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Identifying the Characteristics of an Ideal Reading Intervention Program for Teen Mothers

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Student Summer Scholars Program, 2014

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Introduction

In the fall of 2013, as a senior at Grand Valley State University, I took a Community Working Classics (CWC) course, which sent Grand Valley students out into the community to teach a class on the humanities. My professor told us that one of his previous CWC students, Emily Stroka, was working at the Teen Parent Center, a residential home for teen mothers and their children. As a double-major in English and Education, I was very interested in the reading habits of adolescents, so I decided to teach a reading class.

The class generally went well, but by the end of the semester I realized that the girls were probably no more likely to pick up a book on their own than when we began the class. I still didn't have a clear sense of what would encourage the girls to read more, and I wanted to find out.

I realized that such a venture would be especially important for a population of teen mothers. Research has suggested that adolescent mothers tend to provide a literacy environment that allows for fewer literacy experiences for their young children than do older mothers (Burgess, 2005). Trelease (1982, 2013) suggests that those who read for pleasure and incorporate reading into their lives have higher chance of school success. Fox (2008) suggests that modeling reading in the home helps children to become readers themselves. All of this research suggests that there is a correlation between mothers' reading habits and their children's reading ability.

In order to further study teen mothers' reading habits, I applied for a competitive grant through GVSU that provided funding for students to conduct research on a topic of their choice. My proposal, entitled "Identifying the Characteristics of an Ideal Reading Intervention Program for Teen Mothers," was accepted, and I was able to spend the summer of 2014 investigating the following research question:

“How do teen mothers conceptualize and practice reading, both individually and with their children?”

Based on my findings, I have created preliminary suggestions for a reading intervention program that would encourage teen mothers to read individually and with their children.

Literature Review

While there are many kinds of reading practices, the end-goal for a reading intervention program for teen mothers is to help them employ engaged reading practices. Guthrie & Wigfield (2009) describe the differences between adolescents who use engaged reading practices and those who do not:

Some students are intent on reading and writing to understand. They focus on text meaning and avoid distractions. These engaged readers exchange ideas and interpretations of text with peers. Their devotion to reading spans across time, transfers to a variety of genre, and culminates in valued learning outcomes. In contrast, disengaged readers are inactive and inert. They tend to avoid reading and minimize effort. Rarely do they enjoy reading during free time or become absorbed in literature. (p. 403)

Unsurprisingly, engaged reading practices tend to be associated with high achievement (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2009). In part, this may be because engaged reading practices stress intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic motivation. In other words, engaged readers tend to read for its own sake, rather than for perceived external benefits, such as rewards or prizes (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2009). It has also been found to “substantially compensate for low family income or educational background” (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2009, p. 404). This latter finding, in particular, suggests that promoting engaged reading among teen mothers

and their children is an effective way to not only encourage habitual reading, but also to counter the negative effects of poverty. In a study conducted by Ivey & Johnston (2013), adolescents who were part of an educational environment that promoted engaged reading practices reported a variety of positive behaviors, including: reading for extended periods of time; discussing books with others; developing new friendships based on common reading interests, and strengthening older friendships; expanding their social imagination to include consideration of groups or individuals previously ignored; exhibiting a greater sense of agency over themselves and their environment; strengthening and deepening their intellectual and moral stances; increasing their overall happiness; increasing their overall test scores and grades; increasing their general knowledge, as well as displaying other accomplishments.

Many of these benefits would be highly relevant to teen mothers, both academically and socially. For example, engaged reading practices would encourage them to make a habit of reading voluntarily, which could improve their performances at school and better prepare them to navigate the world. Socially, engaged reading practices can foster support from each other and provide teen mothers with the self-efficacy to make positive changes in their lives.

Methods

In order to understand how to encourage teenage mothers to read, I conducted a qualitative ethnographic study. This kind of study is used when the participants all have common cultural underpinnings, and it seeks to understand the beliefs and feelings of the cultural group in question. In the case of my research, all of the participants had a common culture because they were teen mothers who were living in the Grand Rapids community and had lived at one time at the Teen Parent Center. Because I was interested in learning about the

feelings of teen mothers toward reading, and their past experiences with reading programs, qualitative ethnographic research was ideal.

Participant Selection

Unlike other types of research, qualitative ethnographic research typically uses relatively few participants (Creswell, 2012). For my research, I interviewed five teen mothers who had lived at the Teen Parent Center. Emily Stroka of the Teen Parent Center reached out to the teen mothers and invited them to be a part of my study. She collected contact information from the teen mothers and, with their permission, passed it along to me. Once I had received approval from the Human Research Review Committee, I contacted the teen mothers and made arrangements to meet them at the Teen Parent Center.

Data Collection

The coordinators of the Teen Parent Center arranged for me to conduct interviews with the participants in the library of the Teen Parent Center. On June 12th, 2014, I conducted a round-table discussion with three participants about their experiences at the Teen Parent Center, in order to learn how a reading intervention program could be integrated into its pre-existing structure. Through this round-table discussion, I was also looking to see how the successes of the Teen Parent Center could be reproduced in a reading program.

Between June 18th, 2014 and June 27th, 2014, I conducted five individual interviews with participants. During these interviews, I asked the participants about their past experiences with reading, their feelings about reading, and the kind of reading they did with their children. All of these interviews were recorded with audio equipment.

Data Analysis

I transcribed each of the audio recordings verbatim and coded them for “themes,” or information that was repeated by multiple participants, or by a single participant repeatedly. These themes gave us insight into the common experiences and beliefs of the teen mothers.

Findings

After coding the transcribed interviews, four dominant themes emerged: (1) Why some of the teen mothers don’t read; (2) The kinds of books teen mothers prefer to read; (3) How teen mothers read; and (4) How teen mothers view reading to their children.

“I cannot waste my time on that”: Why Some of the Teen Mothers Don’t Read

Of the five teen mothers that I interviewed, Kashayla, Daysha, and Catalina did not read for pleasure, while Nicole and Amber read voluntarily every day. Kashayla, Daysha, and Catalina said that they didn’t read for primarily two reasons: a lack of interest and a lack of time.

For Catalina, both a lack of interest and a lack of time contribute to her current practice of not reading. She described the way these two factors are interrelated, saying:

I used to like to read a lot. I would read a lot of books in middle school and elementary. But then when I got to high school I couldn’t read them a lot. [...] Just here and there. [...] At first cuz I lost interest. I found it boring, like, I didn’t find it interesting anymore. So when I would look for a book to read, a good book, then I wasn’t so, like...“I want to read a book.” I wouldn’t find it so interesting anymore. Then I started reading again, like here and there, grab a book, and then after that I

didn't really think about it--I didn't have time [...] to sit down and, like, "Oh hey, I want to read a book."

For Catalina, the process away from reading began with a growing sense of apathy toward reading, especially at the beginning of high school. As a result of this apathy, reading was pushed to the side as her life became busier. Looking back, Catalina expressed nostalgia for the books that she used to read, saying, "I gotta read them again. [...] That was a long time ago that I read them." However, the apathy that she felt in early high school persists until today; while describing her recent efforts to read, she said, "I'll like go look for a—and sometimes I just do that—I'll start reading and then get bored and stop." Her affection for some books, then, doesn't quite overcome the systematic dedication required to read them. Similarly, she still finds her life too busy to read, saying, "Maybe if one day I don't have nothing to do, then that's probably the day that I would be, like, I'm a go find a book."

Like Catalina, Daysha also found that a lack of interest and a lack of time are her major obstacles to reading. However, Daysha explained that these obstacles stem directly from her role as a teen parent:

Yeah, I stopped, like—last book I read was when I was pregnant and that was the *Tyrell* book. And then once I had a baby, I just started reading baby books and parenting books, but other than that I don't really read. [...] Basically like—just liked stopped being interesting and had other things to do. Take care of a baby all the time and do chores and look for a job.

Unlike Catalina, who experienced apathy toward reading before she became pregnant, Daysha stopped reading for pleasure once she took on the responsibilities of motherhood.

Unlike Catalina, Daysha's movement away from reading began with a lack of time to devote to it. However, time is not her only obstacle to reading. She said, "I could read if I wanted to, it's just that I don't really feel like doing it anymore" and that "I kinda do have more time [than at the start of her pregnancy], but like that time I usually like watching my favorite TV shows." She doesn't have time to read, and when she does, she would rather do something more languid than reading.

Kashayla didn't express apathy toward reading so much as she displayed an active dislike of it. Unlike the other participants, who fell away from reading in high school, Kashayla summarized her view very simply, saying, "I've hated reading, personally, all my life." She continued:

To be honest, I really don't like to read [...] It's a waste of time to me. It gets boring. Like, I'll read *Twilight* books when I'm bored, or *Bluford High* books or stuff like that, but [...] other than that, I don't like to read.

As with the other participants, Kashayla's frustrations with reading reflect both a lack of interest in it, as well as a lack of time to devote to it. For example, she went on to say that, as a child, "I never really sit inside and read a book. I always went outside and played." She repeated this language about reading, saying, "I don't just sit there" and "I don't have the patience to just sit there and read." Kashayla's emphasis on the physical act of reading—"just sitting there"—suggests that, to her, reading is comparable to sitting down and doing nothing. By contrast, she would prefer to engage with the world around her, which she sees as more constructive than the act of reading. Furthermore, she also said that reading a big book is "just a waste of time. Like, I cannot waste my time on that." Time is thus very

valuable to her; as a mother, her down time is limited, and she would prefer to spend it on something more engaging than reading.

It's important to note that despite the fact that Kashayla, Catalina, and Daysha each view reading differently, their obstacles to reading are the same. Each of them expressed a lack of interest in and lack of time for reading. Additionally, for these participants, these obstacles to reading developed in late middle school and early high school:

Kashayla: I haven't read those in a long time. I think since 9th grade.

Daysha: I haven't read a book probably since 8th grade.

Catalina: I would read a lot of books in middle school and elementary. But then when I got to high school I couldn't read them a lot.

Even Nicole, who currently reads daily, said that she fell away from reading in middle school:

Researcher: Did you read like when you were like in middle school or in elementary school?

Nicole: Yeah, I read a lot. And then I just...all of a sudden I just stopped reading.

Researcher: [...] When did you...when did you feel like you stopped reading, then?

Nicole: Uh...I guess middle school.

Because many of these girls became pregnant in early high school, this change of lifestyle may have contributed to their movement away from reading, as it did for Daysha. However, it's also possible that the girls' lack of interest in reading developed independently of their roles as teen parents. It's important to note, though, that teen mothers in their current state

cannot divorce their limited recreational time from the responsibilities of motherhood.

Additional research on this point will need to be conducted in order to determine the extent to which these variables are related.

“Growing up with struggles in life”: What the Teen Mothers Like to Read

One of the most important findings of this research was that, despite the fact that several of the teen mothers said that they were not interested in reading, all of the teen mothers said that they found the same kind of books interesting. When the girls were asked to describe some of their favorite stories, they provided the following summaries:

Catalina: [*True Blood*] was about this family and one of the guys was in gangs and stuff, and then he met this girl and, like, they were trying to see each other, but he had to move and then came back and found the girl had a boyfriend. And then they would go to the same school, he started getting in—he got involved in this serious crime, and then she helped him out, and then he started changing his life around. [...]He started actually going to school and wanted to graduate and stuff.

Daysha: *Tyrell* was about a boy who, um, him and his mom and his little brother, they was in a homeless shelter, and they were staying at a motel, and then he got a girlfriend, then he met this other girl who was homeless and he was talking to her and stuff, and then it was basically like his dad was in prison, and then he wanted to follow his dad dream of being a DJ and stuff, and then he throws a party and raises money for his mom and his family and stuff.

Amber: Well, actually I'm reading a book right now—it's called, um, *Mama Ruby*, I think? It just explains, like...it's about a girl and, uh—a black girl, and she wasn't allowed to hang with a lot of people, she was the seventh daughter and her mom had seven—like, her mom was the seventh daughter, and she was the seventh daughter, so they figured they called her, like, someone who had healing hands, or whatever, and could help people out when they were in bad situations by putting their hands on her and praying for them or whatever. And so she wasn't allowed to hang with people, so she snuck and did it, and the people she wasn't allowed to, like, weren't good, and she got influenced by their ways, and she got pregnant at, like, 15, and so she had kilt the baby and—well, she didn't kill the baby, she had to take the baby to a...I don't know what it's called...I forget what it's called, but, um...yeah, then she—her parents or nobody knew except for, like, the friend, and her mom, and then that's as far as I got, so far. But it's really good.

All of these stories qualify as “urban fiction,” a subset of realistic fiction that is “gritty, raw, and conveys life on the inner-city streets” (Grand Rapids Public Library, 2014). Many of the teens expressed that they like these kinds of books because they find them relatable. For example, Catalina described these books as being “just, general stories about people—teens—really.” Daysha agreed, and described her favorite books as being “basically about like growing up with struggles in life, and getting through them.” For example, these struggles included “dealing with your parents, like, and having, like—well, basically what teens go through.” Nicole elaborated on these relatable experiences, saying that her favorite books were “drama books,” which involve “teens in high school and pregnancies and teen moms and all that.” Kashayla explained that these kinds of books are powerful because “they're like about...they're about different things like abuse, or a girl losing her virginity, or

somebody getting shot...it's basically about what—what we now in our time age go through.”

That's not to say that these books were entirely grim; Catalina said that in urban fiction, there is “a point at the end of the story [...] like, it teaches you something.” This is reflected in both Catalina and Daysha's book summaries; in the foremost, the male protagonist began to attend school, while in the latter, the protagonist used his passion to provide for his family. While not every urban fiction novel ends positively—*Mama Ruby*, for example, is much more tragic—many urban fiction novels follow the trend of providing a lesson or a moral, as Catalina said. As Simone Gibson writes in “Critical readings: African-American girls and urban fiction,” “The main characters learn from their experiences by the conclusion of the story, passing along advice that results in the formation of a cautionary tale” (2010, p.567).

The teen mothers expressed genuine excitement about these stories. For example, after Catalina summarized some of her favorite stories, she said, “I gotta read them again.” This statement was the first time in our discussion that she expressed a sincere motivation to start reading again. Similarly, in the focus group discussion, Kashayla and Nicole touched on a discussion of a popular urban fiction series:

Kashayla: Yeah, we have watch--read *Bluford High* books?

Nicole: Ooooh, yes, those are my favorite books! Ooh, I love them—

Kashayla: Dude, themselves were great—

Nicole:—I read every one of those books.

Both Kashayla and Nicole expressed enthusiasm about the *Bluford High* series, even though Kashayla individually described reading as “boring” and “a waste of time,” and Nicole said

that she didn't usually discuss books with her friends. In discussing urban fiction with each other, they involuntarily expressed an enthusiasm for reading that wasn't present in their individual interviews.

"It's like a movie in your brain": How the Teen Mothers Read

A third theme that I examined was how teen mothers read, when they do read. In particular, I examined (1) the environments in which teen mothers prefer to read; (2) the level of individual engagement that teen mothers tend to have with the book that they are reading, and (3) the level of social engagement that they have with others about the books they are reading.

A Comfortable Space for Reading

Generally speaking, most of the teen mothers said that when they did read, they usually read alone, in a comfortable position. However, each mother differed slightly on what she considered a "comfortable" position. Daysha said:

I always read my book to myself, like I never really pay attention to what everybody else is reading. [...] I read by myself, like, usually I'll go in my room and just lay there and read a book.

For Daysha, reading is truly a solitary act. She is not interested in what other people around her are reading, and when she reads, she physically separates herself from others by going into her bedroom. Indeed, she seeks out comfort when she reads; she moves into a safe, familiar environment, such as her bedroom, and she reads in a physically relaxing position by lying down.

Like Daysha, Catalina preferred to read in a casual, comfortable environment. However, her comfortable environment was markedly different from Daysha's. Catalina said:

When I used to like to read a lot—a lot, that was when I was little—it would be anytime, really. Like, watching TV, I would just grab a book and start reading. Or, in my room, start reading, or listening to music, start reading, or late at night, when I couldn't sleep, just read. Usually it doesn't matter, but I think I prefer a quiet—no I prefer, like, laying down. [...] With the TV on, probably. [...] Yeah, I don't like it to be, like, quiet, like me sitting in a room, just reading a book.

For Catalina, reading was integrated into the everyday noises of her life. Rather than be distracted by the presence of a TV or music, Catalina found those situations actually made her more comfortable. Similarly, she was just as happy reading during the day as at night. The only situation that made her uncomfortable was the one that Daysha preferred: quiet and alone.

Amber, too, preferred to read comfortably, but seemed less concerned with her physical surroundings than Daysha and Catalina were. Amber said that her ideal environment was:

Quiet. [...] Um...most time like he [Amber's son] watching TV or playing, I'll grab a book, or when it's nighttime, he sleep, I like to read. When I'm on break at work, I'll read or something—[...]-just...alone time, just...yeah.

Like Catalina, Amber integrated her reading practices into the rhythm of her life. Even more, she successfully found ways of integrating reading into her *responsibilities* by reading at work and while keeping an eye on her son. In these varied settings, though, the underlying “comfortable environment” remained the same—“alone time.” For Amber, reading represented an opportunity to experience a kind of individual leisure, a kind of “quiet,” even in the midst of everyday life.

Nicole, too, was not particularly selective about the environments that she read in:

Researcher: [...] Is there a particular environment that you like to read in?

Nicole: No, not really.

Researcher: Okay, so do you sort of pick it up, then, and read at sort of any time
during your day?

Nicole: Yeah.

For Nicole, physical surroundings did not influence her reading habits. However, Nicole did note, “I’d rather read it on my phone. Instead of a actual book. [...] I’m just so used to being on my phone and [laughs]. I don’t know.” Thus, for Nicole, the most comfortable “environment” for reading had everything to do with the form of the book she was reading. Digital books, accessible on e-Readers, tablets, and cell phones, were more engaging than print books, perhaps due to Nicole’s greater familiarity with everyday technology than with physical books. By using a cell phone, Nicole also had greater access to books in a variety of situations than she would if she had to carry a physical book around with her. Furthermore, like Catalina and Amber, Nicole’s tendency to read while multitasking on her cell phone easily integrates reading into the normal actions of her life.

Individual Engagement with the Book

The teen mothers tended to read in two ways: purely recreationally, or recreationally but with a consideration of moral implications. When teen mothers read only for recreation, they tend to regard reading as a way of occupying leisure time. By contrast, when teen mothers read recreationally, but also consider the moral implications of what they're reading, they tend to find themselves thinking about the book in their everyday lives, or placing themselves in the conflict of the story.

Kashayla and Nicole are purely recreational readers. Kashayla said that she doesn't like to read, and would rather do something else, "like being on Facebook or something." Kashayla thus sees reading and Facebook as being essentially the same kind of activity—something that people do purely to relax. (Of course, Kashayla thinks that Facebook is more interesting than reading.) Nicole holds a similar position, but she reads constantly—"I could get finished with a...whole book a day," she told me. She usually prefers to read stories on Wattpad, an app that allows users to upload fiction that they have written. "There's some spell mistakes and, uh, there's kinda lot of mistakes," she said, "but I understand it." Because the books that she likes to read are posted online by users, they tend to be serialized: "There's, like...it depends on how much they write, I guess...there's...sixty parts or something like that in...or, I don't know. Depends on how much they write, I guess." However, this serialized format does not necessarily encourage Nicole to become invested in the story; she said, "I usually don't—once they do come out with something more to add to the book, I don't really go back to it. I just start onto a new book."

Nicole's reading habits more closely resemble watching TV than anything else; she moves from one story to the next when she gets bored, and tends not to become intrigued enough in the story to seek out a sequel. She also tends to view reading as a purely recreational activity, rather than having any particular influence on her life. For example,

she said, “I think it’s fiction, I don’t think any of it’s—any of it’s real or not.” For her, the real world and the world of the story are two separate entities entirely, and the story only holds value as a recreational experience for as long as the story lasts.

Amber and Daysha, by contrast, fall into the category of recreational readers who also contemplate the significance of the books they read. Amber, like Nicole, reads constantly, but she regards reading as much more than a recreational experience. Amber feels that reading is highly beneficial because encountering new words allows her to expand her vocabulary. She felt that reading had powerful, positive impact on her life:

It seems like it helps like keep my mind going. I’m not in school right now, so it kinda just helps me keep—keeps me going. Like, intellectual-wise. [...] It-it kind of keeps your mind going. Like, sometimes you know you’ll catch words in a book that you don’t know and it just kind of keeps your mind going, and free from a lot of different stuff. [...] Like yesterday I was reading my book and I’m like, “I don’t know what this word means” and it’s confusing to read about something and then you get caught up and like you don’t know what the word means, so you’re—you don’t, kinda—sometimes it’ll make you not know what’s going on, so it feels good to know that I’m expanding my...vocabulary in certain ways, and to know that, um, it feels good to know that.

She also mentioned that, in addition to learning new vocabulary, she frequently finds herself speculating on the story she’s reading:

Um, like I wonder if there’s going to be another book, like what would happen next after the book ends, or even if I’m in the middle of the book, I’ll catch myself like,

“Dang, I wonder what’s going to happen.” Like, I wonder what the book would be like in the movie or something, you know?

Part of the reason for Amber’s investment in the outcome of the story may be because of the way that she reads. She said, “I try to picture myself, like, as them [the characters] and see, ‘Would I do that if I was them or would I do something different?’” This reading strategy causes the issues in a story to cross through the boundary of fiction and into the real world, leading Amber to grapple with serious ethical dilemmas. She described one of such ethical dilemmas, saying:

In the book I’m reading, the girl Ruby, she, uh, had her baby and she gave it to like—it’s like a place where nuns keep kids and stuff, and, um, she didn’t tell anybody except for the people who helped her deliver the baby, but the only reason why they knew was because she was at a party and she delivered the baby then. [...] So, um, I wouldn’t have--I would have told my parents, like I did, and I would have told my parents and kept my child, but I mean that’s what she wanted to do, but the—people encouraged her to do otherwise. So I’m like, I would have told my parents and even though they would have been mad, you still could have kept your child, you know?

While reading *Mama Ruby*, Amber gave serious consideration to the protagonist’s actions, and weighed them against what she believes to be right. This technique is given further significance by the parallels between Amber’s life and the fictional Ruby’s life; both had a child while young and unmarried.

Daysha said that when she reads, she feels like it “is like a movie, but it’s like in your brain.” Daysha also said that when she reads urban fiction, she gets invested in the story.

She said, “When I like read certain books like that, I kinda like put myself in the story and then make it into my life.” She said that when she is reading urban fiction, she can sometimes relate to some aspects of the story. For example, she explained the ways that she felt that the novel *Tyrell* was similar to and different from her life:

Like, my mom, she weren’t young when she had me, or stuff like that, but I had a baby young, but that’s the only thing, but then like, like some things I like having, like a boyfriend, then like having a friend that’s a boy. [And] like, being homeless, I don’t have that issue.

Urban fiction is important to Daysha, like it was to Amber, because it contains themes and events that she finds relatable. While reading, Daysha actively reflects on the ways that her life is similar to and different from the lives of the characters in the story. Additionally, like Amber, Daysha finds that books continue to impact her after she’s stopped reading them:

Sometimes when I used to read a book, like, it’ll like stick in my heads for, like, probably like a couple weeks or so? So like I’ll think about that book and just like, think about what happened in the book. [...] Mmmm...like, it was this book called *A Love to Die For*, it was like a documentary on a lady who killed this girl over her boyfriend, who she thought that she wanted she didn’t, and she became—tried to become her friend, and she lured her into the woods and killed her.

After Daysha read this story, she said that she thought about “how evil was and how stuff like that’s just wrong,” and remarked, “I just thinking about hoping that nothing like that happen to me.”

Social Interactions about Books

The teen mothers said that they did not talk with others about books, except to offer up or receive recommendations for books to read. Kashayla paused when I asked if she talked about books with friends, and then carefully and clearly stated, “We—I don’t—we don’t read,” and that her friends “probably wouldn’t like it either.” Amber, too, said that her friends “don’t really read.” She does, however, get book recommendations from her son’s paternal grandmother: “She’ll tell me, ‘This is a good book’ or, you know, and she’ll say, ‘You need to read this’ or um like some authors that she’ll give to me, I’ll go to the library and look for them.” Nicole also said that the only time she talks about books is when she is getting recommendations for good Wattpad books from a friend. Nicole said, “If she seen a book that she think I like, like, she’d tell me about it, I’d look it up, and I’d try to get into it, or whatever.” Kashayla, Nicole, and Daysha all noted that even at school, books are not discussed in a group setting. Kashayla and Daysha attend an alternative school, where they read documents on a computer and take quizzes about the document’s contents. At school, Nicole reads Wattpad stories and writes down the title, a summary of the story, and what she likes about it. While these strategies may increase the teen mothers’ knowledge of the contents of the texts, it doesn’t promote a social environment that encourages reading.

One of the few instances that the teen mothers experienced a social reading environment was the Community Working Classics class that I taught at the Teen Parent Center in the fall of 2013. I was worried that teaching a traditional novel might be too intimidating for the teen mothers, especially because I didn’t know what their reading levels were, so I decided to teach a graphic novel. I figured that a graphic novel wasn’t as text-heavy as a traditional novel, so the teens would be able to use the images as clues to the content, if the dialogue of the graphic novel was too complicated. The graphic novel that I decided to teach was a science-fiction space comedy called *Saga*, by Brian K. Vaughan,

which followed a young mother, her infant daughter, and her husband as they fled oppressive forces that were trying to hunt them down. I figured that the teen mothers would be able to relate to the theme of motherhood, and would find humor in the back-and-forth dialogue. During the class, each of the teen mothers picked a character and read their dialogue aloud in a kind of “reader’s theatre.” This strategy was designed at keeping them engaged and getting them to become invested in their particular character’s outcome. Based on the teen mothers’ responses, it seems that they actually really enjoyed the social environment of the “reader’s theatre.” Nicole, for instance, seemed to enjoy both the novelty of the story and the excitement of role-playing, saying, “I like it cuz it was different. Like, probably for all of us, I guess. It was very interesting and it was kind of fun that we all got to have our own part and stuff like that.” Amber, too, emphasized the value of role-playing:

I liked that. [...] I liked that, and I think a lot of the girls did like that here, cuz it was different, you know, especially the *Saga*—[...] We were all like, “Dang,” after you left we were all like, “I bet you they gon die.” [...] You know, that was interesting. I think we liked that.

Additionally, she said that the role-playing inspired group speculation about the outcome of the story, which is an important step in promoting engaged reading practices.

Even Kashayla, who adamantly does not like reading, said that she too enjoyed the group dynamic of role-playing:

I liked it though. [...] Those are good. Those are funny. Those—that—that’s something I would read if I liked to read. [...] Yeah, that was fun. [...] Instead of just reading it by yourself and I have to do different...sounds in your head. [...] It’s funnier to hear voices.

Kashayla's statement is especially significant because it was one of the few times that she expressed excitement about a story. This may be because her primary critique of reading is that it is comparable to "just sitting there," while a role-playing read-aloud is necessarily active and engaging.

"I want him to read everything": How the Teen Mothers Read to Their Children

All of the mothers said that they have read books to their children in the past. Many of the teen parents have received children's books through donations or gifts, and the Teen Parent Center's library had two shelves of children's books. However, the teen mothers expressed varying levels of interest in reading to their kids, and demonstrated varying levels of success in engaging their kids. One of the most successful was Amber, who—speaking about her son—said, "He loves books. He like, "Mommy—book!" [...] He has a lot of different books. Um, some books are about, like, uhhh learning stuff, and some are like nighttime books specifically, and bath-time books. He has books he takes in the bath with him." It's possible that Amber's son's interest in books is due to a generational dedication to reading—Amber reads frequently, Amber's mother reads frequently, and Amber's son's paternal grandmother reads frequently. Like Amber, Nicole said that her son also enjoys being read to. Nicole said:

Uh, he likes to...kinda mumble the words with me, and...some of the books have, like, songs, so I'll start singing and he'll sing with me. [...] Yeah, he has this one book that—that has these flips inside, and kinda—they're just pictures, so they're not really reading books, but...he just looks at the pictures and I tell him, you know, "What kind of animal?" or something like that.

Although Nicole added the stipulation that some of the books were wordless, the way she uses reading as an opportunity to engage and interact with her son seems to create an environment that makes him enjoy reading.

All of the girls understand it is important to encourage their children to read, but not all of them enjoy the prospect as much as Amber and Nicole do. Daysha, for instance, reads to her son, but she sees it as an obligation rather than a source of entertainment:

That's something I have to do because I want him to learn and benefit from words and seeing different things. But it's not something I want to do cuz like, I—I used to like to read, like chapter books and stuff. But like is other things I want to do now like get out and be free instead of sitting there and reading a book. But it could be something I could do sometimes.

Kashayla said that she reads to her son, too, but that her son doesn't seem to enjoy it: "I don't know, he don't really sit there and read. I read them, but he'll still be playing with his toys or something." Her son expresses a lack of interest in books, and Kashayla—who is not a reader—can't find a way to engage him. Catalina, too, expressed frustration with reading to her son, saying, "I don't really...read a lot of books to him, which I probably should. I used to when he was littler. Cuz he doesn't pay attention to me. [...] Just for like two minutes and he goes away. Forgets about the book."

This doesn't mean that the teen mothers who don't enjoy reading to their children are bad mothers, or don't understand the importance of reading. In fact, the teen mothers seemed to understand that reading was an extremely important part of their child's growth. Amber, speaking about her aspirations for her son's reading habits, said that she wanted him to read "learning books of course, like helping him learn as he grows up in his different stages in learning, and, um, he—historical books—stuff for—books like we read when I grew up in school. [...] I don't know...like, a lotta different books that—I mean, it's up to him.

His choice.” Daysha, too, said, “I’d like him to read books about like his history, and stuff about like presidents—stuff that involves school so that he can learn better. [...] Yeah, like if I like start reading books about like the presidents, and like algebra stuff, like if I start doing that like once he like five and stuff he might be able to get ahead.” Catalina, too, said, “I want him to, like—from since he’s little to, like, open his mind. To read everything, not just, like, picture books.”

The difference, it seems, between the mothers who enjoy reading to their children and the mothers who do not enjoy it is not one of understanding the value of reading. Instead, it seems to have more to do with the mother’s own enjoyment of reading. The teen mothers who read frequently (Amber and Nicole) had children who were more engaged with reading than the teen mothers who didn’t read frequently (Daysha, Kashayla, and Catalina). As a result, one of the ways to encourage teen mothers to read to their children is to inspire them to read individually for pleasure. By making reading a part of their own lives, it follows that they will want to share their habit of reading with their children.

Program Recommendations

Teen mothers as readers are not well studied, so my research has worked to provide some introductory information about teen mothers’ reading experiences. These findings are not conclusive, but they do offer us some insight into some best practices for working with teen mothers. The following program recommendations stem from literature on engaged reading practices for the traditional adolescent, and I have synthesized these recommendations with the self-reported needs of the teen mothers. Specifically, I have offered up these reading practices within the framework of a reading intervention program.

Autonomy and Relevance

At the core of a reading intervention program are the twin concepts of autonomy and relevance. As Guthrie & Wigfield (2009) argue, autonomy is key to creating engaged readers. In order to create lifelong readers, it is important to allow teen mothers to self-select books that they find appealing. Allowing teen mothers autonomy over their reading selections is important because it allows them to take a measure of control over their lives (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2009). Indeed, many of the teen mothers expressed frustration with their lack of freedom in the past to read the kinds of books that they wanted to read. Nicole, for example, said that teachers “don’t really know what we’re interested in. If we tell them, they’re like no, you gotta read what you’re assigned to. And I’m like, “This—this doesn’t interest me, though.” Letting the teen mothers select their own books would provide them with an intrinsic motivation to read, as opposed to an extrinsic motivation. Such a program is necessarily “book-centric”—it holds that the right book—with the proper support—can turn a non-reader into a reader.

As indicated in my findings, many of the teen mothers already know what their favorite kinds of books are. The problem they have, though, is that once they finish a book that they like, they don’t know how to find similar books. Both Amber and Nicole, who read frequently, said that they have people in their lives who offer them book recommendations, and that they tend to read the books that are recommended to them. By contrast, some of the teens who don’t read said that they would be encouraged to read if they were given recommendations. For example, Catalina said, “[If someone would] recommend me a book, and, uh—I’d probably read it” One of the responsibilities of a program director, then, would be to help teen mothers find the kinds of books that they like to read. Additionally, however, a program director would need to help scaffold the teen mothers’ reading by providing them with book suggestions that push the boundaries of the teen mothers’ typical favorite

books. For example, if Catalina enjoys reading the *Bluford High* series, the program director should recommend similar books that are outside of the series. Otherwise, once Catalina reaches the end of the *Bluford High* series, she may believe that she has run out of books that interest her.

Resources for Reading

The teen mothers acknowledged time and interest as the two greatest obstacles to independent, voluntary reading. A reading intervention program designed to increase teen mothers' engagement with reading should thus work to minimize those obstacles.

Time

Because teen parents have to navigate the responsibilities of both adolescence and motherhood, they believe they do not have enough leisure time to devote to reading. As a result, a reading intervention program should set aside an allotment of time each day to be devoted to reading. According to a study by Ivey & Broaddus (2001), in structured educational atmospheres, adolescents tend to prefer free reading time to more systematic reading activities. In this respect, the Teen Parent Center provided an ideal environment for such an intervention, since its schedule included "group" time for several hours after dinner. One of these hours could be dedicated to reading, in a self-selected comfortable environment for the teen mothers. Many of the girls mentioned that it would probably take a requirement to read to begin reading. Daysha, for example, said, "If I was in school, then I probably would read if I had to, [...] but if I didn't have to, I wouldn't read." Catalina echoed this sentiment, saying, "Probably going to school would help me [...] read a lot more [...] cuz and then I would have to, it's not I want to." By requiring reading time for teen mothers—but allowing them to select their own books—the teen mothers would likely begin to read

out of intrinsic motivation. Providing such an environment would help make reading more accessible for teen mothers who see time constraints as the primary reason why they do not read.

Access to Interesting Books

In addition to allotting time for reading, a reading intervention program should provide teen mothers with easy access to interesting books. One of the benefits of the Teen Parent Center was that it contained an in-house library of books, so teen mothers could get ahold of books without having to navigate the bus system to the public library. However, many of the teen parents said that they were not interested in the Teen Parent Center's books. (Indeed, though many of them were young adult bestsellers, they looked as if they had never been opened.) In order to transform teen mothers into engaged readers, it's important to make sure that they have access to the particular kinds of books that they enjoy, especially if such books tend to be in niche genres such as urban fiction. Thus, by providing teen mothers with interesting books and setting aside the time for reading such books, a reading intervention program would minimize two major obstacles to reading.

Outlets for Social Engagement

Of course, creating a sustainable culture of reading is not just a matter of what books teen parents read, but also how they read them. A successful reading intervention program will provide teen mothers with the skills and encouragement to make reading a habitual, voluntary action. I've outlined two models of promoting social engagement below.

Engagement Through Reflective Discussion

One of the ways to encourage teen mothers to read frequently is to provide them with a social environment that centers on books. Such an environment is what Nancie Atwell

(1998) likens to her kitchen table. She says that her family is one of avid readers, and after dinner she will frequently observe her husband, children, and friends congregate around the kitchen table and mull over the outcome of a beloved novel, or gossip about an unexpected twist or cliffhanger (Atwell, 1998). This approach, she holds, is a natural reaction to interesting books, and it stands in stark contrast to the formulaic and contrived engagement strategies of “quick quizzes” or written book summaries. A reading intervention program should thus strive to provide a reflective environment for authentic interactions about books. Such an environment would allow teen mothers to share their current reading choices aloud and describe their thoughts or feelings about the books. Even while I was at the Teen Parent Center, I saw the effect that these kind of “book talks” can have on teen mothers’ interest in reading. During one of my classes, Amber started describing an urban novel that she was reading. As she passed it around, I noticed that several of the teen mothers were hastily writing down its title so they could look it up later. Such a practice is even more valuable than recommendations from an authority figure, because when the teen mothers give and receive book recommendations from each other, they begin to contribute to a self-directed reading environment that exists independently of a structured program. The role of a program director, then, would be to help facilitate reflective discussion about the teen mothers’ book selections, and to help the teen mothers begin to apply the significance of the story to the world around them.

Engagement with Reading Through Creative Outlets

Many of the teen mothers said that their favorite aspects of the Teen Parent Center were the chances to be creative. For example, all of the teen mothers—especially Kashayla—loved having the opportunity to plan and cook meals for each other. (During the focus group discussion, the teen mothers got so excited by the discussion of food that they all went around and described their favorite food at the Teen Parent Center.) Similarly, Catalina said

that she wants to be an artist, and took me to see a mural that she and some of the other teen mothers (along with one of the Teen Parent Center directors) had painted. The painting, which stretched across an entire wall of the Teen Parent Center, depicted a series of female faces, each one representative of an emotion that teen mothers experience. Nicole said she likes to scrapbook; Daysha said that she wants to learn to sew. Each of these activities reflects a genuine desire for self-expression from the teen parents. A reading intervention program should seek to tap into these opportunities for creativity and individualism and pair them with the teen mothers' reading selections. For example, perhaps Kashayla could research and prepare a recipe based on one of the meals described in her book. Similarly, Nicole could create a fictional scrapbook dedicated to events from her novel, or Catalina could create a painting of a crucial scene. Such activities would promote teen mothers' autonomy and allow them to share their passions with each other.

Encouraging Children to Read

A reading intervention program that targets teen mothers also has a longstanding social significance—helping their children to read. The program, by virtue of promoting reading among teen mothers, will already support intergenerational efforts toward reading. For example, teen parents will model reading habits for their children, which may help children develop an interest in reading. Similarly, if teen mothers read voluntarily, they will have the stamina and firsthand experience to encourage their children to stick with it.

Because many of the teen mothers already know that reading to their children is important, the primary goal of a reading intervention program would be to provide teen mothers with the time and encouragement to systematically read aloud to their children. This would be most successful if “read-aloud” time were to be built into the teen mothers' schedule, according to their own preference. For example, Catalina may prefer to read to

her son before he goes to bed, since she works until dinnertime. By contrast, Amber may choose to read to her son during bath-time. As long as the “read-aloud” time is consistent, it should be left up to the teen mother to decide. The reason that teen mothers should try to build “read-aloud” time into their own schedule, rather than allotting a standard “read-aloud” time through the program, is that it would provide a sustainable habit that could continue to thrive independently of a teen mothers’ involvement with the program.

Beyond this, there are some things that a reading intervention program could do. First, it could supply books that cover important academic topics, since many of the teen mothers indicated an interest in giving their children a jump-start in school. The topics that mentioned were history, biology, geography, politics, and math, but other relevant topics would obviously be acceptable. Additionally, many of the program’s other strategies—such as promoting autonomy, relevance, and a social environment—could be generalized to the “read-aloud” time. For example, creating a “group story time”—where the children take part in reading aloud, puppet shows, and sing-alongs—would give them early experience in the social dimensions of reading.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine teen mothers’ reading experiences and emphasize the distinct trends that emerged from their responses. I have detailed the reasons for why some teen mothers tend not to read, and included a discussion of the kinds of books that they do enjoy. Additionally, I have discussed the ways in which teen mothers tend to read, and how they feel about reading to their children. In particular, I have noted that the most effective way to help the teen mothers read to their children is to foster a love of reading in the teen mothers themselves. Based on these findings, I have generated recommendations for a reading intervention program that would promote engaged reading practices. Through

such a program, we can foster a greater appreciation for reading among teen mothers, but also work to overcome generational literacy gaps by encouraging teen mothers to read more frequently with their children. Such a program would be ideal in a residential environment like that of the Teen Parent Center, since it would support reading in a home environment, and would have the organizational oversight to encourage systematic involvement with such a program.

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