeating a question, using a strategy to get students standing up, or even offering a chance to re-do an assessment on another day seem like feasible and appropriate accommodations. I also encourage teachers to advocate for policy or program changes that would better serve school-age mothers in their schools, such as on-site daycare or perhaps relaxed food and beverage rules (benefiting hungry pregnant students, parents whose mornings were hectic and they missed breakfast, or tired students who could use water or coffee to stay alert).

The stories of Gloria, Candace, Ebony, and Mercedes are not easy and never have been; their lives are subordinated and marginalized by the matrix of domination; their academic skills are below college readiness guidelines. They need teachers who not only value their voices and empathize with them, but also work tirelessly and creatively to create school experiences that counter oppression. Alongside social-emotional support, teachers must find a way to boost students’ critical reading and analytical writing skills to open up career prospects and gain critical awareness of their situation. Classrooms can also be sites to disrupt limiting

discourses if teachers are willing to teach without answers, embrace lingering questions, and have uncomfortable conversations. These young women and their peers need teachers who will help them ask “why?” to capitalism, patriarchy, neoliberalism, white privilege, the “wrong-girl frame,” and the “weak man, strong woman” thesis. Their futures and their children’s futures depend on it.

Epilogue: Commencing their Futures

I am standing at the back of a large auditorium, the site of WAC's spring commencement. I have been to twelve of these ceremonies before (graduations occur twice per year), although this time I am not wearing a faculty robe, being introduced, or giving out an award. Now I am just an observer, as I have been for the last semester in Ms. Price's third period English class, and this is the official end of my data collection. As the procession of students march in, I scan the faces in gold robes to find Mercedes, Gloria, and Ebony. I am not surprised that Gloria's high heels are among the steepest of the bunch, and I notice that Mercedes has a curly hairdo peeking out under her graduation cap, instead of her usual un-styled hair covered by a headscarf. I watch as Ebony takes her seat on the stage and shortly after approaches the microphone to introduce the staff. She has volunteered for this role, and she delivers it with a hint of the smile and sass that I recalled from the first day of Ms. Price's class but had not seen in months.

Four of Ms. Price's third period students, including Ebony and Mercedes receive Honor Roll certificates, indicating they earned all As and Bs in their classes. I am smiling, almost tearful, with pride and respect for their accomplishment. As the Assistant Principal reads off the Honor Roll, she lists their future plans and the people they want to thank. Both Ebony and Mercedes list their child first on their thank you list, as do two of the twelve other Honor Roll students. There are two student speakers, one of whom is a school-age mother I taught the previous year. Near me, her three-year old daughter exclaims, "Mama!" when she appears at the podium. "This is exactly why I came back," I think -- these vivacious, determined young mothers defying limiting scripts.

Nearly all of the students whose voices appear somewhere in these pages graduates on this June morning, including Charles and Calvin. Both pause as they receive their diplomas to flash wide grins and celebratory motions to the crowd. I heard from another teacher that Gloria

barely made it to this day, earning two Ds. She has a loud cheering section who erupts when she crosses the stage, though. In the chaos of photos and hugs after the ceremony, I only manage to find Ebony to offer a quick congratulations and a smile for her baby.

Even at this celebratory moment and especially after, I still return to a question about each of my focal students: is she going to be okay? I realize this is a vague, not very academic question, but I asked it outright to both Ms. Price and the school social worker. My whole study has been framed positively, focused on identifying strengths and assets; yet, this is the question that sticks. I do not like the label “at-risk,” preferring Fine’s (1995) language of “at-promise.” If I am admitting my deepest feelings, though, all of these students have a great deal of promise as *well* as significant risk of not meeting it.

Although the least represented in the data, it is Ebony whom I worry about least. From what I know, she did return to her hometown right after graduation to enroll in community college. She already had living and daycare arrangements made and family (both hers and her baby’s paternal side) to support her in the area. She graduated on the Honor Roll after losing her partner and missing nearly six weeks of school -- yes, I tell myself, she is going to do just fine. Mercedes, whom I feel I got to know the least, also seems prepared to achieve her goals. Ms. Price and the social worker concur on both of these accounts.

It is the two angrier, more wounded women I worry more about -- although they also happened to be more participatory in the class, insightful in their comments, and open to talking with me. Ms. Price told me she thought Gloria would do well if she enrolled in college right away, without a break, because she worried if she stopped going to school she would never go back. From her public social media presence, I know that Gloria has not begun college yet, but she found a minimum wage job at a discount store. I have faith in Gloria’s intelligence, humor, and wisdom. Even if she does not pursue higher education, I think she can find a way eventually to become a “Working a 9-5/Car paid for/ Not hiding from the repo man/ Rent paid up/ Not

dodging the landlord/ Real business handling Wom[a]n,” as she described in her “Raised By” poem.

But then there is Candace. Candace did not graduate, and as her twenty-second birthday approached, she aged out of enrollment at WAC. I do not believe she can earn a high school diploma, but perhaps a GED will be in her future; at least in the English portion, I expect she could pass. When I last saw her at the end of the school year, she was pregnant with her new boyfriend’s child, but openly stated that she was going to terminate the pregnancy. More than the others, her story frustrates and confounds me. Candace made the most poignant, beautiful responses to literature and in interviews she told me all about the ways she was making her children’s childhood better than her own. She tearfully told me, “I’m trying. I won’t give up. It’s a lot” but continued to make decisions that jeopardized her chances of being “able to live like how I want us to live and that [my kids] really deserve.” I do believe she can get there, but she has a long way to go and without a high school diploma it will be even harder.

Just as I wrapped up my writing about this class, I found out an interesting bit of news: at her new school, Ms. Price was awarded “Teacher of the Year.” I am incredibly indebted to her for graciously hosting me for this study, and I am inspired to know that she is continuing to grow as an educator and impact students.

APPENDIX A:

Research Methodology Notes

Data Collection

I was present for one-half of the class meetings for this one-semester course (31 hours of instructional time). Rather than a fly on the wall, I took on the typical ethnographic role of participant observer, engaging in some classroom routines and conversations, and occasionally offering instructional assistance. In the beginning of the term, I utilized ethnographic techniques such as mapping the space and keeping track of schedules to help orient me into the space and provide possible supporting details for narratives told (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). In my field notes, I attempted to capture as much of the classroom conversation and activity as possible, particularly focusing on the case study participants. I ended each set of field notes with a conceptual memo of key themes, questions, and emerging theory. For those classroom moments that struck me as particularly interesting, I also created narrative renderings of the observation, “storying” my experience, as described in Schaafsma and Vinz (2011). I also collected copies of all curricular materials from the course, including texts, teacher-created handouts, video clips, and multimedia presentations. I interviewed Ms. Price twice: the first took place during the second week of the semester to discuss her course goals, overall approach, and knowledge of the students; and the second took place after the last day of class to reflect on the class in general, as well as reflect on key events and her perceptions of the case study participants as a way to triangulate some of my data.

In my field notes and jottings, I paid careful attention to interactions involving the school-age parents. I also read and photocopied their written assignments as an additional data source, with an eye for how they represent themselves and their identities and how they interacted with class texts. While I intended to interview each case study participant twice, frequent and extended absences disrupted this component of my data collection. I conducted

one interview, lasting approximately 45-minutes, with the four case study participants. In this interview I sought to establish background information on attitudes about English as a subject, past school experiences, and literacy practices. I conducted second interviews with Gloria and Candace, reflecting on the class as a whole and seeking further clarity of issues that arose in the data. Interview Protocols are included in Appendix B.

Data Analysis

Taking an “ethnography of communication” approach, as Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) describe it, I primarily focused on the classroom talk represented in my field notes by identifying patterns of language use and analyzing the relationship between these patterns and overarching cultural factors of the context. Using open coding and a constant comparison model, I tracked repeating terms, themes, and interaction styles (Glaser, 1965). While I paid particular attention to references to parenting, I also coded other recurring topics, including race, gender, sexuality, and violence, as well as references to school or reading. My coding was multi-layered. First, I recorded whether an interaction was part of formal or informal classroom talk. I coded “reading events” (Rosenblatt, 1978) when classroom talk was focused on or stemmed from a text; and I tracked actions related to language, such as a student reading aloud from a text. In some cases, I coded for style, such as agreeing, cosigning, questioning, or joking. I also coded for the purpose of statements, especially in reading events, such as text-to-self connection or perspective-taking. The following chart details the classroom talk codes that emerged during data analysis:

Category/ Layer	Type of Talk	Actions/ Purposes	Topics	Styles
Codes	Informal Formal (teacher-led)	Advice Personal Sharing Perspective-Taking Hypothetical Position Self-positioning Peer-positioning Sharing written work	Parenting Race Sexuality Violence Family Dating School	Agreeing Co-signing Questioning Joking Challenging Sarcasm

			Money Church Pop Culture	
	Reading Event	Reading Aloud Answering Question Recall Inference/Prediction Connection Text-to-Text Text-to-Self Text-to-World Perspective-Taking		

For the major classroom talk codes, I kept separate tallies for when the code related to the language of the teacher, a school-age mother, or a non-mother. Contrasts between the school-age mothers and the rest of the students highlighted potential “funds of knowledge” findings, which was another layer of codes I applied. I then looked to the interview transcripts to find supporting events of these funds of knowledge. I also coded the interviews and student writing for topical themes similar to the classroom talk, such as identity positions and references to school, literacy practices, or this particular class. The following chart details coding for the interview transcript data and student writing:

Data Source	Codes (Topic/subtopic)
Interview Transcripts	Education School, general School, past experiences School, WAC This class Literacy In-school Out-of-school Related to parenting Changes Self-perception/ Identity STRONGBLACKWOMAN Parenting Relationships Conflict Romantic Partnerships

	Family Friendship Life History Challenges Key Events Motivation Lessons Learned
Student Writing	Identity, General Race Gender Class Intersectionality Beauty STRONGBLACKWOMAN ENDANGEREDBLACKMAN Identity, Personal Self-perception Rhetoric of the Future Independence Motherhood Limiting Scripts/ Societal Discourses Responsibility Relationships

I read and analyzed all curricular documents, including texts or handouts from days I was not present for observations. I wrote a summary of each document; recorded a list of key events and themes related to parenting, gender, and sexuality; and recorded and annotated all text passages related to parenting, gender, and sexuality. I also noted which days I saw curriculum being enacted, linking the formal curriculum with my observation notes, as well as noting gaps between themes present in the text and what was discussed in class. I used the same topical codes (parenting, family, race, etc.) to code students' written work, and also noted identity positions.

The following chart maps how the research questions are supported by data collection and analysis methods.

Research Question	Sub Questions	Data Sources	Methods of Analysis
When, and in what ways, do	a) How do school-age parents making their	a) Field notes from classroom	a) Analysis and coding of field notes for self-

school-age parents position themselves as parents within the classroom?	<p>parenting status visible? How and when do they refer to their parenting experiences?</p> <p>b) How do school-age parents utilize literacy practices to explore their identities, including their parenting identity?</p> <p>c) When, and in what ways, are school-age parents positioned as such by others?</p>	<p>observations</p> <p>b) Case studies' written work and field notes from classroom observations</p> <p>c) Field notes from classroom observations</p>	<p>references to parenting</p> <p>b) Analysis and coding of student for references to parenting and other identity positions. Analysis of field notes for text-based references to parenting</p> <p>c) Analysis and coding of field notes for peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student references to parenting</p>
In what ways do students' parenting experiences operate as funds of knowledge they draw from in the classroom?	<p>a) What is the relationship between how school-age parents report using literacy in relation to their parenting role outside of school and their classroom-based literacy practices?</p> <p>b) How do school-age parents bring their parenting identities into interactions with texts they read and produce?</p>	<p>a) Interviews with case study participants, field notes from classroom observations, and case studies' written work</p> <p>b) Interviews with case study participants, field notes from classroom observations, and case studies' written work</p>	<p>a) Analysis of field notes and written work for overlap with how the participants describe their literacy practices in interviews</p> <p>b) Analysis and coding of interview transcripts and field notes for parenting references related to texts. Analysis and coding of written work for parenting references</p>
In what ways do the curriculum and teacher practices silence or help give voice to school-age parents' lived experiences?	<p>a) How is parenting represented in the texts of the formal curriculum, and how is it addressed by the teacher in the enacted curriculum?</p> <p>b) What is the relationship between how the teacher</p>	<p>a) Curricular materials and field notes from classroom observations</p> <p>b) Interview with teacher and field</p>	<p>a) Analysis and coding of curricular materials for representations of parenting, as well as gender and sexuality; Analysis and coding of field notes for teacher references to parenting in relation to curricular materials</p> <p>b) Analysis and coding of interview transcripts</p>

	<p>describes her understanding of school-age parenthood and her interactions with school-age parents?</p> <p>c) What characteristics and traits do school-age parents value most in a teacher?</p>	<p>notes from classroom observations</p> <p>c) Interviews with case study participants. Field notes from classroom observations</p>	<p>for references to school-age parenting. Analysis and coding of field notes for teacher and case study interactions</p> <p>c) Comparison of interview transcripts in response to this question with field notes for teacher and case study interactions</p>
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APPENDIX B: Interview Protocol

Interview Questions for Ms. Price

Initial Interview (February, 2015)

1. Can you describe your overall approach or teaching philosophy?
2. Why did you decide to teach this class? What are your primary goals for this class?
3. How do you feel things are going so far with third period?
4. How do you use knowledge of your students' lives when you're planning and teaching?
5. One thing I'm interested in is how students who are parents may bring in their parenting experiences into school. How do you think being a parent impacts students?
 - a. Can you think of any ways school-age parents may use their parenting experiences as an asset in school?

Final Interview (June, 2015)

1. How do you think third period went this semester?
2. What stands out to you the most about this class? What do you think you will remember about this particular class?
3. Which lessons or texts do you think resonated the most with the students?
4. The four students I focused on were Gloria, Ebony, Mercedes, and Candace. Can you talk to me about your impression of each of these students and reflect on their learning and engagement?

Interview Questions for the Focal Participants

Initial Interview (March-May, 2015)

1. Tell me about your past as a student.
 - a. If it doesn't come up: how did you come to ACEC?
 - b. If it doesn't come up: ask to differentiate since becoming a mother.
 - c. Can you tell me about an experience in school you really valued?
 - d. What are your plans after graduation?
2. Intro my project. Can you tell me about yourself as a mother and about your children?
 - a. Do you think becoming a parent has impacted you as a student? How so?
3. Outside of school, what kinds of reading and writing do you do? How many minutes a day would you say you are reading or writing outside of school?
 - a. How have your reading and writing habits changed since becoming a parent?
4. What do you think of Ms. Price's class so far?
 - a. What do you remember about the first day of this class?
 - b. Can you tell me about a class period, moment, or text that stands out to you from this class so far and why?

5. As you are reading/now that you have finished *The Guardian*, what do you think of that book? What did you take away from reading it?

Final Interview (June, 2015)

1. How did this semester go for you?
2. What did you think of Ms. Price's class overall?
3. What was your favorite activity or lesson from Ms. Price's class? Why?
 - a. What was your favorite text?
4. What will you remember most about this class? Can you tell me about a particular conversation that stands out to you and why?
5. Did you notice examples of school-age mothers in the course readings? What did you think of the way teen parents were represented?
6. I work with future teachers. What advice would you give future teachers about working with students like you?
7. What is next for you?

Interviews were semi-structured and not all questions were discussed with all participants, based on available time.

APPENDIX C: Course Reflection

I created a handout with the following questions, which Ms. Price administered during the final week of class. The focal participants' answers are included here.

1. Overall, how did you feel about this class?

Candace: I feel good about this class. I love Ms. Price.

Gloria: Overall, I like this class way more than I like any other class I have.

Ebony: I like this class.

Mercedes: I enjoyed this class.

2. Of all the discussions, readings, or activities, what stands out the most about this class to you?

Candace: What stands out about this class is that Ms. Price can really relate to us and she keeps it real with everyone.

Gloria: The class discussions stand out the most, like the one on gender roles.

Ebony: I mean this class helped us understand life.

Mercedes: The reading

3. If you had to pick one character from something you read or watched who you relate to the most, who would it be and why?

Candace: I don't know if I really relate to any of them, except maybe some of the struggles Winter faced or Maureen's desire for her son to have a good life. But I don't relate to the way they handled themselves.

Gloria: One character I like was Midnight because he was about his money and stayed to himself.

Ebony: I wasn't really here much.

Mercedes: Little Willie is the one character I sort of relate to. He's smart, he's different, and he's going to be successful. He doesn't let his race or where he's from stop him. I was glad the book ended up okay for him

4. The title of this class is Power & Identity. How do those themes relate to what you did in class?

Candace: In the stories we read, people are trying to find their identities and also trying to find their own power.

Gloria: All the books were about people struggling with their identity and having power over each other.

Ebony: We talked about the identity of characters and our self. We talked about do we feel like we have power. I feel like I got power.

Mercedes: This class was about developing who you are (identity) and understanding what you can control (power). Being in this class helped me think about my identity and the power I have.

5. What do you think Ms. Price will remember most about you?

Candace: My crazy love life

Gloria: Our conversations and my sense of humor

Ebony: My hard work

Mercedes: That I was quiet but also a leader.



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July 7, 2016

Dear Rethinking Schools:

I am writing to request permission to use an excerpt from "Baby Mamas in Literature and Life," an article previously published in your book *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality* (2016) and your Fall 2015 magazine in my thesis. This material will appear as originally published, without the introduction and conclusion, and with a few omissions for brevity. Unless you request otherwise, I will use the conventional style of the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Chicago as acknowledgment.

A copy of this letter is included for your records. Thank you for your kind consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Abigail Kindelsperger

The above request is approved.

Approved by: Judy Sukel Date: 7/7/16
managing editor, Rethinking Schools

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VITA

ABIGAIL PARKER KINDELSPERGER

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EDUCATION

Ph.D. candidate (ABD), Curriculum & Instruction

University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC)

anticipated December 2016

- Curriculum Studies program

M.A., English Education

The Ohio State University

2008

- Thesis — Activity Settings of Learning to Teach Literature

B.S., Middle/Secondary Education & B.A., English, *Summa Cum Laude*,

Butler University

2005

- Thesis—The Cross-Cultural Literary Canon: Gender Roles in the Curriculum of India, Australia, and Canada

Professional Educator's License, Illinois, English Grades 6-12, issued in 2008

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Illinois at Chicago

2013 - 2016

Adjunct Faculty

Dominican University

2014 -present

DePaul University

2015

Middle and High School Teacher

Austin Career Education Center (Chicago, IL)

2008 - 2014

Churchill School and Center (New York, NY)

2006 - 2007

Ben Davis High School (Indianapolis, IN)

2005 - 2006

Graduate Assistant, The Ohio State University

2007 - 2008

PUBLICATIONS

Kindelsperger, A. (accepted for publication). Teaching and learning while pregnant: *Unexpected* opportunities. In *Screen Lessons: What I have Learned from Teachers on Television and in the Movies*. M. Dalton (Ed). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Kindelsperger, A. (2016). Baby mamas in literature and life: School-age parenting as a generative theme. In *Rethinking Gender, Sexuality, and Sexism*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.

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SCHOLARLY PRESENTATIONS

Kindelsperger, A. (accepted for 2016, November). *Teaching Spoken Word as Teacher Education Praxis*. In *Texts that Invite us to Speak for Ourselves: Advocating for Spoken Word Poetry as Content and as Pedagogical Frame*. Workshop session proposed for the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention. Atlanta, GA.

Kindelsperger, A. (2015, November). *Learning from School-Age mothers English Class Experiences*. Paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention. Minneapolis, MN.

Kindelsperger, A. (2015, October). *Intersections of Mothering Identities and Student Identities in a High School English Class*. Paper presented at the Mid-Western Educational Research Association Annual Convention. Evanston, IL.

Kindelsperger, A. (2013, November). Creating critical literacy through the exploration of fresh, local voices. In *Contemporary poetry in grades 6-12: Developing independent voices, dialogic communities, and critical literacies*. Paper presented (in absentia) at the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention. Boston, MA.

Kindelsperger, A. (2013, February). *How does local, contemporary spoken word poetry in the classroom engage students?* Work-in-progress session presented at the Chicago Curriculum Studies Student Symposium.

Kindelsperger, A. (2012, November). Telling stories with August Wilson. In *Jane Addams AND August Wilson telling the city: Helping our students tell their stories*. Paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention. Las Vegas, NV.

Parker, A. (2009, April). *The cross-cultural literary canon: Gender roles in the curriculum of India, Australia, and Canada*. Poster presentation at the American Educational Research Association Annual Convention. New York, NY.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Illinois at Chicago

- Instructor, HON 101: Introduction to UIC Honors
 - First-year seminar for Honors College students with an emphasis on successful transitions to college.
- Instructor, ENGL 459: Introduction to Teaching Middle and High School English
 - Undergraduate course, the first of four in the English Education sequence. An emphasis on philosophical frameworks of English teaching, trends and controversies in the field, lesson planning, and Task 1 of the EdTPA.

- Responsibilities included coordinating field experience placements in local schools and bringing guest speakers to campus.

Dominican University, River Forest, IL

- Instructor, EDU 711: Professional Seminar
 - Directed study with a small group of graduate students to prepare for the EdTPA assessment.
- Instructor, EDU 578: Literacy in Secondary Content Areas (online)
 - Graduate course for practicing science teachers in an alternative licensure program.
- Instructor, EDU 535: Literacy in the Content Areas (hybrid course)
 - Graduate course for practicing teachers of multiple disciplines in an alternative licensure program.

DePaul University, Chicago

- Instructor, SEC 371/TCH 471: Teaching English in the High School 1
 - Graduate and undergraduate course focusing on frameworks for writing instruction and International Baccalaureate curriculum development, with opportunities for teaching demonstrations and reflection.
 - Responsibilities included coordinating field experience placements in local schools and aligning course content with International Baccalaureate licensure requirements.

SUPERVISORY APPOINTMENTS

University of Illinois at Chicago English Education Field Instructor (3 semesters)

The Ohio State University English Education University Supervisor (3 quarters)

CONSULTING & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Pearson

- EdTPA Scorer

Young Chicago Authors

- Professional Development Facilitator: Chicago Public Schools Arts-Based Discipline Professional Development on Creative Writing
- Consultant: Created assessments for the “Chicago Writes” curriculum

RELEVANT PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Graduate Publications Assistant, University of Illinois at Chicago Honors College

Reading Exam Prep Instructor, High Jump Chicago- Lab Campus Summer Program

Writing Tutor, Smarthinking (online)

Writing Instructor, National Youth Sports Program - Indianapolis

Peer Tutor, Butler University Writing Center

Education Intern, Indianapolis Museum of Art

SELECTED AWARDS

Excellence in Undergraduate Mentoring Award for Graduate Students, UIC

Top Ten Most Outstanding Female Student, Butler University

Outstanding Senior English Education Major Award, Butler University

Outstanding Future Educator Award, Indiana Association of Colleges of Teacher Education

GRANT

Chicago Fund for Teachers Summer Fellow

- Received funding for all expenses related to attending a Spanish language immersion program in Oaxaca, Mexico for two weeks.

SERVICE

Volunteer, UIC Reading Clinic Trigraphothon

Guest Lecturer, Dominican University Alternative Certification Program

Reviewer, Literacy Research Association Annual Conference

Reviewer, Mid-Western Education Research Association Annual Conference, Division G

Volunteer, Louder than a Bomb

Cooperating Mentor Teacher, University of Chicago at Illinois

AFFILIATIONS & MEMBERSHIPS

National Council of Teachers of English

American Educational Research Association

Literacy Research Association

Mid-Western Educational Research Association

Teachers for Social Justice