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ABSTRACT

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# Warning Labels:

# Stigma and the Popularizing of Teen Mothers' Stories

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Abstract

Those interested in critical, feminist, and anti-racist pedagogy are on a search for means to counter dominant ways of speaking about stigmatized groups. Some see promise in popular theater, which starts from the experience of those on the margins. This ethnographic study followed twelve teen mothers, a highly stereotyped group, as they wrote and publicly performed a play about their lives. The playwrights wished to convey three messages: (1) they became pregnant for a variety of reasons, just like older women do; (2) they support a young woman's right to choose--including motherhood--based on individual circumstances; and (3) they believe that being a mother is a challenging yet positive experience. These messages, however, largely got diffused for several reasons: (1) the play's adult sponsors wanted it to encourage the prevention of teen pregnancy as much as to give voice to teen mothers; (2) given these dual purposes, the director tried to elicit warning stories from the play-builders; (3) the teen mothers found it difficult to forge one representative story from twelve evolving lives and difficult as well to challenge one stereotype without feeding into another; and (4) audience members, influenced by prevailing social attitudes, did not always interpret the play as the authors' intended. Nevertheless, practices like play-building hold educational promise if not oversold to students as an opportunity to fuse individual stories into one coherent statement capable of displacing opposing ideologies. The script writing phase, in particular, helped teen mothers articulate their concerns and collectively theorize about their experiences.

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Recently, public figures and mass media editors in both Canada and the United States have urged society to "re-stigmatize" teen parenthood. The author of a cover story for the influential Atlantic Monthly, for example, calls for segregating teen mothers from other students and other "imaginative measures to 'uglify' unwed teenage motherhood" (Dafoe Whitehead 1994, 77).

The teen mother today, however, is hardly without stigma. Indeed, the stereotypes surrounding teen motherhood are difficult to challenge and dispel because they simultaneously connote so many already stigmatized, and at times contradictory, meanings: victimized by abuse or poverty, promiscuous, ignorant, welfare dependent, childish, neglectful, love-starved, emotionally unbalanced, and so on. Further, given their relative lack of power, teen mothers are an unlikely group to succeed in disputing the stereotypes.

But what if they were given the chance? What if they were allowed to mount a production to tell their "own story" to the rest of the world? That is just what was proposed at one high school, where a group of teen mothers were invited to write a play based on their experiences and then perform it for other students at neighboring schools.

School authorities made no overt attempt to silence the play that the teen mothers eventually produced. Yet the voice--or voices--that emerged from the play proved to be if not silenced, more conflicted and compromised than the play-builders ever intended because of the forces shaping the play's production, performance, and interpretation. In the end, the teen mothers' stories proved generally easy to "recuperate"; that is, the dominant discourse

was able to subsume the teen mothers' challenges by "negating and defusing" them (Barrett 1985, 82; cf. Alcoff and Gray 1993), primarily by portraying them as victims. This paper is an ethnographic attempt to show how this occurred and explore the implications for pedagogical theory and practice.

## The Appeal of Play-building and the Pitfalls of Experience as a Building Block

The use of popular theater techniques like play-building with young people--as authors, performers, and viewers--holds much promise (see, e.g., Griffiths 1990). Drama teachers and popular theater directors have used the medium to help students, particularly those on the margins, give voice to their experiences. The play "Canadian Stories," for example, was based on the personal accounts of English-as-a-Second-Language students and aimed to promote multiculturalism and fight racism (Griffin 1991). A broad consensus exists that immigrant students struggling to succeed in Canadian society should not be stigmatized.

In the case of teen mothers, however, society remains sharply divided over how far to go in humanizing this "other." Many continue to believe that adolescent pregnancy should be stigmatized as a deterrent to early sexual activity and welfare dependence. The dominant discourse today is that of the bureaucratic experts, who have framed teen pregnancy as less a moral problem and more a technical one related to the creation of intergenerational welfare dependency and poverty (Arney and Bergin 1984; Kelly in press).

For those interested in countering or reframing the dominant discourse, a form of popular theater like play-building, which starts with the experience of those on the margins, holds appeal. How do teen mothers, for example, make sense of their lives? What stories might they tell that have not been told

within the dominant ways of speaking and conceptualizing?

Yet there is a danger in seeing the teen mothers' experiences as somehow more authentic and able to transcend the dominant discourse to a new point of clarity. Increasingly, poststructuralist feminists and other theorists are seeing this view of unmediated experience as naive (see, e.g., Grant 1993). They have redefined experience in light of a more complex understanding:

> Experience is the process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, originating in, oneself) those relations--material, economic, and interpersonal--which are in fact social and, in a larger perspective, historical. (de Lauretis 1984, 159, quoted in Scott 1991, 782)

Teen mothers' "stories" consist in their continual reflecting on their experiences and actions, talking about them to others, and reconstructing them after the fact. Thus, the stories are always representations. In making sense of their experiences, teen mothers, like all of us, inevitably draw on existing ideologies. Therefore, rather than accepting their accounts at face value, we need to "examine collectively the central role social and historical practices play in shaping and producing these narratives" (Fuss 1989, 118).

Social, economic, and political relations inevitably shape what stories get told and how they are interpreted. In the case of teen mothers' stories, for example, the "stigma contest" (Schur 1980) currently being waged over the meaning of teen pregnancy and parenthood in the wider society provides an

important context. The purposes of the play's sponsors, the intentions of the teen mothers in agreeing to participate, the concerns of authorities in the schools where the play was performed, and the play's intended audiences, therefore, all need to be examined. As Alcoff and Gray, writing about the discourse of survivors of incest, rape, and sexual assault, point out:

> Before we speak we need to look at where the incitement to speak originates, what relations of power and domination may exist between those who incite and those who are asked to speak, as well as to whom the disclosure is directed. (1993, 284)

With these caveats in mind, is it possible for marginalized groups to counter the dominant discourse? How might such change come about? According to Scott (1991, 793), "change operates within and across discourses": "Subjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts among discursive systems, contradictions within any one of them, multiple meanings possible for the concepts they deploy."

As I will show, the teen mothers employed both strategies: they used one discourse against another, and they took advantage of the contradictions within the dominant discourse in an effort to forge a positive identity for themselves. They began to represent themselves, but the ultimate success of their effort would depend on others taking up their way of speaking, too (Davies 1991, 52). It would also depend on whether the teen mothers were able to fashion a reasonably coherent representation which they recognized as their own, and this in turn would involve coming to terms with differences within the group and even with shifting self-identities.

## Research Methods

The data analyzed here are drawn from a larger ethnographic research project, "School Responses to Teenage Pregnancy and Motherhood," which began in 1993 and is still underway in two public secondary schools in western Canada.[1] The focus of the present analysis is the building of a play by a group of teen mothers about their experiences, the performance of this play in four high schools, and the interpretation of the play's messages by its several audiences.

Prior to the play-building workshop, I made a presentation to students enrolled in the Teen-Age Parents (TAP) program[2] about my broader interest in studying the politics of interpreting their needs and lessening the stigma attached to teen motherhood. I answered questions about myself, the proposed study, and the discipline of sociology. Students voted unanimously to allow me to participate in the workshop as well as to continue with my wider study.

In the winter of 1993, I observed a meeting at which the idea of play-building was introduced, the week-long workshop, and all subsequent performances. I audiotaped all question and answer sessions following each performance and noted the sex, ethnicity, and age of the questioner as well as the nature of the interaction between the questioner and the teen mothers. Afterwards, I interviewed four of the teen mothers in the play, ten student audience members, and seven adult audience members (mainly teachers). I also obtained written responses to the play from twenty student audience members in two classes (one for grade eight students considered "at risk" of dropping out, the other a grade eleven English class) and three teacher audience members. Questions focused on the play-building experience, perceived educational benefits, and concerns about the play's intended and unintended

messages.

Prior to the workshop, I spoke with the director from a popular theater company who was to lead it. A white, middle-aged woman, she had previously worked as a high school teacher and actor. I learned that the director was interested in gender equity issues and believed in reproductive rights for women.

## Building the Play

### Purposes in Tension: Creating Empathy, Issuing Warnings

"The purpose of the workshop," read an annual report put out by the community-based organization that sponsored and funded it, "was to produce a piece of forum theater which would depict aspects of the life of a young mother and encourage the prevention of unwanted pregnancies." This purpose proved to be double-edged. In seeking volunteers to participate in the play-building workshop, the director emphasized to the teen mothers that the play would give voice to their experiences, thereby enhancing other people's understanding of their lives. In inviting school administrators and teachers to bring their students to see the play, though, its sponsors made clear that the dramatically framed experiences of young mothers would "encourage the prevention of unwanted pregnancies." Now the play, therefore, carried two, likely competing, purposes: a warning to other teenagers as well as a vehicle for teen mothers to tell their stories and counter prevailing stigmas.

Tensions emerged almost from the beginning of the process. On the first day of the play-building workshop, we sat in a circle, and each of the twelve teen mothers told their stories. The director asked a series of questions that helped to shape each story: How did you get pregnant? What was going on

in your life at this time? How did your parents react? Your friends? What was the pregnancy like? What was your labor like? How much did your baby weigh? What did the baby of the father do? Is he still around? Are you a good mother? What is a good mother? How do you survive now? Where do you live? What is your child's personality like? What are your hopes and dreams for the future? Other participants occasionally asked follow-up questions or commented, while the director took notes. I listened without taking notes at this stage; the only question I asked was whether they had been in school at the time they got pregnant.

I was immediately struck by the diversity of the stories. For example, although ten of the twelve had been out of school at the time they got pregnant, they had left school for different reasons, ranging from fighting with a teacher to family problems to finding the school work too difficult. The major commonality seemed to be that all felt stigmatized in one way or another, although the nature and source of the stigmas varied. A number of young women spoke about the significance of racism in their lives, either as First Nations women or as white women who had given birth to children of mixed race. Several teen mothers spoke of the age barriers to getting on welfare and the indignities they had suffered once they began to receive public assistance.

Based on these twelve accounts of becoming teen mothers, many plays could have been constructed. Ultimately, though, most of the scenes that comprised the teen mothers' play seemed fairly conventional, not unlike the narratives of fictive and documentary videos about teen pregnancy and motherhood shown in family life classes. A number of factors help to explain why this happened. First, the time frame for building the play was short;

participants had only three days before the pre-scheduled dress rehearsal to build the play, learn their lines, and prepare for performing, given that the first day was spent listening to individual stories. Therefore, when the students hesitated to suggest scenes, the director described the plot of the previous year's play. Most of its themes, including some of the same scenes, were eventually adapted for re-use.

Second, the director tried to prompt ideas by quoting individual teen mothers, based on notes she had taken of her interviews with them on the first day. Her selection of phrases, in turn, seemed intended to elicit stories of prevention or warning. (She told me later that an important aim of such a play would be to "deter young women from becoming teen mothers.") For example, the director noted that Ruth had used the phrase "hope and pray method of birth control" and wondered aloud about the possibility of building a scene about the use of condoms.

Third, the director stressed the importance of structuring "dramatic tension" into the play, and this seemed to slant the teen mothers' stories toward the negative. At the end of the first day, for example, the director asked the teen mothers what themes had emerged from their discussion. Several identified (1) the prejudices they faced from family, friends, and strangers, and (2) how their lives had become more difficult financially and otherwise.

Two of the more outspoken young women--Tamara and Patricia--emphasized, however, that there were many positive aspects to being a teen mother and that the play should not just dwell on the negative. Ruth responded that she wanted the play to be "realistic" and that becoming a mother at a young age was "not that good." The director followed up on Ruth's comment, telling Tamara and Patricia that "just saying how wonderful it is to be a mother"

would be "boring" because the theme lacked dramatic conflict. Thus, the emphasis on conflict toned down an exploration of the positive sense of identity some teen mothers had fashioned from their experiences. It need not have. One might have created dramatic tension while holding onto the theme of positive identity, by, for example, having the teen mothers in conflict with a school administrator who refuses to acknowledge their claim to full student rights.

Resistance to the Dominant Discourse

Despite pressures to the contrary, many of the teen mothers resisted the building of a play that was a simple prevention story. The evolution of a scene that became known as "Friends Visit" illustrates this resistance. A number of teen mothers had described how, once they had given birth, it became more difficult to see their old friends, and when they did see them, they found they had less in common. The director linked these experiences to a scene developed the previous year in which a teen mother is at home with her baby, unable to attend a party with her friends, abandoned by her boyfriend, and without a baby sitter; she concludes that her life has changed forever.

In re-writing this scene, the teen mothers eliminated mention of the boyfriend and made clear that although the mother has access to a baby sitter, she decides not to attend a party with her friends because her baby is running a low fever. Her old friends don't understand her concern, nor do they evince interest when she eagerly tells them that her baby has gotten his first tooth. Still feeling the scene was overly negative and incomplete, the teen mothers added a final twist: after her old friends depart, the teen mother phones to invite a new friend--another teen mother she has met at school--and her child over to lunch the next day. The depiction of a teen mother facing tremendous

responsibilities alone was thus transformed into one where parental responsibilities (caring for a sick child) are balanced with the joys (witnessing a first tooth), and old networks of support give way to new ones based on changed life circumstances.

The re-writing of "Friends Visit" might not have been possible without a direct confrontation with the director, which occurred in the middle of day two of the workshop. I had observed what I perceived to be growing discontent among the teen mothers with the process of building the play, and I suggested to the director at the lunch break that she might want to call a group meeting. After lunch, she asked people to form a circle and report on their feelings; I took notes. Annie wanted to know what "the point" of the play was, and the director reiterated that it was to increase "understanding" of the lives of teen mothers. Patricia said she did not want to add the condom scene that the director seemed to be advocating. "I don't want to be a teacher, lecturing. I never wanted to hear people lecturing me about birth control." Seizing on the director's own rationale for the play, Tamara added, "We want people to understand what our lives are like, make them more accepting [of us]." Audrey said that unlike Patricia and some others, she had not known about birth control at the time she got pregnant, and she would have liked to have had more information. At least some of the teen mothers seemed to recognize that the explicit rationale of the play (to increase understanding of teen mothers) might be at odds with the implicit rationale (to deter other teenagers from becoming parents).

This recognition may partly explain the resistance to the condom scene. Those like Patricia, who emphasized that teenagers already know about birth control or would reject a heavily didactic play, had known about

contraceptives and had been using them at the time of their accidental pregnancy. They may have rejected a scene that positioned them at a time before they got pregnant--that is, with an opportunity to re-write their lives--because this might suggest to potential audiences that they regretted having their child or thought of their child merely as "an accident."

Collective Reinterpretation of Experience

The only scene that eventually focused on contraceptives did re-write the teen mothers' lived experiences but through a feminist lens. The kernel of this scene was inspired by Sabrina's account of her pregnancy. She had been dating an immigrant from a strict, religious family. In retrospect, she believed that she deliberately acted "submissive" in the relationship, attempting to emulate the women in his family so that her boyfriend would love her. When they began to have sex, they decided to use condoms, and apparently one failed. When Sabrina told her boyfriend she was pregnant, he denied the child could be his, implied that she was a "slut," and broke up with her. Because she had already had one abortion, she worried that she might not be able to conceive a child in the future if she had a second abortion. Thus, she decided to keep her child. As a result of this experience, Sabrina described herself as "more assertive."

The director asked Samantha to improvise a scene in which she "asserts" herself in an attempt to persuade her boyfriend (played by Annie) to wear a condom. When the boyfriend resists, Samantha, borrowing a line from Ruth's story, says, "I'm sick and tired of using the hope and pray method of birth control. If you're not going to wear a condom, then we're through." As originally scripted, the scene ends with the boyfriend calling out Samantha's name after she exits. During rehearsal, however, Annie improvised the final

line, "She has PMS." The director objected, and Annie explained that this would be "a guy thing to say." The director replied that ascribing the girlfriend's behavior to PMS would "take away the power" from Samantha's character. Ruth agreed: "If there are guys in the audience, we want them to realize that birth control is their responsibility, too."

The improvisation process combined with guidance from a feminist director show how play-building might provide a framework for fostering a collective reinterpretation of gendered experiences. Yet given that a number of the teen mothers later interpreted this and related scenes as "male bashing," a more sustained exploration of the complex reasons that many young women find it difficult to negotiate safer sex, the involvement of some young men in the play-building, or both might have clarified the issues and distinguished a feminist from an anti-feminist perspective.

Guidance in developing a feminist (or other) lens need not come from a director. For example, when the group was brainstorming one-liners for the "Prejudice" scene, Audrey said she had not experienced any prejudice. Ruth quickly reminded her of incidents on city buses where they had botn been treated with disrespect simply because they were "Native teen moms." Ruth encouraged Audrey to name such experiences as "racism."

The Challenge of Constructing a Counter-Discourse

Beginning to theorize about their experiences and name them was difficult enough. But thinking about how to connect with potential audiences in ways that countered prevailing stereotypes about teen mothers--a key goal of the play-builders--proved even more difficult. Many efforts to resist categorization inadvertently played into other stereotypes. Patricia, for example, when asked why she decided to carry her pregnancy to term, explained,

"I don't really agree with using abortion as a form of birth control." Although not religious, she appropriated language associated with the pro-life movement; it helped her to counter the stereotype of teen mothers as selfish and irresponsible. Yet in order to explain why she, an "unwed mother," had decided to keep her baby--a decision that pro-life advocates often characterize as selfish--Patricia used a more pro-choice argument: "Adoption wasn't for me. There was no way I could go through the pregnancy and then say, 'Here you go, take my life'."

The difficulty of finding a clear position from which to challenge stereotypes meant that much of the play involved the teen mothers assuming the parts of those who had hurt them (family members, boyfriends, school gossips, strangers). The play-builders hoped that by echoing back the many statements of prejudice and unsolicited advice they had heard, their audiences might recognize the cruelty in those words. In the course of rehearsing these scenes, a number of young women engaged in bawdy humor, which acted as comic relief. In improvising a scene between two gossips, for example, Ruth said, "I hear Lydia is going to a school in [the city] that promotes girls having babies at a young age," and Annie quipped, "It's a ho(e)-down." "Ho" is current slang for whore; using it to form the word "hoe-down"--a square-dancing party--made for a funny contrast between whores, women outside the bounds of conventional morality, and rigidly conventional "squares." As I will elaborate below, however, at least some audience members later interpreted the use of such words as "ho" and the bawdy humor as evidence that the sexual stereotypes about teen mothers were true.

The Problem of Same-Yet-Different

Compounding the difficulty of dispelling stereotypes, the teen mothers

did not speak with one voice. Some felt that becoming mothers had literally saved their lives, while others wanted to encourage their peers to practice safe sex. Their lives did not make for neat generalizations. The director, for example, suggested that many of the young men who fathered the teen mothers' children were "in denial." Those for whom this was not true contested the generalization. Even some of those for whom this was true resisted the statement. Explained Sabrina in a later interview, "Lots of girls in our class are still with their baby's father, and lots of them that aren't have boyfriends. And some of them just like being single."

In short, the group was faced with a problem that has increasingly concerned feminist theorists: How do we take into account the fact that women are simultaneously the same and yet different? On the third day of the workshop, the teen mothers devised a partial solution, a means of asserting their individuality. As a way of closing the play and leading into the question and answer period, they each would give their name and age, their baby's name and age, and a statement about being a teen mother. The statements came from individuals and reflected their own experience and beliefs, but they were vetted by the collective. Once somebody made a particular statement, subsequent speakers were encouraged not to repeat the exact sentiment. If the collective felt the statement might inadvertently reinforce a stereotype, they coached the individual on how to make her line "sound better."

Sherill, for instance, initially said, "Being a teen mom has kept me from partying." The director and several teen mothers urged her to rephrase her statement because the audience might assume that teen mothers don't like to have a good time or that they are former drug or alcohol (ab)users.

Sherill finally settled on the line, "I like being a teen mom because it has made my life more stable." Similarly, Audrey initially said she had a daughter who "will always love me and not try to change me--she'll love me just the way I am." Several of her friends advised that this would feed into the stereotype of the teen mother who has a child because she feels unloved and perhaps victimized. Audrey wrote a completely new line, perhaps the only one of twelve that might be categorized as cautionary: "The hard part about being a mom is not having the same freedom as before."

A similar group dynamic emerged as the play-builders prepared for the question and answer (Q&A) sessions that would follow each performance. The teen mothers coached each other on how to manage potentially stigmatizing questions. Someone posed the hypothetical question, "How do you support yourselves financially?" Annie responded, "welfare." Ruth advised her to avoid that word and say "social assistance" instead. Alexis added, "We couldn't stay in school without the [public] support. We're in school because we don't want to be on it [welfare] anymore." This provided the response to the frequent complaints that teen mothers are lazy and a drain on taxpayers. Patricia expressed the concern that whoever answered this question "shouldn't say, 'Some of us are on social assistance' because what if they ask, 'Which ones of you are on welfare?'" In order to avoid this, Tamara recommended that the respondent use the phrase, "Most of us."

Another strategy for coping with the "same-yet-different" problem also emerged while practicing how to answer audience questions: the exploration of differences that might yet comprise a pattern. For example, Patricia was the most insistent that her boyfriend was happy about her pregnancy and supportive throughout; they had plans to marry at the end of the school year. Yet during

a Q&A session, Patricia cited as an example of her boyfriend's support that he "baby-sat" a lot. Annie called attention to the (unnamed sexist) assumption that a child's father "baby-sits" while a child's mother "parents." From this angle, Patricia's boyfriend (and, indeed, Patricia herself) might be described as "in denial" of the full extent of his parental responsibilities. Patricia accepted Annie's interpretation. This example illustrates Marilyn Frye's observation:

> It is precisely the articulation and differentiation of the experiences formulated in consciousness-raising that give rise to meaning. Pattern discovery and invention require encounters with difference, with variety. The generality of pattern is not a generality that defeats or is defeated by variety. (1990, 180)

On the eve of their first performance, it was clear how often in their lives the teen mothers had been called upon to justify the choices they had made and to explain who they were in order not to be identified negatively by others (e.g., as "sluts," "stupid," "irresponsible," "welfare bums"). They had been engaged in this exhausting practice from the time they had decided to carry their pregnancies to term, albeit usually in isolation from people who had made similar decisions. Now brought together--first as students in the TAP program, then as play-builders--the teen mothers had begun to develop what one later described in an interview as loyalty to "the image of teen moms."

As this loyalty grew, however, it did not necessarily hold that the loyalty was expressed in the script as a unified voice. What emerged from the play-building process was a highly negotiated script, which reflected

compromises among the teen mothers, between the teen mothers and the director, and between the teen mothers and the social attitudes they all knew existed in the wider world.

## Performing the Play, Answering Questions

"Teen Moms in the Nineties," the title the play-builders gave to their production, took only ten to fifteen minutes to perform. The play consisted of seven parts:

Scene One: "Prejudice" (one-liners)
Scene Two: "Asking Boyfriend to Use a Condom"
Scene Three: "Friends Visit"
Scene Four: "Bathing the Baby" (one-liners)
Scene Five: "Conflict with Mom over Boyfriend"
Snapshots: "Girls at Mall Fantasize about Having Babies"
"Telling Mom about Being Pregnant"
"Boyfriend in Denial"
"Teen Moms Discuss Difficulty of Mothering"
"Gossips at School"
Closing One-Liners

The scenes were mostly impressionistic, highlighting key topics and relationships. They acted as discussion starters for the main event, the Q&A periods, which lasted from thirty to forty minutes.

For the closing one-liners and thus for the start of the Q&A session, the teen mothers stood shoulder-to-shoulder in front of the classroom

audience. No school authority was present as their sponsor. The director, although in the audience, rarely attempted to mediate between the audience and the teen mothers, and she never intervened to interpret for them. In interpreting their own lives, though, the participants found it difficult to find space within the prevailing discourses about teen mothers to present a positive identity or formulate a counter-discourse.

What messages did the teen mothers intend to convey? I looked for the answer to this in three places: the rationales they used in building the play, their closing one-liners, and their responses when asked directly about the play's main message in five of the six Q&A sessions. Their intended messages comprise at least three categories: (1) "we're not the stereotype," (2) "make good decisions," and (3) "it's hard to be a parent, but there are lots of positives, too."

"We're Not the Stereotype"

In the opening scene entitled "Prejudice," the audience hears negative statements about teen mothers based on their age, marital status, breast-feeding in public, welfare status, and knowledge of birth control. These statements suggest that teen mothers are inappropriate, incompetent, promiscuous, ignorant, selfish, lazy, lacking in self-control, and irresponsible. No explicit mention was made of child abuse or neglect, although the line "Do you even know what you're doing?" hints at this.

Ruth chose to draw attention to the multiple ways teen mothers are stigmatized in her closing one liner: "The hardest part about being a Native teen mother is facing the discrimination and prejudice in society." She elaborated on this during Q&A sessions:

> A lot of guys think that if you're young and you have a child, they assume you're a ho [whore]--easy. . . . I've been accused by people and the public of being a sleazy, no-good mom and stuff because I'm native and because I'm young. And it's nothing like that. I've been going out with my boyfriend since I was twelve; we went to the park together. We grew together. It developed from that into a relationship.

Patricia, among others, underscored the harmful nature of stereotyping when asked about the play's message: "We're not the stereotype. We're not all going out to get laid all the time. [I want you] to understand us better and have respect for all those other mothers out there who are having a hard time."

"Make Good Decisions"

This theme came out mainly when younger students in the audience explicitly asked about the play's message. Tamara stated: "It's your decision. You're responsible for yourself. . . . Make good decisions." Teenage mothers have made a series of important decisions about whether or not to engage in sex, to use birth control, to have an abortion, to give the baby up for adoption. A number of the teen mothers acknowledged that they had made at least some of their decisions by default. They urged their audiences to "think before acting," "don't be in denial," "think about the consequences," "take responsibility," and "do the right thing."

Using "make good decisions" as their central framework, the teen mothers hoped to avoid a simple warning message. Nobody, for example, urged sexual abstinence. Instead they said things like, "If you're going to have sex, be responsible. Use a condom because there's not only pregnancy, there's AIDS

and stuff out there" (Ruth). Several, drawing on their own experiences with failed condoms and birth control pills, pointed out that no form of contraception is 100% effective.

In addition to taking into account the consequences of one's decisions, the teen mothers highlighted the importance of communication in relationships, an important part of the context in which decisions are usually made. In the snapshot scene between mother and pregnant daughter, the play-builders underscored the dangers of the mother interpreting events only through her own experience ("I'm too young to be a grandma") and dictating solutions ("You're getting an abortion"). Some teen mothers also stressed the need for communication with dating partners. Annie stated, "There's more to a relationship than just sex." Nancy, who was visibly pregnant with her second child, made this point most vividly in the Q&A sessions: "If you think you want to get a baby and you're in some loving relationship, think about this guy and what he may do afterwards. The guy can leave you, and you'll be this big, fat hippo sitting there."

Ultimately, argued the teen mothers, making good decisions depends on particular circumstances and therefore has to rest with each individual. They avoided the dominant discourse that would have portrayed them as negative role models, however, by asserting that they had made good decisions, if not about the use of birth control, certainly about subsequent choices such as returning to school.

Parenting Is a Difficult Yet Positive Experience

In their closing one-liners, ten of the twelve performers emphasized why becoming a mother had been a positive experience for them. The experience had resulted in personal growth (maturity, stability, assertiveness, sensitivity,

and patience), improved relationships with family members, and joy (of having a new "friend," of experiencing "all the firsts with my baby," of witnessing a unique "character" develop, of being able "to teach someone the things I was never taught"). The teen mothers tended to weigh the positives against the challenges and restrictions of being a new parent. Tamara's comment was typical: "Having [my daughter], my life's a lot better now; I can't see myself without my daughter. But a lot of freedom's taken from me. You mature really fast. Boom, you're an adult--you're a mom."

The teen mothers emphasized that to be a good parent, one must be "emotionally ready." Alexis pointed out: "Having a baby changes your life dramatically." In a snapshot scene of younger girls at the shopping mall fantasizing about babies, the teen mothers exposed what they believed to be the erroneous idea that having a baby is like baby-sitting or playing with a doll. This is countered by a later snapshot scene in which teen mothers talk about the difficulties of being full-time parents. In addition, the teen mothers referred back to these scenes in the Q&A sessions. Ruth, for example, held up the doll they had been using as a prop in the play and elaborated: "It's not really easy. This is just a doll. They [real babies] don't sit in your lap like this. They cry." Alexis added, "When babies get sick, they don't know what to do. They can't tell you."

What Was Left Unsaid

A subtext of the play--what remained largely unspoken yet was important to the play's meaning--was that teen mothers are stigmatized as likely child abusers. The issue of abuse was not raised in the play itself, perhaps because the play-builders worried about highlighting it as a potential discussion topic. The fear of being seen as neglectful or abusive is a real

one; teen mothers are particularly vulnerable to having their children taken from them. This is true despite the fact that careful research suggests that a mother's age is far less important than other factors in determining her parenting behavior, including potential abuse of her children (Miller and Moore 1990, 1036; Phoenix 1991).

In six performances, the teen mothers were asked only one question related to abuse and neglect. A black female student queried, "Do you ever take your frustrations out on your babies?" Tamara responded, "Well, yeah, sometimes. Well, not really. [audience laughter] You get frustrated, for sure. That's why it's good to have someone else around to support you."

Tamara's comment prompted two other teen mothers to describe how they avoided taking their frustrations out on their babies, with Alexis cautioning, "You've got to realize it's not the baby's fault. They don't know any better." Immediately after the performance, the teen mothers let the director know that they felt "offended" by the "frustrations" question; they thought it positioned them as child abusers. Patricia likened the question to "Do you beat your wife?" During a later performance when a student audience member asked, "What is the most absurd question you've been asked," several of the performers mentioned without hesitation the "frustrations" question.

Parenting can be an isolating experience, for mothers of any age, in the dominant Canadian society as it is presently structured. Given a more accepting general climate and adults less concerned about simply issuing warnings about teen pregnancy, there might have been more room to discuss the potential negative aspects of the mothering experience and the conditions that might lead to abuse. But because the stigma of being potential child abusers hung over the performers' heads, they did not feel safe enough to raise or

explore the issue.

## Interpreting the Play

Although the teen mothers--as play-builders and performers--intended to convey certain messages, these were not necessarily the meanings that audience members took away from the play. Their interpretations depended on such things as who they were (e.g., their age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social class, school status), their values and prior knowledge, and subsequent conversations about the play with peers and teachers.

In this section, I analyze the questions asked in the Q&A periods; this analysis is informed by interviews I conducted with, as well as written responses I collected from, audience members after the performances. The questions following each of the six performances were strikingly similar and comprised three categories: questions that keyed off prevailing stereotypes about teen mothers, questions about the effect of pregnancy and parenthood on various relationships, and questions about the experience of pregnancy, labor, or new motherhood. I noted how many of the audiences' questions possibly implied stigma and the various forms it took. This analysis revealed that teachers' concerns differed somewhat from those of students.

### Interpretations by Teachers and Other Adults

Teachers interviewed after the various performances agreed that the play benefitted both the viewers as well as the performers. Explained one, "it made the students in the audience aware of the pressures and problems teenage pregnancy can cause," and the teen mothers "probably gained self-confidence and self-esteem." A concern about some of the play's messages, however, tempered these perceived benefits. Wrote one teacher:

> My concern was that not enough was said about life after the baby was born. It was probably good that abortion was slated as an option, but the real issues and practicalities of bringing up a baby as a teenage mother were not discussed. . . . It was almost like a "rosy" picture was painted. Certainly, we should be trying to discourage teenage pregnancies and teenage motherhood. Adoption was not discussed. Money issues were not discussed. Looking at the future was not discussed.

Here capsulated is the prevention discourse that many teachers wanted to see reflected in the play. No doubt such concerns fueled teachers' attempts to shape student interpretations of the play by issuing warnings. They did this in two ways: through the questions they posed to the performers during the Q&A sessions and in the follow-up discussions and activities they conducted in the privacy of their own classrooms. Most of the teachers' questions aimed at prompting the teen mothers to consider their futures as well as those of their babies. Follow-up questions seemed to indicate, and later interviews confirmed, that prevention (of teen pregnancy, child abuse, welfare dependence) was high on the teachers' agenda. One teacher, for instance, asked, "Are there things that you wished that we as parents or we as teachers had been able to teach you <u>before</u> all this happened to you?" This question, designed to elicit warning stories from the teen mothers, instead drew statements affirming the choice they had made. Ruth answered first: "I'm glad I have a child. I wouldn't change it."

A few of the teachers' questions were more pointedly judgmental, and the teen mothers highly resented them, as I discuss below. One teacher, for example, asked, "How many of you smoke?" His question led to the following

exchange:

Tamara: What, during our pregnancy, or?

Teacher: Now.

Alexis: I smoke.

Teacher: Why?

Alexis: Why does anybody smoke?

Teacher: Aren't you role models for these little kids growing up?

Patricia: It's hard to quit. I've tried. I was down to two cigarettes a day when I was pregnant. I used to smoke a pack and a half.

Teachers also attempted to counter the positive stories told by teen mothers by pointing out some of the play's silences to their students and highlighting alternative messages. For example, a family management teacher at one school told me that she planned to discuss the play with students at the next class meeting. She wanted them to realize that "these girls are the cream of the crop of teen mothers because they're still in school." Even at that, she continued, the Q&A session revealed some of "the negatives" about teen motherhood--"the girls' worries about money, the fact that their social lives had changed"--and she planned to reiterate these. Another adult present at the same performance found the mixed messages confusing and disturbing. On the whole, she told me, the play made being a teen mother seem like a "groovy thing to do."

These adult interpretations do not necessarily mean that the teen mothers were fully successful in conveying their own messages. But they are evidence that the text that emerged from the play-building process was distant

enough from the warning story ideal desired by many teachers to cause concern.

Interpretations by High School Students

Students said they enjoyed the play, especially the Q&A format. Many, particularly the younger students and Asian students of various ages, described the play as cautionary. Although student audience members asked relatively few direct questions about contraception, "safe sex" seemed to be a common message that students took from the play. A grade twelve, Indo-Canadian girl interviewed one year later described the play's message: "It was to show us the responsibilities teen mothers have, basically, and the obstacles [they face]. And the point of safe sex--that was the other thing that they promoted." Some students liked the emphasis on choices and making good decisions. Most said the play increased their understanding of teen mothers' lives. Said one female student directly following a performance: "I learned to be supportive of teen mothers. . . . They're just normal human beings who had babies."

This new understanding resulted in three common sentiments: admiration, sympathy, and disapproval. Students' admiration for teen mothers was predicated on the belief that many teens in their community engage in sexual activity and that "mistakes" do happen (e.g., condoms break). Given this, a number of students, girls in particular, said they admired teen mothers for not having had abortions and for coping with hardship.

In addition, I sensed moments when students in the audience identified with the frustration that the teen mothers described in dealing with adults who believed them to be incompetent parents based solely on their age. A white girl in grade ten, for example, asked, "Do you think your children have an advantage having a younger mom? That you understand them?" Several teen

mothers agreed. Ruth's comment, in particular, met with nods and "yeahs" from some students in the audience:

> I think that you try harder because you have so much pressure from society. We get discriminated [against] so often that we strive to be the best that we can, whereas some older parents, they're 25 or 30 or whatever, right? They don't have that pressure. They just naturally think they're such great parents.

A more common sentiment than admiration was sympathy for teen mothers insofar as students perceived them to be victims of various stereotypes, abandoned by the fathers of their children, and destined to live in poverty. During one Q&A session, a series of questions had the teen mothers defending themselves against the stereotypes of being too young, ignorant about birth control, on welfare, and possibly neglectful. In response, a white boy in grade twelve said, "I have a question. Everyone has negative things to say about teen moms. What are some of the positives?" Although this question allowed several teen mothers to talk about the joys of parenthood, it also elicited sober reflection in a way that the teachers' more pointed questions about the future did not. Sherill commented:

> [Our babies] are changing a lot of our lives. A lot of us before were not as responsible and concerned about our educations as we are now. A lot of us were at the dropout point, but now we are back in school because we've got all this responsibility.

A few students expressed disapproval of teen mothers or at least skepticism toward supposed transgressors. Recall that most students offered support to those teen mothers whom they perceived to have made a "mistake." Thus, a fair number of student questions focused on ascertaining who had "planned" to have a baby. As a consequence, students directed the harshest comments and gestures at the one teen mother who was very obviously pregnant a second time. An Asian female in grade eleven pointed at Nancy, for example, and asked, "You have a baby, right? I see that you are pregnant again. Why would you want to go through this again?" Nancy replied defensively, "I wouldn't. Just before I was going on the birth control pill, I got pregnant [again]. It was too late."

Nancy also acknowledged that she had had multiple sex partners and that two different men had fathered her child and child-to-be. She was later described by some students as "promiscuous," apparently the most damning and common stereotype that teen mothers face from their peers. The most frequent question asked by students, both boys and girls, had to do with the biological fathers of the teen mothers' children: what was the nature of their relationship, was marriage a possibility, did the fathers stick around, did they provide support, and so on.

In an attempt to counter the "slut" stigma, some of the teen mothers felt compelled to describe the steady nature of their relationships (e.g., Ruth's description above of playing with her boyfriend in the park since age twelve lent an innocence to the relationship). In an extended exchange about the stereotype that teen mothers are promiscuous, Patricia asserted, "I was on birth control pills. I didn't forget to take it once. I was that one percent. There's always that one percent. Don't forget that." Thus, one of

the most staunch opponents of moralizing about birth control during the play-building phase ended up issuing a warning about the pill in an effort to counter the "slut" label.

Some female students empathized with the teen mothers and said the play made them angry about the sexual double standard still prevalent among many of their peers. Explained one white girl:

> I know, from example, when we asked them, "How many of you are still with the fathers," . . . maybe about two of them said that they still were, and the rest of them weren't. I mean the attitude is, if you become pregnant, the attitude is that you're a slut, that you sleep with everyone, and that you deserve it, and etcetera. And the attitude is that the father doesn't have to do anything. It's all the woman's fault.

A Chinese-Canadian girl in grade eleven wrote: "From what I saw, guys are too busy keeping their macho image than thinking about how their mate feels. Because of this, guys usually bail out when their mates are pregnant."

Although some students displayed only one main feeling about teen mothers, more often than not, their comments belied a certain confusion; they expressed pity, admiration, and disapproval for teen mothers simultaneously. Thus, teachers concerned about preventing teen pregnancy and teen mothers concerned about increasing their peers' understanding of their lives both had some reason to feel happy about how the high school students interpreted the play. Students' interpretations provided another indicator that the entire text--the play as scripted and performed and the Q&A session--was a negotiated

potpourri.

Interpretations by Teen Mothers

Among the performers, the immediate response seemed to be a sense of accomplishment and relief that the performances were over. Ruth: "I learned, I guess, that I have the power to change situations that I'm in and to be assertive; being in this workshop helped me learn that."

Eventually, several other teen mothers looked back with puzzled dissatisfaction. Despite their intentions at the outset, the theme of their play, it seemed to them, turned out to be mainly about warning others not to follow their example. They felt they had somehow participated in the reinforcement of their own stigmatization. I began to glean this when conducting the following interviews some months after the last performance.

Sabrina: I didn't think any of that play was really anything that happened in my life other than the fact of getting pregnant and having a baby. We all gave our stories, but it didn't seem like it was anything that happened to any of us, really. Some of us maybe, but me--there was nothing in that play that had to do with what happened in my life, other than having a baby.

Researcher: If you were going to have it be representative of your life, how would it have been different? What would you have picked to be highlighted?

Sabrina: That's kind of tough, because in my opinion that play was sort of to warn people or something. But that would be hard for me to do because I didn't find it really awful. I'm glad that all this has happened. So it would be hard for me to give a play of what

happened to me by giving warning as well, because I can't really say, "Oh, it was really awful. Watch out." (emphasis added)

* * *

Researcher: So I'm just wondering if you can remember back to the play, what message or messages other students took from it.

Samantha: It seemed like it was trying to say, "Don't get pregnant" cuz it was really negative. But I don't understand how that happened.

Researcher: So if you had more control over the message that such a play could have, what would it be?

Samantha: That it is hard to be a parent. It's not always negative--there are parts that are negative--but there's a lot of positive things about it. I don't know, it's just as if anybody else that's pregnant, any other aged moms, except that we're going to school.

Thus, although Patricia and Tamara had been the most outspoken at the outset about the play being overly negative about their experiences, I learned that some of the quieter participants like Samantha and Sabrina were equally critical, at least in retrospect. Those still present in the TAP program the following year declined to participate in the play-building workshop again, and ultimately the workshop was canceled for lack of interest among both new and returning students. Although undoubtedly there were multiple reasons for this, I believe that the main explanation was that many of the teen mothers did not feel comfortable having their life experiences reduced by other adults to a mere warning.

What explains their interpretation that the play became a warning?

Above all, not all participants understood at the outset that a highly negotiated text results from the play-building process. The teen mothers had been led to believe that their play would give voice to their experiences and help to dispel stereotypes. They did not realize how difficult it would be to convey their own story, let alone forge a collective story about teen mothers that would encompass twelve different lives.

The teen mothers also discovered they could not fully control how their audiences interpreted their intended messages. They did not count on teachers injecting warning messages through the issues they raised in the Q&A sessions and afterward. The play-builders may have overestimated the power of art to bring about change in their peers. Commented Sabrina in retrospect, "I think the play got people thinking. I don't think it made anybody change their life." Samantha was less hopeful: "I don't see what kind of impact that play had on anyone; if it did, they would be still talking about it."

## Conclusion

In contrast to most curricular material about teen pregnancy and parenthood, the play "Teen Moms in the Nineties" included actual teen mothers' self-interpretations and was sponsored by adults who wished, in part at least, to combat the negative stereotypes about teen mothers. Even so, the story that could not be fully told--or would not be fully heard--is one that some teen mothers say they would like to convey: (1) they became pregnant for a variety of reasons, just like older women do; (2) they support a young woman's right to choose--including motherhood--based on individual circumstances; and (3) they believe that being a mother is a challenging yet positive experience. A young woman might either intend to have a child or remorselessly find

herself pregnant. And then, with support from state-funded institutions, she might happily combine education and motherhood.

These messages were forced to compete, often unfavorably, with the warning message the teen mothers found stigmatizing. The result was complicated enough to prompt one adult observer (not a teacher) to note that while many adults wanted the play to be a morality tale, the teen mothers' production presented "the reality":

> I think we [adults] want to say, "It's absolutely terrible, and you're going to be poor and you'll have a terrible time," or "It's going to be fine, and it's going to be wonderful." And it's neither. It's both. And that's true for all of us in our lives.

Ironically, many teen mothers did not see their own play, in the end, as "reality," but as an unsatisfactory construct. To prevent such disillusionment, the challenge lies in explaining to play-builders at the outset that they will be in the business of constructing a story. There should be no raising of expectations that their individual realities might somehow be combined to form a coherent, singular statement, which could then be told without clashing into opposing ideologies. The play-building process would nonetheless be worthwhile. The script writing phase, in particular, helped participants articulate their concerns and collectively theorize about their experiences.

Implications for the Use of Play-Building as Curriculum

The analysis of the play-building process with teen mothers suggests some ways in which teachers might rethink classroom practices, taking into

account poststructuralist theories of experience and subjectivity. The teen mothers discovered they could not control what sense their audience made of their production. They might not have been so puzzled about how their play became a warning, though, had they (1) fully understood how the play was constituted around multiple, competing discourses; (2) learned to recognize dominant ideologies, (3) gained access to oppositional movements and ideologies, and (4) learned some of the rules of narrative (see Davies 1993).

By attending to storyline structure, ideological content, and multiple textual interpretations, teachers can help students see "how one discourse can be used to modify or counteract the force of another" (Davies 1993, 159). Although students must learn to recognize the impossibility of overturning stereotypes simply by willing it so, they are not without agency. "[Agency] is the freedom to recognise multiple readings such that no discursive practice, or positioning within it by powerful others, can capture and control one's identity" (Davies 1991, 51).

Educators must also be alert to the limits of play-building as a "liberatory" educational practice for marginalized students such as teenage mothers. Well-intentioned teachers may aim to empower students by encouraging them to create an "authentic" statement that ostensibly grows directly out of their own experiences. Yet students with the same experiential background do not always interpret their experiences in the same way, and their self-interpretations are subject to pressure and even manipulation from outside interests that seek to stigmatize their stories.

Implications for Sexuality Education

With regard to the specific content of the teen mothers' play, I would add my voice to a growing number of calls to reconceptualize sexuality education to include both "discourses of desire and refusal" (Ruddick 1993, drawing on Fine 1988). The teen mothers spoke to the pleasures as well as the responsibilities involved in exploring sexuality, giving birth, and becoming parents. When given the space, the teen mothers gave voice to their desires as well as urged prevention and the making of informed, responsible decisions. As Ruddick cautions:

> Unless their intimations of pleasure are addressed, they cannot find their experiences within official stories or trust the officials who tell them. They become isolated, less able to name the complexities of their feelings, and thus less capable of becoming choosing people. (1993, 134)

## Notes

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2. TAP and all other names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

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