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Empowering Teen Mothers as Problem Solvers

An Action Research Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the Kalmanovitz School of Education

Saint Mary's College of California

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Teaching Leadership

By

Teresa Christine Bolla

Spring 2020

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This action research project, written under the direction of the candidate's master's project advisory committee and approved by members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the faculty of the Kalmanovitz School of Education, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Teaching Leadership degree.

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Abstract

Empowering Teen Mothers as Problem Solvers

By

Teresa Christine Bolla

Master of Arts in Teaching Leadership

Saint Mary's College of California, 2020

Susan Schultz, Research Advisor

Teen mom students at an alternative high school participated in an eight-session, school group intervention called Taking Charge. This program was designed to assist teen mothers in acquiring the following life skills: action planning, setting goals, solving problems, and coping. Students specifically addressed problems in four life domains: education, personal relationships, parenting, and career. These young mothers were hardworking, dedicated, and often overcame numerous obstacles as they strove to finish high school, work, and raise their children. These mothers, in an effort to better their lives and the lives of their children, proved to be powerful and persistent as they worked relentlessly to improve their stations in life. Having babies early in life inspired teen mothers to overcome the odds as they do everything in their power to graduate and plan for their futures. As a result of the intervention students gained self-efficacy and self-confidence, as they learned to boldly address life's challenges.

Dedication

This page is dedicated to the all of my amazing teen mom students! You are amazing mothers and I am blessed to work and learn with you. You make me smile *every single day* at school. Bless you all!

And to my sweet friend, Antje Colby, I love you!

Never give up!

Acknowledgements

I cannot thank my Research Advisor Sooz Schultz enough! Thanks for your unwavering support and quick turnaround time. I could not have done this without you. Your continued words of encouragement made all of the difference. You are the best! I must also give some love to Dr. Monique Lane. Your guidance in our MATL classes was both amazing and inspiring. You are an energetic, caring, and *most captivating* professor! It was an honor to be in your classes.

A special shout out to my family! First of all, I must acknowledge my mom, Dr. Christine Di Martile Bolla! Watching you work relentlessly on your higher education has inspired me more than you will ever know. To my wonderful husband, Jack Morris, thanks for learning to cook some good food, you figured it out at the perfect time! Thanks too, for your steadfast love, support, and for being there for me through this intense process. Lastly, I say to my wonderful sons, Jack Matthew and Dominic Richard, you guys are just the best! I enjoyed being a student with you both this past school year. I now feel that I too, embrace Lasallian values in all that I do in our home, in my classroom and beyond. Let's all keep our faith strong as we live out Lasallian values in our daily lives. A Lasallian education recognizes: the importance of remembering the presence of God, a concern for the poor and social justice, and respect for all persons. Both Saint Mary's College and De La Salle High have enabled us all to obtain quality education in a beautifully diverse and inclusive community.

Always remember that we are in the holy presence of God.

Saint John Baptist De La Salle. Pray for us.

Hold Jesus in our hearts. Forever.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Keeping teen mothers in school is a challenging task, but there are some interventions that have been successful in helping these young women engage in school allowing these students to prioritize their education helps break the cycles of inadequate institutional supports and high rates of poverty (Harris & Franklin 2008). Teenage mothers are hard-working, dedicated, and often overcome numerous obstacles as they strive to finish high school, work, and raise their children. These mothers, in an effort to better their lives and the lives of their children, prove to be powerful young women who persist relentlessly to improve their stations in life. Many of these young women demonstrate strength and determination to avoid their high risk for dropping out of high school. Having babies early in life often inspires these mothers to overcome the odds as they do everything in their power to graduate and plan for their futures.

The dedication and persistence that some teen mothers are able to sustain enables them to maintain self-efficacy and avoid many long-term negative adult outcomes. For instance, high rates of teenage moms are at risk for unemployment and systems involvement. This can include dependency on subsidized housing, the need for financial social services, possible incarceration, or long-term poverty (Chablani, & Spinney, 2011). Hence, the long-term benefits of successful intervention are surely worth the effort. Early intervention will undoubtedly contribute to a better society at the local, state and national levels, as these young mothers mature with the confidence and success that coincides with educational attainment.

Studies have shown that students with high rates of absenteeism are in danger of dropping out of school, which may have a negative impact on many levels. *The Alliance for Excellent Education* (2013), a Washington, DC–based national policy, practice, and advocacy

organization, asserts the importance of high school graduation. High school graduates have higher earning potentials, and as a result are better able to contribute to their local economy. This is true in both California and our nation at large. This action research project hopes to increase school engagement which will in turn increase attendance rates of teen mothers. The majority of students enrolled our immigrants doing their very best to get by. It is especially important that these “invisible students” are seen, supported and encouraged to graduate (Public Policy Center of California, 2007). This is most important for the students themselves as they need to provide for themselves and their children. The implications of this are quite promising as this could have a positive, cumulative effect on not only these students, but on their children as well. The children of the teen mothers being cared for in the on-site daycare at New Beginnings High School are often first-generation Americans. Should their teen mothers become more engaged in school and reduce their rates of absenteeism, these young children are more likely to become consistent school attenders themselves (Anat, 2009).

Statement of the Problem

Over half of the Latinx people living in California reside in marginalized communities all while making up 40% of California’s population. Such Latinx people are often negatively impacted by government structures, economic structures, and cultural structures. Latinx mothers make up the majority of teen mothers in state of California. Higher education is a means by which teen mothers are more likely to achieve financial independence. Research indicates that policies and programs do not receive sufficient funding to create real change for some of California’s most marginalized people. (Public Policy Institute of California, 2017; Anat, 2009).

I teach in California’s Bay Area at an alternative high school, which serves pregnant and parenting adolescent women, most of whom are living below the federal poverty line.

Additionally, over 90% of the population is Spanish speaking. Attendance has been extremely low, often with less than fifty percent of students in attendance on any given day. The majority of our students have a long history of irregular school attendance. Poor attendance has become increasingly problematic with each passing year. To counteract this institutional culture of absenteeism, teachers need to cultivate better teaching strategies to promote more student engagement at school.

Regrettably, at this school site, teachers have had little time for collaboration and often keep to themselves when it comes to curriculum planning. A newer administrator recently implemented additional minimal school days to allow for more teacher collaboration, but this has been met with some resistance. For example, teachers were resistant to a suggestion by the principal to implement more integrated, thematic curriculum. This is a small school, which has a maximum of 50 students enrolled at any given time. The rate of absenteeism has increased steadily during the five years I have taught at this school. It is clear that the current teaching methods and curriculum are failing students as is reflected in a steadily increasing attendance problem. Teachers must be more innovative in their teaching and open to ideas which better engage these students.

Students' lives revolve around pregnancy and parenting, and it is essential that relevant curriculum reflect students' interests and values. Research has proven that such marginalized students learn best in an interpersonal climate where they feel safe, supported and valued (Artz & Nicholson, 2010). Getting all teachers to abide by this concept is not an easy task, but with increased staff collaboration planned for the future, there is hope that school can become a more engaging place for the students served.

New Beginnings High School students are determined young women, many whom are working and going to school, all while parenting. They reside in homes with numerous people so as to afford the very high rent prices in California. Gonzalez (2019) expands on a concept of *familismo* which she describes by summarizing the work of Consoli and Llamas, (2013) as a “form of familial solidarity such as strong feelings of attachment, loyalty and responsibility towards family and extended family members” (p. 1). This notion is often embraced by the teen mothers at the alternative high school as they are household members of working age and are often expected to contribute financially to the household to offset the cost of food, rent, and other living expenses. Students often miss school due to work. Often, these students are exhausted from working late hours during the week, which contributes to the attendance problem. This is especially true for students who are 18 years of age or older. Some students remain enrolled at the high school until 21 years of age, or sometimes older, as it is understood that going to school while parenting may require extra time. The parents of students have a high regard for education, but the financial struggle they endure can make it difficult to prioritize school attendance.

Furthermore, current district truancy policy as mandated by the state of California criminalizes students and families who do not attend school regularly. For instance, *Education Code, Section 48293* states that,

In the event that any parent, guardian or other person having control or charge of such minor continually and willfully fails to respond to the directives of the School Attendance Review Board (SARB), the District may file in the proper court a criminal complaint against parent/guardian, which may result in fines of up to \$500 (California Department of Education, 2019).

These parents do not have the resources to pay such fines and to appear in court may require a parent to miss work which most cannot afford to do. Hence, the students and their families

become entangled in an educational system with rules and regulations that criminalizes them and adds to their stress.

Schools are drastically different and underfunded, in high minority, under-resourced areas. This is true in California and our nation at large. Chesney-Linda and Jones' work teen mothers' aggression among adolescent girls validates the need for better schools for subordinated students. In their interviews with 83 female students, it was clear that a smaller, alternative school served students better. The alternative high school featured in a chapter by Artz and Nicholson in Chesney-Lind and Jones' (2010) book *Fighting for Girls* discusses an under-resourced school for teen mothers in grades 9-12. These students had a very positive regard for their teachers as noted by one student who stated, "The teachers genuinely care if I'm off for a day, someone will ask, 'Oh, you weren't here yesterday. What's wrong?'" (Chesney-Lind p. 166). As this teacher checked in with this student, it is evident that the student felt cared for and her teacher was concerned when she did not come to school. This student's statement is very significant as it shows the importance of having a caring, compassionate teacher. Students who feel both welcome and cared for unconditionally by their teachers will view school as a positive and worthwhile place to spend their time. School can become a secure haven for students whose lives may be unpredictable, a place which offers consistent support with caring teachers who can be seen as dependable and trustworthy.

Schools which support marginalized students are places of hope and will give the incentive needed for many of the students to make the extraordinary effort to get to school each day. Many students lack reliable transportation getting to and from school. While many students utilize passes supplied by the school for public transportation, getting to school this way is difficult, time-consuming, and at times, unsafe. Traveling to school on bus or rail in the later

stages of pregnancy, or with a baby or toddler in tow, is even more challenging. Adequate, convenient, transportation needs to be readily available for all students. District provided school buses or vans would help to alleviate this problem.

Many incentive programs have been initiated at the school site to remedy this chronic problem of absenteeism, including the distribution of Baby Bucks to regularly attending students. For instance, students can use Baby Bucks to shop at the school store, which has many donated baby items. Attendance is always higher on Baby Bucks Store days, but even on these special days, attendance is still quite low. At the end of each school quarter, awards and prizes are given to students with excellent attendance, and certificates are awarded to students who have excelled in their studies. In general, the school strives to use positive reinforcement with students and the atmosphere is very supportive.

In addition to providing a supportive atmosphere for teen moms, the school provides high quality day care for the children of students, including three, beautifully equipped Head Start programs for babies, crawlers, and toddlers. Unfortunately, when students miss school, their babies and toddlers are missing out on positive early childhood learning experiences. Research shows that preschool children with frequent absences in Head Start programs have smaller gains in literacy and math than those children who attend school regularly (Ansari & Purtell, 2018). The need to remedy the problem with absenteeism at this high school is significant as the teen mothers and their babies are adversely affected when they do not come to school on a regular basis. Students who enjoy coming to school and see value in attending, will view school in a positive light. In turn, encouraging the routine of regular school attendance for teen mothers means their children will also benefit from Head Start attendance. This has the potential to create better future outcomes for these young mothers and their children alike.

Despite encouragement from graduating peers and caring school staff, the challenges of adolescent motherhood create difficulty for many teen moms to attend school with regularity. There are valid reasons why students miss school, such as: disengaging curriculum, working late hours, living in physically and/or emotionally unstable relationships, having parents who are underemployed, or those who are struggling to maintain secure housing. This list is not exhaustive as there are many other mitigating factors that make it a challenge to come to school. It is important to assert once again, that if school is not personally meaningful and engaging, these hard-working teen moms will not be inspired to come to school as they are often exhausted and need extra sleep and down time. Students will not be motivated to come to school if teaching methods are didactic and do not actively involve and include students in the learning process. Educators must think outside of the box and cannot rely on traditional teaching methods to engage and encourage these parenting teens. As such, the purpose of this inquiry was to increase student engagement by having students who are teen mothers participate in the Taking Charge Program where they learned problem-solving skills that will help them throughout their lives (Harris and Franklin, 2008).

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this Action Research Project (ARP) was to engage teen mom students more deeply. Improved engagement could improve school attendance, which may result in increasing the number of students who will complete high school each year. In June 2019, almost all enrolled seniors at New Beginnings earned their high school diplomas, many of whom graduated on time, meaning that in spite of giving birth while in high school, they were not derailed from completing their studies. In addition, most of these students were the first in their families to graduate!

This Action Research Project is focused on a problem-solving curriculum called the *Taking Charge Program* (TCP). This program was created by two social workers with an aim to teach practical, problem-solving, life skills to adolescent mothers. Each week focuses on one of four life domains: personal relationships, education, career, and lastly parenting. As such the TCP uses a combination of approaches in its attempt to facilitate the problem-solving process of the adolescent mother. The teacher guides the student using specific, probing questions which will assist students in identifying and addressing problems.

Psychologist Albert Bandura defined self-efficacy as the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task (2003). One's sense of self can play a major role in how one approaches goals, tasks, and challenges. Bandura's (2003) social cognitive theory as it relates to self-efficacy is the theoretical foundation for the Taking Charge Program (TCP). In Bandura's (1991) earlier work he describes self-efficacy specifically as, "beliefs of people about their capabilities to exercise control over their own level of functioning and over events that affect their lives" (p. 257).

After completion of the program, students will have increased confidence in planning for their future in the four focus areas: personal relationships, education, career and parenting. This newfound assurance will increase the likelihood that students will attend school regularly thus promoting higher graduation rates. This promising curriculum has been effective in three other programs for adolescent mothers where the program authors report a reduction in school absenteeism of 50% and improved student performance overall (Harris & Franklin, 2008).

The TCP embraces and encourages culturally responsive teaching, which Gay (2001) describes as, "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively," (Gay, p. 114). Culturally

competent teaching is “vital to the effectiveness of the TCP group curriculum,” (Harris and Franklin, 2008, p. 141). The program delivery must be embraced and accepted by the young mothers. Koss-Chioino & Vargas’ (1999) work with Latinx youth, is also referenced within the Taking Charge Program stating that, “the leader’s style and the group’s ambiance should be shaped by cultural considerations. The leaders’ knowledge of the group’s cultural ecology is critical to the group’s receptivity of the intervention” (p. 142). This strengths-based, solution building process focuses on the here and now, and assists students as they plan for their futures. During the developmental phase, adolescence teens encounter many situations where important decisions need to be made. The TCP assists teen mothers in this process (Harris and Franklin, 2008).

Because, the school services both teen mothers and their children, the stakes of this inquiry are quite high. The primary goal of this Action Research Project was to determine why teen mothers were missing so much school, and what could be done to increase student engagement which would likely improve their school attendance. Although there are a number of reasons why students do not attend school, there are many reasons why they should. For the purpose of this inquiry, the TCP was implemented for 40-60 minutes on the first day of each school week, usually a Monday in Parent Education class. All students at New Beginnings were enrolled in this class. The teacher followed up with students each school at the beginning of the day in Parent Education class to see how students were progressing in achieving their weekly goal in one of the four domain areas.

Students who participated in the program were pregnant or parenting teens. The TCP was designed with English learners in mind and the school demographic was similar to the original groups who successfully completed the TCP, as both programs were comprised of teen mothers,

most of whom were Latinx. The program required one dedicated teacher, and another group leader. The program was facilitated by this researcher and a beloved school counselor. One student served as translator as needed and was given the title of class assistant.

I hoped that this evidence-based, life-skills intervention program for teen moms would dramatically increase school engagement thereby improving daily attendance. The *Taking Charge Program* empowers young women to take charge of their education and develop skills that will help them succeed in school and life (Harris and Franklin, 2008).

Action Research Question

The question that guided this inquiry was: *What effect will participation in the Taking Charge Program have on teen mothers' school engagement and self-efficacy at an alternative high school?* This study was designed to determine if participation in a school-based life skills program increased students' connection to the curriculum and the school community. Research suggests that students who become personally involved in the learning process in their classes, will be more likely to attend school and increase their performance on school assignments (Chablani & Spinney, 2011; Sadler, 2007). The authors of the TCP curriculum have reported great success with similar groups of teen mothers who have participated in the program (p. 31, Harris and Franklin, 2008).

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the time frame was restricted. It would be most effective if the study could take place at the beginning of the school year when attendance is at its best and students are motivated and excited about returning to school. Additionally, absenteeism has been extremely problematic and poor attendance among the participants may skew my ability to gather significant data and measurable findings. Moreover, the second and

third quarters of the school year have historically lower attendance rates. A third limitation is the amount of time allowed for the study to take place. The TCP is designed to last 8-12 weeks and due to the restraints of my graduate program, the maximum time allowed for this project was 8 weeks.

Positionality of the Researcher

As I conducted this research, I kept my biases in check. I was a white-identified woman researching Latinx teen mothers. I had to be mindful and continue to view these students and their families as hard-working. I needed to continually work to reduce being personally frustrated regarding their absenteeism. As previously mentioned in this chapter, there were many valid reasons why these students did not come to school. Milner's (2007) research on race, culture, and positionality asserts that students and their families have been marginalized historically, socially, and institutionally, by their local school district and the educational system at large. Milner cautions researchers to not compound this issue with further judgement.

I knew that I was well regarded by my students and worked to stay connected with them outside of school via texting and social media networking sites. I encouraged the young women to come to school, sent them positive messages, and checked in with them regularly when they did not come to school. However, I was inclined to lower my academic expectations for my students as I had a great deal of empathy for them due to their extremely difficult lives outside of school. The Taking Charge Program required me to teach a more fixed and rigorous curriculum which challenged my teaching as I sometimes made work too easy or not challenging enough. I did this because I wanted to make sure I did not negatively impact students' self-esteem, as I wanted them to feel successful. I knew I needed to challenge them more academically. I had a tendency toward a phenomenon that researcher Howard (2010) calls "deficit-based teaching."

Such thinking challenges teachers to have a “firm belief in students’ academic potential,” (Howard, p. 48). This was very illuminating as I *thought* that I had students’ best interests at heart when I made work less challenging.

Moreover, although the TCP program encouraged the instructor to use culturally relevant teaching, I sometimes struggled by taking too much of a lead and not allowing students the time necessary to process and think for themselves. To maintain professionalism, I had to keep my passion about the subject in check, thus allowing enough time for student interaction and discussion. I needed to move away from being “totally in charge” to more of a facilitator and co-learner in this research process. As such, I encouraged the other TCP leader, our school counselor, to share equally in the problem-solving curriculum activities. As a school counselor she was adept at being a good listener and modeled this behavior for me to emulate. Acknowledging and addressing these shortcomings in my teaching style enabled me to better serve the students throughout this Action Research process.

Lastly, I have great empathy and do my best to treat my students with kindness, but I am of a different culture and must be ever mindful of this. To invert the hierarchy of knowledge claims that is embedded in traditional classroom spaces, this program is conducted in Group Session format. The group leaders included: not only me, but also a beloved school counselor. We both knew these students quite personally. One of our students was designated as teacher assistant and assisted with translation as needed. This ensured that students felt comfortable sharing and contributing with the group and they could share in their native language as needed.

Definition of Terms

Average Daily Attendance (ADA). The total number of days of student attendance divided by the total days of instruction. This is the formula that determines how much funding a school district receives from the state (California Department of Education, 2019).

Adolescent or teen mom. parenting mother age under age 18 or up to 23 years or younger at time of enrolled in high school (as per School District Guidelines).

Taking Charge Program (TCP). An 8-12 week cognitive-behavioral, strength-based, curriculum which focuses on problem-solving strategies in relation to parenting, education, relationships and career planning (Harris, M. B., & Franklin, C. (2008).

Implications

Students' participation in the Action Research Project—beyond improving school engagement—will provide the students an opportunity to acquire life changing problem-solving strategies, which will help them finish school and focus on future career and life goals. Being able to address and solve problems as they arise will impact students throughout their lives as such skills are necessary to operate effectively both personally and professionally.

Additionally, students will have the opportunity to make more personal connections with their teen-parenting peers and experience a deeper, new sense of connection to school. This newfound connection to school may help reinforce these students' value for education and its impact on their future careers. This high-stakes research will potentially have an immediate positive effect on teen mothers and their babies. Educational attainment will result in improved self-efficacy for these teen mothers and will open up more opportunities in their futures.

In our district, the alternative high schools' rates of absenteeism are significantly higher than the rates at nearby traditional high schools. The TCP would need to be slightly modified for use in those schools; however, this could be achieved with moderate effort. Marginalized

students with enormous potential comprise the bulk of students enrolled in alternative high schools. Increasing school engagement and attendance will create more equitable educational and life outcomes for such students. Should this ARP prove successful, I would be open to expanding my role to help facilitate such endeavors at other alternative school sites.

Chapter II

Literature Review

The purpose of this action research project is to investigate how participation in *Taking Charge: A Schools-Based Life Skills Program* (2008) would impact school engagement and attendance rates among teen mothers at New Beginnings High School (a pseudonym). New Beginnings High students have high rates of absenteeism. Longstanding, systemic barriers created by academic institutions' historical embodiment of culturally deficit thinking which negatively impacts Latinx students' school performance may contribute to this. For instance, parents are fined if their children are chronically absent from school. To impose fines on families is most unfair. There are valid reasons why students are not at school. For example, some students are working 20 or more hours per week out of necessity. Their work hours sometimes conflict with traditional school scheduling. In addition, students need to support themselves and their families, and often lack reliable transportation to and from school. Students can receive vouchers for public transportation, but many feel unsafe doing so while pregnant or with a baby in tow. Classroom curriculum must be especially engaging and worthwhile for these students to make the extraordinary effort of getting to school. Traditional curricula in such alternative high school settings often disregards the unique knowledge, skills, and cultural wisdom that students like these young Latinx mothers bring into the classroom (Myers, 2019). Students who graduate from high school are less likely to live in poverty, and may experience enhanced life outcomes, such as additional educational attainment such as college or career training. Students who feel connected to their classroom are more likely to personally engage in the learning process. Additionally, students' culture and life experiences must be viewed as assets in their classrooms. Teachers who utilize culturally relevant curriculum make learning engaging and meaningful for

students (Meyers, 2019). Parents of our Latinx students value education and believe in the importance of completing high school. However, pressing financial struggles and complex educational histories have created barriers to student achievement.

The Taking Charge Program (TCP) was created by Mary Beth Harris, Ph. D and Cynthia Franklin, Ph. D, both social workers with over 25 years of experience working with teen mothers. Harris and Franklin report that in three past studies with teen moms utilizing this program, there was a reduction in school absences by 50%, and an overall improvement of school achievement by these same teen moms (Harris & Franklin, 2008). It was my hope that this inquiry would result in improved engagement and school attendance at our school site.

Overview of the Literature Review

This section provides an overview of the foundational literature that informed this action research project which investigated the effectiveness of goal-oriented, problem-solving curriculum at a small, alternative high school for teen mothers. Students at this site had extremely high rates of absenteeism and curriculum did not appear to be especially engaging, which most likely exacerbated the truancy issue.

This literature review will first examine how teen mom students' self-efficacy could be encouraged through participation in a weekly life-skills program. I draw on Bandura's social cognitive learning theory (1977) and explore the utility of culturally relevant teaching practices (Gay, 2002).

Next, the review of literature will explore three factors which promote school success among teen mothers, with particular focus on Latinx adolescents residing in marginalized communities. I examine the following areas: *classroom engagement*, *sense of belonging in a school community*, and *student resiliency*.

The databases used for finding research articles were EBSCO, PsychInfo and ERIC. Key search terms included various combinations of the following: *student engagement, teen mothers, teen pregnancy, adolescent mothers, children of adolescent mothers, pregnant adolescents, Latina/Latinx students, student engagement, school engagement, school-based services, alternative high school, urban education, and culturally relevant teaching.*

Theoretical Rationale

Two theoretical concepts guide this Action Research Project. The first is that of Albert Bandura (2003), focusing on self-efficacy as it relates to his social learning theory. Gay's (2002) concept of culturally relevant teaching is the second theory embraced in this research as it is especially important to consider the perspectives and familial ties of students in this predominantly Latinx student population.

Albert Bandura's social learning theory. Bandura (1977), posits that people learn best from each other in *social* settings. According to Bandura, students will try to copy what they see from people they deem to have expertise, such as teachers or more competent peers (Bandura & Walters, 1963). The four mediational processes proposed by Bandura are as follows: *attention*: the extent to which we are exposed/notice the behavior; *retention*: how well the behavior is remembered; *reproduction*, which is the ability to perform the behavior learned by another person's demonstration; and lastly *motivation*: the will to perform the behavior. Students are more likely to imitate and engage in behavior for which they see a reward. The TCP embraces this theory wholeheartedly and strives to teach students how to solve problems in small group learning sessions where they will learn practical strategies through observation and imitation (Harris & Franklin, 2008). The curriculum also includes mini rewards as students complete weekly problem-solving activities and attend class regularly.

Bandura (1977) asserts that, “People derive much of their knowledge from direct experience of the effects produced by their efforts,” (p.180). Bandura’s (1997) research on self-efficacy also helps guide this literature review. A major goal of this action research project was to increased students’ problem-solving ability. As students learn to confidently solve their problems, they make tremendous gains in their self-efficacy.

Bandura describes four sources of efficacy expectations which elaborates on the reasons people are motivated either positively or negatively to achieve success as they face challenges. These four sources are: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. The idea that believing one can achieve what one sets out to do results in a healthier, more effective, and generally more successful life. This process is assisted with the help of competent others such as teachers, parents, or peers (Bandura, 1977, pp. 79-81). As the young women in this inquiry become proficient in problem-solving in a difficult social setting, they are more likely to become self-reliant, reducing their odds for remaining victims navigating a public assistance system that by design, makes such positive outcomes less likely.

Wheatley’s (2013) research on resiliency builds on Bandura’s work on self-efficacy as she discusses how children and young people can utilize strength-based programs to enhance and develop resiliency as they face everyday difficulties and major life stressors. According to Wheatley, girls master self-efficacy via vicarious learning role models and that their most powerful influences are same age peers, television, and the internet. Her research maintains that low self-efficacy results in people who doubt their sense of self -worth and have very little faith in their capability to successfully face life’s challenges. She asserts that young women with low self-efficacy will benefit greatly from peers and adults who maintain positive talk and encouragement. Students with higher self-efficacy are better equipped to problem-solve and view

life's problems as challenges for which they will be able to surmount with hard work and tenacity, rather than seeing problems as insurmountable. Wheatley contends that students who learn to persevere have had positive, encouraging, people in their lives who have modeled a *can-do attitude* which validates one's confidence and self-efficacy.

Geneva Gay's culturally responsive teaching. The second theory embraced in this project is culturally responsive teaching (CRT), which Gay (2001) describes as, "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively," (p. 114). Gay's work in CRT maintains that students will achieve more academic success when they learn through their own personal and cultural experiences. Traditional schooling in the United States has emphasized a Euro-centric model, which often alienates students of color because coursework and subject matter is not personally relevant to them.

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) emphasizes the need for teachers to prepare classroom environments that are both inviting and inclusive for the students being served. Such classrooms must have teachers who have been trained in practices which engage students of varied cultural backgrounds. Students' cultures must be represented in all aspects of classroom life and in all aspects of curriculum planning. Evidence of CRT is seen in classroom libraries which include works of authors who represent an affinity with students. For example, a classroom with predominantly Latinx students should include works by Latinx authors. Bulletin boards, which Gay describes as, "prime real estate" should be adorned with images, quotes, pictures and artifacts which students find relatable and interesting. Although what a classroom looks like is very important, it is essential to also consider the student community in the classroom. Hammond (2015) states this quite succinctly in her work on CRT and the brain

insisting that, “...a culturally responsive classroom environment goes beyond decorating the walls with cultural artifacts that highlight the rich history of African Americans, Latinos, or other ethnic groups. It also offers an emotionally stable and responsive environment” (p. 143). The teacher who embraces culturally relevant teaching practices understands that culture matters in all components of classroom life. This teacher tailors learning to every aspect of students’ cultures. Culturally competent leadership and culturally relevant teaching methods are essential to the success and effectiveness of the Taking Charge group curriculum which was designed to serve culturally diverse teen mother students.

Embracing students’ cultures is at the forefront of TCP instruction when the curriculum is facilitated by group leaders who embrace culturally competent leadership, (Harris and Franklin, 2008). Social and cultural factors should not determine students’ success in school, but the reality is that such factors often have a negative impact on students’ learning experiences. CRT is designed to serve the students least supported by the system. The TCP provides opportunities for students to see their identities, cultures, and histories reflected in problem-solving curriculum. Teachers who are able to embrace culturally responsive pedagogies will likely have a significant impact on students’ comfort level in the classroom, potentially resulting in greater academic gains for such students. Students who experience self-efficacy in classrooms where learning environments honor their culture, are more likely to have successful outcomes in school, career, and life.

Review of Related Research

The review of related research is arranged into two sections. The first section includes scholarly works investigating challenges to school engagement for adolescent mothers. While there is a plethora of reasons these young mothers are disengaged in school, this literature review

will focus on the following three challenges to school engagement: depression, fatigue, and poverty. The second section of this literature review will focus on successful, research-based, strategies to promote student engagement: quality programs for teen mothers; caring, relationship-building instruction; and culturally responsive teaching practices.

Challenges to school engagement for adolescent mothers. This section will describe some reasons why teen mothers are not engaged in school. There are valid reasons why students are often absent from school including their tendency toward depression and the exhaustion that accompanies the postpartum period. Several of these mothers are living in poverty and are working many hours to provide for themselves, their babies, and their families. Although, they value school and desire to complete their studies, the financial strain is another very real challenge which prohibits some teen mothers from attending school regularly.

Depression. Research regarding post-partum adolescent mothers and depression strongly suggested that unlike typical teenagers, adolescent mothers experience additional social challenges that may contribute to postpartum functioning. Birkeland, Thompson, and Phares (2005) determined that,

lack of social support may exacerbate other problems typically encountered by adolescent mothers such as role conflict and restriction, attenuated educational achievement, underemployment, school changes, unstable relationships with the child's father, difficulties due to dependence on their families, and physical health problems for themselves and their babies (p. 292).

The aforementioned research study utilized a risk and resilience framework. This research included 149 adolescent mothers, ages 15 to 19, all who participated in school-based teen parents' programs. These mothers then completed surveys about measures of their stress levels in regard to being young parents. Such stressors included: maternal competence, weight/shape concerns, and depression. The participant sample was quite diverse, and no ethnic

differences in base rate levels of the variables were detected. Multiple factors were assessed including: social isolation, maternal competence, and new mothers' weight/shape.

Lara et al, 2017, researched perceptions of maternal self-efficacy among teen mothers, many of whom were found to be depressed because they lacked confidence with regard to their ability to care for their babies. Their study used a maternal efficacy questionnaire which was administered to 120 teenage mothers under age 20, during their first six months postpartum. The results determined that social support had a significant effect on their confidence to effectively parent their babies, and a lack of such confidence very often resulted in a higher rate of depression among teen mothers than that of more mature parents.

Fatigue. Teenagers are often tired, and because of this many high schools have elected to have later school start times. The hope is that such later start times will result in students who are well-rested and will then attend be better able to attend to their schoolwork. High school students often experience less sleep than adults due to homework and extracurricular activities. Baum et al. (2014) conducted a study with 50 healthy adolescents, ages 14-17. These adolescents completed a 3-week sleep manipulation protocol involving a baseline week where it was found, “that after only a few days of shortened sleep, at a level of severity that is experienced regularly by millions of adolescents on school nights, adolescents have worsened mood and decreased ability to regulate negative emotions, ” (p.180). When a teenager is also a parent, extreme fatigue can make coming to school very difficult. Teenage parents are quite exhausted as they are balancing the demands of motherhood in addition to attending school.

Wilson et al. (2019) validate the commonly held notion that post-partum period is a time of great fatigue for the new mother. The researchers performed a “systematic literature search to retrieve published studies that included measures of both fatigue and depression in postpartum

parents,” (p. 224). Their findings from 34 papers depicted a solid connection between postpartum fatigue and depressive symptoms among all new parents, with a focus on mothers in particular. This study affirms that the postpartum period is a challenging time for new parents, mothers and fathers alike. Teen mothers are likely to experience these symptoms while attending school, which makes them at greater risk for discontinuing their studies and dropping out of school.

Poverty. Harding’s (2003) research focused on identifying a causal effect proving that neighborhood context affects two critical adolescent outcomes: high school dropout and teenage pregnancy. According to Harding:

..when two groups of children who are identical at age 10 on observed variables (including but not limited to family income, parents’ education, welfare receipt, and family structure) experience different neighborhood contexts during adolescence, those who grow up in high-poverty neighborhoods are more likely to drop out of high school and have a teenage pregnancy than those who grow up in low-poverty neighborhoods (2003, p. 712).

Poverty is an unrelenting problem with aftermaths that can extend over one’s lifetime. Poverty may be passed on across generations. Folks who are not currently destitute are often living on the verge of poverty, causing much stress and anxiety. Upward mobility is easier to achieve when discrimination and inequality are low, when the educational system is of better quality, and when those who begin school are young people who are supported to obtain an education. College educated parents are more likely to encourage their children to prioritize education. Higher incomes often coincide with a higher *cultural capital* which include knowledge, skills, and education. These factors are just some reasons which contribute to broadening gaps in one’s earnings and community assets. Poverty is a complex issue to which there is not a simple solution. Some groups of Americans are at a significantly higher risk of living in poverty. There are differences along gender, age, racial, and geographical lines. (Howard, 2010; Gay, 2002).

Smith & Strohschein (2018) explored research on childhood experiences contributing to adolescent pregnancy in both the United States and Canada. The risk of teen pregnancy was, “higher among both U.S. and Canadian adolescents from more unstable and economically insecure families implying that policies and interventions to reduce teen pregnancy must address childhood socioeconomic disadvantage,” (p. 1244). Researchers used longitudinal data from the U.S. National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, The Young Adult Survey, and the Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth to connect childhood histories to teenage pregnancy. Data was collected between 1994-2012 with participants between the 13-19 years of age.

The study asserts that the, “cumulative experiences of disadvantage and instability contribute to risk for teen pregnancy,” (Smith & Strohschein, 2018, p. 1258) and confirms that teenage girls from under-resourced communities are much more likely to become pregnant than those whose families come from greater means. This was true in the both the United States and Canada, and one could presume this might be the case in other countries, with economic scarcity as the common ground of occurrence.

Depression, poverty and fatigue are just three challenges this research has investigated to prove that there are many circumstances which makes it difficult for adolescent mothers to remain engaged in school. These constraints can also make it difficult for teen mothers to attend school with regularity. When teen mothers are feeling depressed, fatigued, and are living in poverty, it is especially important that schools are places where they find refuge, resources, and extra encouragement. The teachers serving such students must teach with compassion and care earnestly for the teen mothers they serve. Relationship building is key. The accumulated effects

of such schools and teachers will more likely result in better outcomes for these teen mothers and their children (Chablani & Spinney, (2011).

Strategies to promote engagement. This second section focuses on three areas which promote school engagement for teen mothers. The first area of discussion features quality programs and teaching methods which positively engage and impact teen mothers and their children. The second portion focuses on the importance of caring relationships between teachers and students which often have long-lasting effects on teen mothers. Lastly, the importance of culturally relevant teaching practices will be examined. Such practices especially solicit interest and engagement from teen mother students, many of whom are students of color. These students are more fully invested in the learning process when their teachers craft curricula and learning environments which are centered on their cultural histories, expressions, and knowledge.

Quality programs for teen mothers. There are currently a number of programs and organizations that are designed to help teen moms learn to adjust to the demands of parenting while trying to complete their studies. Levy and Weber (2010) investigated one such program—an arts-based activist research project called *M.O.M (Mirrors of Motherhood)*—which successfully engaged teen mothers. Students took photos, drew, and produced collage work to help empower them through the challenges of early motherhood which helped them express their pain, stress, and joys of parenting. This program could be an elective in high school or be used as a wonderful classroom extension to a language arts project which would engage students in a personally relevant learning activity. Another program called The Circle of Care (COC) program included a,

...relentless outreach, transformational relationships, and stage-based programming. Through the implementation of these strategies, 81 very high-risk young mothers were identified and served in the Circle of Care Project. The participant retention rate was 90%. Implications suggest that very high-risk young parents can be good candidates for

programming to improve their lives and the lives of their children, as long as that programming is developmentally appropriate and incorporates a strong relationship-building component, (Chablani & Spinney, 2011, p.369).

There is a great deal of research which proves that support programs for teenage mothers and their children are very effective. The benefits of such programs include reduced occurrence of unplanned pregnancies, better school engagement and subsequently higher graduation rates

Additionally, when there is quality childcare available, the children of teen moms thrive, along with their young mothers. For under-resourced teen mothers, such support programs appear to offer promising opportunities to help young mothers with parenting, while their children are cared for in a close and safe environment (Murphy & Franco, 2006). High schools catering to parenting teens which include daycare are of great benefit to babies and mothers alike. Teen moms have much at stake and parent support programs offer opportunities to help these mothers with parenting.

Sadler et al., (2007) conducted a study with a volunteer sample of 65 adolescent mothers. These mothers were enrolled in a parent support program in an urban high school which provided both parent education classes and childcare. Students were interviewed, surveyed, and assessed for, “self-esteem and depressive symptoms, social stressors and support, self-perceived parental competence, parent-child teaching interactions, and subsequent childbearing and maternal educational outcomes. Child outcomes included child developmental assessments and health outcomes,” (p.121). Fifty-three of these mothers had children enrolled in the school-based childcare center, and 12 mothers had their children cared for by family members. The teen moms whose babies were being cared for outside of the school daycare setting, had occasional childcare issues. Teen moms whose babies were cared for by family members, while often loving and nurturing, were not consistently available to babysit. The study concludes showing

promising patterns for those who remained enrolled and engaged in school. Only 6% of participants had repeat unplanned births which certainly highlights the effectiveness of the program and reaffirms the need for additional support programs. Additional programming to support parenting teens and their children such as childcare, parent education, and counseling, are necessary, effective and worthwhile (Sadler et al., 2007).

Griswold et al. 2013 study of The Prenatal Care at School (PAS) program serving 28 pregnant teens ages 14-19 years of age in the Rochester City School district shows promise. With the exception of one Caucasian student, all others were either African American or Hispanic. Pre and post program surveys showed gains in the following areas: increased attendance of 14.2%, and a 42% increase in pregnancy and childbirth knowledge. Rather than have students miss school for prenatal appointments, such care is done at the school site. A number of social support agencies work in tandem with local health care providers and school personnel to offer some medical care at school. The prenatal care offered in this program was especially designed for expecting teens. PAS helped prepare teen mothers for labor and delivery and 92% of teens surveyed felt encouraged to stay in school.

Harris and Franklin (2008), founded the Taking Charge Program (TCP), a problem-solving, six to eight week-long, curriculum designed for pregnant and parenting teens. This intervention teaches problem-solving strategies designed to help adolescent mothers learn how to solve various issues they may encounter in their lives. The research analyzed three clinical studies with 139 pregnant and parenting teen mothers attending three regular high schools, three alternative schools, and one dropout recovery program. Students systematically practiced problem-solving activities in group format with their peers. Over the course of the program, students' self-efficacy was promoted as they became more comfortable addressing problems

related to their personal relationships, parenting, education, and future careers. The outcome of this study was very promising and resulted in absences being reduced by half and an overall improvement in school performance. Nonparticipants had higher rates of absenteeism and their school performance remained static or worsened over the course of the study.

The benefits of the aforementioned programs serving teen mothers in a variety of ways have all proved to engage students and reduce absenteeism. The next section will focus on the positive impact of teachers who use caring, relationship-building instruction, which engages students on many levels. Such teachers empower their students both personally and academically.

Caring and relationship-building instruction. Students' whose teachers are more caring, and encouraging, are more likely to feel motivated in school, which may affect them positively as they continue their life's journey. The importance of such teacher support is highlighted in Kalil and Zio-Guest's (2008) study of racially marginalized adolescent mothers. When students know their teachers care about their well-being the effect can be very powerful as stated in Kalil and Zio-Guest's work where they studied how students benefit both academically and emotionally when they feel *genuinely* supported by their teachers. Such teacher support correlated with students' feeling better about school. As teachers focused on helping and encouraging students in their *process of learning* academic material, rather than focusing solely on *students' performance*, the students in this study felt better about themselves. Students in the study were treated fairly and felt accepted and valued by their teachers. Students often experience the best emotional support of their lives from teachers. Kalil and Zio-Guest (2008) describe this quite succinctly stating that:

...if we are to ensure the optimal academic outcomes for teenage mothers who may be at high risk of future poverty and unemployment, understanding the role of the school

environment is vital to creating effective, equitable, and motivating academic experiences, (p. 524).

It is evident that the manner in which teachers interact with their students is critical to such students' feelings of self-worth. When students believe their teachers care about them, these students will feel better about themselves and will gain confidence in their academic and personal abilities. Teachers are in a special position to change lives when they interact with their students in a caring, loving, manner. As such, the positive, long-term effects can be quite powerful. In the case of teen moms, compassionate teachers, may very well promote better outcomes for not only teen moms, but their babies as well.

The alternative high school featured in a chapter by Artz and Nicholsons' work on reducing aggression in adolescent girls shows promise. Their study included 83 female students enrolled in one of two schools. The study included 64 students from a traditional high school and 19 from a high school for teen girls, some who were either pregnant or parenting. The findings concluded that teen mothers were more encouraged when they felt like their teachers truly cared about their well-being. This is summed up in one student's statement, "The teachers...genuinely care if I'm off for a day, someone will ask, 'Oh, you weren't here yesterday, what's wrong?'" (p.166). This work validated the importance of student teacher connectedness with students who felt more encouraged and less concerned about classroom competition. The researchers go on to say that, "marginalized students learn best in an interpersonal climate where they feel safe, supported and valued," (p. 170). This research confirms that caring, sensitive, teachers have a huge impact on the feelings of belonging for marginalized, pregnant, or parenting high school girls. Students were often very cautious about trusting *supposed* caring adults within an institution. Students could be misled into thinking adults cared for them. For example, one student explained how she had been coerced into being handcuffed by an assumed caring adult.

Students must be able to trust their teachers. Adults who utilize punitive measures are compounding students' stress. Much more is to be gained when teachers use positive, reaffirming, methods to help their students (Chesney-Lind & Jones, 2010).

Culturally responsive teaching. There are many ways to successfully engage teen mothers in the learning process. Teachers must willingly embrace culturally responsive teaching (CRT), methods, as it is well-researched that teachers who embrace such practices are more likely to connect and engage their students in the classroom.

Gay asserts that teachers must acquire a “knowledge base about ethnic and cultural diversity in education” through both personal and professional self-awareness. Teachers become caring and culturally competent in their teaching practices when they use, “the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspective of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002). Teachers who continually advance in their teaching by learning, reading, and participating in professional discourse related to CRT, will encourage their culturally diverse learners by both challenging and engaging them in the learning process. This is an evolving practice centered on caring for students for who they are, where they come from, and how they can utilize best teaching practices to engage these students. If students spend time in classrooms which genuinely reflect their history, culture, and customs, they are more likely to be invested and engaged in the learning process. Such students may be more willing to work through challenges as they learn, thus encouraging self-efficacy which could potentially lead them closer to completing high school.

Gonzalez' (2019) qualitative study assessed sense of belonging in the context of the cultural framework called ‘familismo’ to promote inclusive environments for Latinx college students' success. Narrative essays and vignettes written by undergraduate students which

focused on cultural values and traditions associated with *familismo* were examined. The study was a nine-year retrospective study at an urban, Midwestern college. The results showed that a sense of belonging and inclusion in working with Latinx students demonstrated the importance of making them feel comfortable and connected to their classrooms and schools. “The findings indicate that the cultural emphasis on families is an important compliment to belonging and inclusion research when working with Latina/o students, (p. 937)”. This notion is mentioned throughout the chapters in this Action Research project as it is well understood that students greatly benefit from teaching methods which are culturally relevant. This generates affinity and belonging in the classroom and as such, students are more likely to gain self-efficacy.

Garcia and Chun (2016) studied the effect of CRT and teacher expectations. Participants included 110 predominantly Latinx middle schoolers. To help understand students’ perceptions of culturally responsive teaching practices, two subscales from the Student Measure of Culturally Responsive Teaching scale (SMCRT) were used. The findings concluded that it was essential for teachers to incorporate CRT teaching practices to assist students’ attainment of academic self-efficacy. Both culturally responsive teaching and teacher expectations lead to greater academic success among ethnic/racial minority adolescents.

The use of diverse teaching practice and high expectations likely contribute to students’ academic self-efficacy. It is of high importance that teachers help to instill in students the belief that they are capable of succeeding in school. These behaviors can possibly help decrease the academic achievement gap among students with diverse background. All school personnel should be involved in adjusting and changing the school system so that it serves the increasingly diverse population (Garcia & Chun, 2016, p.187).

The research of both Gonzalez (2019) and Garcia and Chun (2016) asserted the importance of teaching methods that bore in mind the cultural backgrounds of the students being served. The latter study added an additional component of higher teacher expectations. It seemed that students performed at higher levels when their teachers had increased hopes for them. It is

clear that CRT can most definitely contribute to more positive outcomes for Latinx students when teachers are both trained and willing to learn and adjust teaching methods to best meet their needs.

Summary

This action research project considered the effect of support programs and teacher involvement in helping marginalized teen mothers achieve self-efficacy and improve school engagement. Bandura (1994) and Gay (2001) set a strong theoretical foundation for the study. According to Bandura, self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to influence events that effect one's life and control over the way these events are experienced. Gay's (2002) research in culturally responsive teaching maintains that academic success is more likely attained when students learn through their own personally relevant, cultural experiences.

The literature review examined both challenges to school engagement and strategies to promote better student engagement at school. Barriers to school engagement for students include depression, extreme fatigue, and the challenges of living in poverty. Students deal with these challenges all while trying to manage postpartum life as new mothers. The literature review explored research to promote student engagement via quality programs for teen mothers such as an un-named support program for teen moms at an urban high school (Sadler et al., 2007), the PAS program (Griswold et al. 2013), and the *Taking Charge Program* (Harrison & Franklin, 2008) curriculum.

Caring, relationship-building instruction is the hallmark of any program which successfully encourages teen mothers at school (Chesny-Lind, 2010; Kalil, 2008). Culturally relevant teaching practices have proven to be effective in engaging students as they become comfortable at school in classrooms that reflect their cultures (Gay, 2008; Gonzalez, 2019).

The Taking Charge Program curriculum will be highlighted further in Chapter three as students at New Beginnings High School participated in this same program and the results of its effectiveness and details of its incorporation into the Parent Education program at the school will be reported in greater detail.

Chapter III

Method

There are many factors which significantly affect the lives of teen mothers and their families, including government structures, economic structures, and cultural structures. This is especially true in the Latinx culture in California where the number of Latinx people continues to rise. Such families persevere to improve their stations in life as children and parents work to support the family and maintain the household. Education is a means by which such groups may gain financial independence and security. School and district policies often prohibit and discourage educational success for these marginalized people as truancy policies do little to support students and their families who often must prioritize work before school attendance and parent meetings. (Public Policy Institute of California, 2017) (Anat, G. 2009). These culturally insensitive policies undermine the success of teenage mothers resulting in their dropping out and not finishing high school. (Alliance for Education, 2013).

The literature reviewed for this study focused on the importance of teen mothers and their acquisition of self-efficacy (SE), (Bandura, 1993) which can be greatly encouraged through culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002). The purpose of this Action Research Project (ARP) was to implement the Taking Charge Program (Harris & Franklin, 2008) and examine its effect on school engagement among teen mom students enrolled in a parent education class at New Beginnings High School. The Taking Charge Program (TCP) is a problem-solving program developed to help teen mothers gain confidence as they learn and practice specific steps to solve problems in their lives.

New Beginnings High School is situated in a large, multi-ethnic suburban city, within a large school district. Some students come from outside of the school district limits as such

programs designed for pregnant and parenting teens do not exist in surrounding areas. As a teacher at the site for over five years, I was acutely aware that students needed to develop skills to overcome challenges in their lives. Much of the curriculum used in the classrooms at New Beginnings was not preparing the girls to address real issues in their lives. Since students were not invested in their studies and did not find subject matter personally relevant this undoubtedly contributed to high rates of absenteeism.

The purpose of this Action Research Project (ARP) was to genuinely engage teen mom students more deeply by having them apply specific goal-oriented, problem-solving strategies that they could apply to their lives in the here and now. The hope was that teen mom students would increase self-efficacy as they acquired strategies to assist them in successfully dealing with challenges in their daily lives. I wanted to increase student engagement, and the Taking Charge Program claimed to engage students as they learned strategies through various problem-solving activities. The program challenged students to actively participate and practice their problem-solving skills. Teacher lecture was coupled with learning activities. As the weeks progressed students were urged to discuss their challenges with one another. Many of the teen mothers at New Beginnings liked to chat and socialize, and it seemed reasonable that they would be open to engaging with one another when discussing challenges which were personally relevant to them.

Hence, the question that guided this inquiry was: *What effect will participation in the Taking Charge Program have on teen mothers' school engagement and self-efficacy at an alternative high school?* This chapter describes the setting of the research project, the student participants, the data collection strategies used to determine students' engagement, and the blueprint for data analysis.

Setting

The setting of this action research project was New Beginnings, an alternative school in Northern California, which serves pregnant and parenting teen girls and young adults, ages 13-23. New Beginnings High School is a small alternative, high school that serves pregnant and parenting teens and their children. The school provides alternative academic programming aimed at high school graduation and beyond. On-campus childcare, up to the age of 3, is available so students are able to attend core and elective academic classes. Babies and toddler are simultaneously educated and nurtured in a developmentally appropriate and child-centered Head Start program created to encourage their emotional, physical, and intellectual growth.

The school served students from 9-12 grade with classes being comprised of multi-grades and ages. The number of students at any given time fluctuated due to attendance issues and students out on maternity leave. The school is under-enrolled at 40% of capacity. Students are frequently absent and/or tardy.

New Beginnings is a Title 1 School site which serves a predominantly Latinx population. According, to CAASPP testing, 2019, (California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress), 100% of the students scored below the proficient/standard met marker in both ELA (English Language Arts) and Math. Language fluency at the school was comprised of 64% EL (English Learners), 16% RFEP (Reclassified English Proficient), 16% EO (English Only), 4% IFEP (Initially Fluent English Proficient). Over 80% of the students were eligible for free or reduced lunch. Most students were classified as socio-economically disadvantaged, with a small number of foster and homeless youth included in this demographic. Twenty percent of students qualify for special education services.

The school personnel consisted of an administrator and less than five teachers; all of whom are Caucasian, with one teacher being of partial Japanese descent. There was one, white, male, special education teacher on site for one day per school week. The paraeducators, included native Spanish speakers from Mexico, and a Caucasian educator who has been studying Spanish at a local community college. I am a white identified woman, and while I am not fluent in Spanish, I do speak Spanish to the best of my ability throughout my school day. I refer to students as my *Spanish teachers* and often solicit the assistance of bilingual students to help me translate as needed.

The racial identities of the teaching staff differed dramatically from the student's being served. Addressing this issue is a very challenging task. Students from diverse backgrounds require teachers who take responsibility for, and are capable of, bringing about educational change. Such teachers must be genuinely interested in their students and their students' lives outside of school to bridge the gap between home and school, thus engaging students in the learning process. It is important to note that teachers who serve populations that differ from them must be open to professional development opportunities and collegial collaboration. This enables teacher to learn best practices for meeting needs of culturally diverse students and families. (Villegas, A.M. & Lucas, T. (2002).

The school was situated in a large mixed city/suburb, in a larger school district serving roughly 25 students from many different cultures. The classes at New Beginnings were all multi-age, and multi-graded. While the school was predominantly Latinx, students came from Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador. A very small percentage of the student body was Caucasian, African American, Filipino or of mixed race. The demographics of the school did not match the larger community surrounding the school which while, ethnically diverse, was predominantly

Caucasian. However, the ethnically diverse, district-at-large, was predominantly Latinx. By contrast, the city's racial breakdown was roughly 50% Caucasian and 31% Hispanic, so the school demographic did not match the city's inhabitants. The high school was located in what could be described as an *urban suburban mix*, where there were restaurants, coffee shops, and parks nearby, as well as ample public transportation by both bus and rail.

Demographics of the Classroom

Participants were selected because they were enrolled in my second period Parent Education class which served the entire student body of teenage mothers, during the 2019-2020 academic school year. It was not uncommon to have more than half of the student body missing on any given day. Students were frequently absent due to medical appointment for themselves and their children. Three students left the study due to the birth of their babies. There was a handful of students whose attendance could be classified as frequent non-attenders, some while technically enrolled, attended school very rarely, if at all. High rates of absenteeism, and frequent tardiness demonstrated a need to improve engagement at the school. Therefore, all students enrolled at New Beginnings High School were included in this study to encourage schoolwide engagement. At the time of this study there were less than 30 students enrolled at our high school; one third of whom were classified as *frequent non-attenders*, attending school less than once per month. The majority of students were between the ages of 17 and 18 years old, with less than 6% of students under 16 or over 19 year of age. Students in this study were all pregnant or parenting teens. Almost all students were Spanish speaking, most of whom were born in Mexico. There was a very small population of students from El Salvador and Guatemala, and three students who spoke English only and were-of mixed Caucasian-Asian, Caucasian-Hispanic race. Students were dependent on public transportation, or those who walked to school were greatly

affected by weather. Very cold and or rainy weather historically had a negative impact on school attendance.

Data Collection Strategies

In order to determine the effect participation in the Taking Charge Program (TCP) had on students' engagement with school, both qualitative and quantitative data were recorded and investigated. Quantitative data were collected using a Likert Type student engagement checklist which was completed by a site administrator who observed each TCP session. This engagement checklist was chosen as it allowed the site administrator to quickly and easily evaluate classroom engagement in a clear and consistent manner. Qualitative data were gathered as students completed post TCP session short answer surveys querying what they learned from the program and what they were looking forward to learning in the next session. The final data collection method was a teacher journal where I recorded my reflections and observations before, during, and after each TCP session, and subsequent days in Parent Education class which followed.

Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist (SEWC). A Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist (SEWC) was completed by the site administrator on the first day of the school week for the eight weeks during which this Action Research Project was conducted. The SEWC is a Likert scale format tool which measures student engagement, comprised of 10 queries rating from 5- Very High to 1- Very Low. The SEWC evaluated both observation of engagement (positive body language, consistent focus, verbal participation, student confidence, fun and excitement) and perceptions of engagement (individual attention, clarity of learning, meaningfulness of work, rigorous thinking, and performance orientation). There was a summary statement at the end of the SEWC, evaluating for an overall sense of engagement using the same Very High to Very Low rating scale. The site administrator utilized the SEWC to denote both

observations and perceptions regarding student engagement. (see Appendix A). This checklist was developed by the *International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE)* which is a component Houghton Mifflin Harcourt English Language Arts curriculum. I selected this particular tool as it was quite simple to use and would allow my site administrator to easily observe and record observations of student engagement. I wanted to get a third person, impartial take on students' engagement during this ARP. Responses were analyzed quantitatively, and data were evaluated to ascertain if any session or topic was particularly engaging for the students.

Students' short answer responses. On the second day of the program students were asked to answer five questions on an Action Plan Worksheet (see Appendix B) to get them thinking about what they wanted from their lives. As they began the journey to gain better control over their lives and learn problem-solving skills. Students completed a short answer Google form after each TCP session. Questions in the short answer reflections included: "*What aspects of the course were more useful or valuable?*" and "*What are you looking forward to doing in the next TCP Session on (session date)?*" Sessions four through seven focused on helping students achieve specific goals within four life domains. Students were asked to respond to specific questions about their goals. "*How do you feel about being able to complete your (education, personal relationship, parenting, or career) goal?*" On the eighth and final day of the TCP, all students in attendance met in a small group and responded to the following statement, "*What I learned about Myself...Strengths and Weaknesses.*" One student volunteered to write and record students' responses and shared these out loud with session leaders at the end of class. (see Appendix H). Students were also required to reflect on the program via Google form describing what effect the TCP had on their ability to address various challenges that arose

during the study. I followed up with some students individually, either in person at school, by phone or text and recorded these exchanges in my teacher journal.

Teacher journal. Additional qualitative data were gathered in my teacher journal entries which contained detailed field notes that were recorded throughout my school week. Findings and observations were recorded most days before and after TCP Sessions 1-8, and intermittently throughout the week as I followed up with students each day in Parent Education class. My journal writing occurred throughout the day, when time permitted, ideally, right after a TCP session, but this was not always possible due to the various demands of the daily teaching schedule. Whenever, I could steal a moment in my school day, I would write an observation, or take a moment to reflect on the TCP and my perception of its effect on students' engagement. Additionally, I brought my journal home and wrote reflectively about my day and any significant interactions I had with my students or observations I noted.

I followed up with students who were absent on TCP days and jotted their reasons for being absent in my journal. In the days and weeks following the final class, I met with several students 1:1, via telephone, text, or in person to get input about whether or not they felt better equipped to address life's challenges. I recorded notes from these conversations in my teacher journal. I also asked some students to expand on statements they had made during the last session with regard to their strengths and weakness.

Procedures

One week prior to beginning the Taking Charge Program, parental information letters were mailed to the homes of all students as the entire school was participating in this research project. Letters were written in both English and Spanish. My Action Research Project (ARP) commenced in early December at the end of the fourth term of the school year and was

completed at the beginning of the fifth term in early February. There was a two-week break between class session three and four. I implemented the TCP once a week for eight weeks during my first period Parent Education class. The ARP occurred on the first day of each school week which was usually a Monday. Two sessions occurred on a Tuesday due to Monday holidays.

My second period Parent Education class is only 40 minutes long, and I knew I would need more time than that as I prepared to conduct my research. Therefore, I requested that my colleagues allow my class to run a bit longer during the eight-week duration of my ARP. For the most part, colleagues were supportive, as this did cut into their instruction time, but since it was just one day per week, they were agreeable and supportive.

The Taking Charge Program strongly suggested having a co-leader. I was very fortunate to have a school counselor, Laura, in attendance at each session working as my co-leader in the study. Her experience as a school counselor was a wonderful asset as she was particularly skilled in helping students with their problem-solving work. Laura is very well-liked by both students and staff. Laura and I alternated reading from the provided *Leader 1* and *Leader 2* script in the TCP during each session. The script was very straight forward, and easy to follow. The eight sessions were categorized as: (1) Getting Started, (2) The Problem-Solving Process, (3) The Education Goal, (4) The Relationships Goal, (5) The Parenting Goal, (6) The Career Goal, (7) Catching Up, and finally, (8) Ending the Group.

In order to encourage attendance and engagement in the program I prepared breakfast for the girls for each TCP Session, usually crockpot steel cut oats with fruit and donut holes. I enjoyed doing something special for my students each week and hoped that this special breakfast was a way to start each week and program session on a positive note. I also hoped that this would

encourage student attendance and engagement. Students were promised an extra special breakfast for the final day of the program in February.

TCP was conducted in a large classroom which served as a break room and tended to be the social gathering room for students during break and lunch. The room regularly hosted school meetings and celebrations. It was the hub of the school campus, so to speak. Each TCP class was organized to take place in group session format, with time to break away into smaller groups to focus on problem-solving. Time allotted for each group session was about 55 minutes. The general design of each session was conducted in similar format as follows. During the first 5-10 minutes of each session, students chatted and interacted while eating the provided breakfast. The next 30 to 40 minutes was spent focused on problem-solving. At this time students filled out their Task Planning worksheets (see Appendix C). The final 5-10 minutes of class was spent responding to any concerns or questions that students had, plus a short summary of the session's activities. In the days following each TCP session, during the first five or ten minutes of my Parent Education class, I made a special point to follow up as needed on their TCP tasks and weekly goals. The following sections provides details about the stages of the TCP curriculum. The first phase of the TCP commences with students getting acquainted with one another. In the second phase students learn and practice problem solving skills. The final phase has students work to address their own challenges and personal problems.

Getting acquainted. The first session was called Getting Started and focused on getting students more comfortable with one another. The session commenced with a warm-up activity, using get acquainted Game Sentences Starters (see Appendix D), which were cut out and distributed among the students. Bilingual students helped peers with translation when needed. This was an upbeat and light-hearted activity, designed to get the program off to positive start.

This warm-up activity was developed by TCP creators (Harris & Franklin, 2008). During this first session students were informed that they would acquire points for participating in the program. They would receive 30 points for each TCP Session they attended, 10 points for each day they attended the remaining Parent Education for the week. In a typical week a student could receive 60 attendance points and an additional 20 points for completing their goal related tasks. Students were also informed that random prizes would be given out during the eight weeks of the program with special surprises distributed to those with the most points. The leaders also established guidelines and group expectations for each TCP session, *be on time to group, come to group every week, and don't talk about what goes on in the group to outsiders*. These three guidelines were written on chart paper and students all signed the bottom of the paper in agreement.

At the end of this session, and all subsequent sessions, students filled out short answer, open ended questions about the program in the Taking Charge Google Classroom. Questions included: *What are you most looking forward to in the next Taking Charge Program Session? What aspect of the course were most useful and valuable?* Students' responses allowed me to check levels of engagement and interest through the duration of the program.

Problem-solving practice. The second session of the TCP focused on the Problem-Solving process and students completed an Action Plan Handout to get them thinking about challenges in their lives (see Appendix B) The leaders presented ways for students to problem-solve with regard to choosing goals. Students were introduced to a process by which they could overcoming challenges, recognize their resources and strengths, and develop strategies they could use to accomplish their goals. (Harris and Franklin, 2008, p. 80)

During the third TCP session of this Action Research Project students practiced problem-solving. Students were asked to create a character who was a teenager who was five months pregnant. They were to then brainstorm possible challenges for this character. The students created a teen mom whom they named, “Maritza.” This fictitious teen was 17 years old, five months pregnant, and was having trouble with her boyfriend. Maritza’s biggest challenge was coming to school each day. Students determined that Maritza needed to plan her transportation no less than two days in advance and have a back-up plan should her ride become unavailable.

Taking charge! Students problem-solve for themselves. In Sessions four and continuing through session seven, students applied problem-solving strategies to *their own, personal, life challenges*. As the weeks progressed, students, worked through the problem-solving process to best address and overcome challenges that prevented them from reaching goals in the following areas: education, personal relationships, parenting, and career. Students practiced strategies to face challenges in their lives through a series of step-by-step, problem-solving processes. Students completed personal goal and Task Planning Worksheets (see Appendix C) and reported on task completion in the following week with leaders and the group. Session seven focused on getting caught up, as students looked over previous goals and tasks and discussed with each other what was and was not working. Leaders circulated the room checking in with students, answering questions and giving support and input as needed. The hope was that engagement would increase as students dealt with issues that were personally relevant and meaningful to them.

Plan for Data Analysis

Data sources were respectively collected and analyzed to answer the research question: *What effect will participation in the Taking Charge Program have on teen mothers' school engagement and self-efficacy at an alternative high school?* In order to determine the effect participation in the Taking Charge Program (TCP) had on students' engagement with school, both qualitative and quantitative data were recorded and investigated. Quantitative data were collected using a Likert Type student engagement checklist (see Appendix A) completed by a site administrator. Qualitative data were collected via student's short answer responses after each TCP Session and also via teacher journal where observations were recorded most days before and after TCP Sessions 1-8, and intermittently throughout the weeks following. These data served to provide a triangulation of data sources, which allowed for various viewpoints to consider when decoding the results. Triangulation can accurately reveal how participation in the TCP affected teen mothers' school engagement at an alternative high school.

Student engagement was measured quantitatively, using an Engagement Walkthrough Checklist (SEWC) (see Appendix A) which completed by the school administrator during each Taking Charge program session. The SEWC is a Likert scale format tool which measures student engagement, comprised of 10 queries rating from 5- Very High to 1- Very Low. There was a summary statement at the end of the SEWC, asking for an overall sense of engagement using the same Very High to Very Low rating scale. The scores on the responses pertaining to engagement for each category were calculated, converted into point scores, averaged, graphed, and analyzed to determine which TCP sessions showed increases or decreases.

Qualitative data analysis was used to evaluate students' post-TCP session short answer responses regarding what they had learned from the program and what they were looking forward to learning in the next session. Students responded online in the Taking Charge Google

Classroom after each session. The responses were coded and analyzed for themes and trends. I looked for evidence in students' responses that demonstrated engagement and interest in the program. As I examined student responses, I noted their confidence with respect to problem-solving, and whether or not their answers demonstrated interest and engagement in the program session and/or the problem-solving process. I also looked for statements from students which revealed self-efficacy as it related to the problem-solving process.

Summary

The intention of this action research project was to investigate the affect participation in *Taking Charge: A School-Based Life Skills Program for Adolescent Mothers*, would have on teen mothers' engagement in school at an alternative high school. New Beginnings students are frequently absent from, and often tardy for school. Many are disengaged. There is a palpable feeling of disconnect at the school site. Students often arrive at school asking, "Where is everyone?" as their peers are often absent from school. Students are often on their phones and appear "checked out" during class time. Clearly, they are not as engaged as they could be. These students have many life challenges and would benefit immensely from increased self-confidence and self-efficacy. Teachers, counselors and staff support are dismayed by high rates of absenteeism. There is a need to critically examine teaching methods, curriculum, and teacher-student interaction to determine better ways to serve and engross students.

The TCP took place over eight weeks, and participants learned problem-solving strategies which could potentially empower them to gain self-efficacy and confidence as they "took charge" of their lives. Students wrote down their goals and what they needed to do to achieve them. Participants learned that they could gain control over their lives by discussing their challenges with peers and school staff. Participants reached out to people in their lives for help

and learned about and explored resources which could assist them achieve their goals. I evaluated the students' engagement in school using the following measures: The Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist (SEWC) (see Appendix A), student's weekly short answer responses (see Appendix G), and teacher journal (see Appendix F),

This chapter introduced the setting of my action research, it's participants, the triangulation of data from instruments used to collect and determine both participant and observer reactions, the procedures used to implement the intervention and the methods used to collect and analyze data. The following chapter will discuss in detail the data which was gathered during the study and its analysis.

Chapter IV

Findings

Teenage mothers are often resolute in their desire to overcome barriers as they strive to complete high school while raising their children. These mothers, in an effort to better their lives and the lives of their children, prove to be powerfully persistent as they relentlessly endeavor to improve their stations in life. It is important to mention the young mothers who participated in this study were predominantly Latinx and are commonly viewed in a negative light. My depiction of these young mothers is quite the opposite. I see them as being deeply committed to their education in an effort to avoid their disproportionately high risk of dropping out of high school. Teen mothers often realize the importance of education, viewing it as a vehicle to assist them become more financially independent.

The intent of this action research project was to determine if participation in Taking Charge: A School-Based Life Skills Program for Adolescent Mothers (Harris and Franklin, 2008) would increase school engagement and self-efficacy among teen moms at New Beginnings High School. This inquiry was guided by the following question: *What effect will participation in the Taking Charge Program have on teen mothers' school engagement and self-efficacy at an alternative high school?* I have taught at New Beginnings High School for over five years and have noticed that while these young mothers are most definitely determined, hard-working, and inspired to do their best for their babies and babies-to-be, when it comes to school students appear dispirited. In part, I attribute students' sense of disengagement and high rates of absenteeism to lackluster curriculum that may be viewed as uninteresting or irrelevant. To compound the problem, curriculum tends to be delivered in a more traditional, teacher-directed fashion. Additionally, the geographical location of the school and students' lack of dependable

transportation magnifies the problem. To combat these issues, school must become a more engaging place where adolescent moms *want* to spend their time.

The literature reviewed indicates that students' school engagement has much to do with students' relationships with their teachers (Chablani & Spinney, 2008; Kalil & Ziol-Guest, 2008; Keyes, 2019; and Murphy, 2006). Furthermore, since many of the students served at our site are Latinx, it is especially important that teachers use culturally relevant teaching practices. Such teaching practices take into consideration the *cultural capital*, or stock of experience, behaviors, and assets of students reflected by the familial or cultural ties they bring with them into the classroom (Gay, 2002; Yosso, 2005).

In my review of the literature I examined the following areas which pertain to students' affirmative school experiences and potential positive life outcomes: *classroom engagement*, *sense of belonging in a school community*, and *students' resiliency*. According to researchers Wynter-Hoyte, Braden, Rodriguez, and Thornton (2019),

...in order to maximize student learning and engagement at school, teachers must utilize appropriate curriculum which focuses, on sustaining students' identities for contending with deficit perceptions of culturally and linguistically diverse students, thus promoting more equitable and meaningful learning contexts for them (p. 444).

Clearly, students at New Beginnings would benefit more should teachers become inspired to embrace the aforementioned teaching philosophy when planning and delivering curriculum.

Teachers who realize the importance of students' cultures and consent to making this the center of their pedagogy, will promote students' self-efficacy, confidence, and engagement in school. The Taking Charge Program creators, Harris and Franklin (2008), encourage culturally relevant group rituals, and push leaders to integrate the dominant cultures of student participants asserting that, "the way people get things done, including the way we deliver educational, social and mental health services, is affected by culture," (p. 147). It was my intention in conducting

this research to increase students' self-efficacy as problem-solvers as they learned to "take charge" of their lives. Alternative educational school sites such as New Beginnings often have a negative connotation and as such, countless alternative schools exist to accommodate those students who have not done well in a more traditional school setting. Outdated, perpetuated pedagogy has contributed to a subordinated student population, and a system that has failed to appreciate learners' promise and potential. I hoped to contribute to research which would result in more successful outcomes for teen mothers, and/or other alternative education students, by having them learn how to effectively address and work out their problems.

Overview of Methods and Data Collection.

Three methods of data collection were used over the eight-week study to ascertain student engagement. Data was investigated quantitatively by means of an *observation checklist*. Qualitative data analysis was used to analyze both *student short answer responses* (online Google documents in the Taking Charge Google classroom and written worksheet responses) and my *teacher journal*, which I completed daily after each gathering, and periodically throughout the week.

Each session of my research occurred during first period, on the first day of the school week, which was usually a Monday. Ten to fifteen minutes was allotted for related follow-up discussion, and written work during first period class each subsequent school day of that week. On some days there was not enough time for discussion at the end of class, but I had these same students in my 5th and 6th period classes and was able to elicit their responses then.

The first two weeks were more informal with Session 1 focused on creating space for students get to know one another. In Session 2, the Problem-Solving Process was explained, and students were given worksheets where they would later practice solving their own problems

during weeks 3 – 7 (see Appendices B, C, and E). Students applied problem-solving strategies in four respective life domains: education, personal relationships, parenting, and career. This intervention provided students an opportunity to practice problem-solving skills each week as they wrote down which particular problems they needed to address in their lives. Students discussed the steps they would take in their small groups, guided by a teacher and/or school psychologist who facilitated each session.

Demographics of the Participants

Participants for this action research project were drawn from my first period Parent Education class, which took place Monday through Thursday, during the third quarter of the winter, 2019-2020 school year. All New Beginnings students were enrolled in this class. Parents were mailed a parental information letter one week prior to the study.

The participant pool was comprised of less than 30 students and many of those enrolled attended school irregularly. Over 50% of these students were generally absent from school and were designated *frequent non-attenders*, attending school less than ten times per month. Almost all students were Spanish-speaking, most of whom were born in Mexico. See *Figure 1* below.

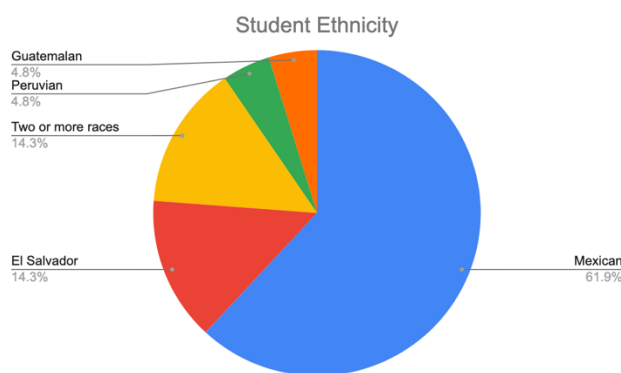


Figure 1: Student ethnicity (N=30)

There was a very small population of students from El Salvador and Guatemala, and a small group of English only speaking students who were of two or more races. Most participants

were between the ages of 17 and 18 years old, with less than 6% of students under 16, or over 19 years of age. See Figure 2 below.

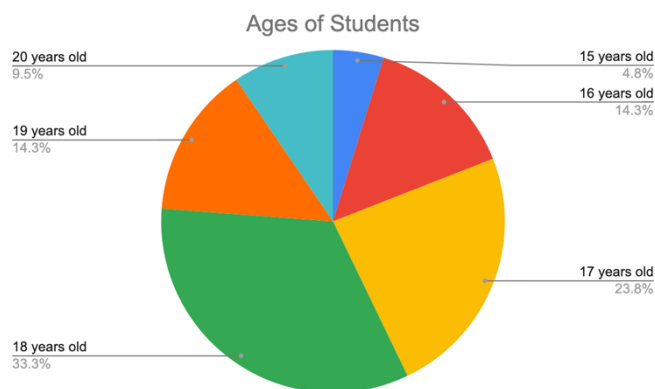


Figure 2: Ages of students ($N=30$).

Analysis of Student Engagement Observations

The Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist (SEWC) was completed by the site administrator during each session of the investigation. The administrator observed and assessed behavior using the SEWC tool. The *overall level of engagement* was rated on a scale of 1-5 as follows: 1= Very Low, 2 = Low, 3 = Medium, 4 = High, and 5 = Very High. The SEWC measured student engagement and was comprised of 10 queries divided into two sections: observations and perceptions of engagement. The first section measured observation of engagement looked specifically for these characteristics of student engagement: *positive body language, consistent focus, verbal participation, student confidence, and fun and excitement*. The second portion of the SEWC measured perceptions of student engagement including: *individual attention, clarity of learning, meaningfulness of work, rigorous thinking* and finally, *performance orientation*. There was a summary statement at the end of the SEWC, evaluating an overall sense of engagement using the same Very High to Very Low rating scale.

Analysis of the data collected from the SEWC (see Appendix A) denotes substantial engagement among TCP participants. The data collected showed an overall sense of medium engagement measuring of 3.3 out of 5. The first three weeks of the intervention, students' responses resulted in an overall score of 3.3 on the SEWC rating scale. It is important to note that in weeks 5 through 8 there was a 16% increased trend in observed overall engagement. During this period, overall engagement measured at 4, which was a high score. Note: there was no data collected during Week 2 as the observer inadvertently used a different scoring sheet so those results could not be adequately calculated.

After graphing the quantitative data from the first section of the SEWC, the characteristic of verbal participation as a measure of student engagement was more closely analyzed. Figure 3 below illustrates the level of student engagement observed based on their verbal participation.

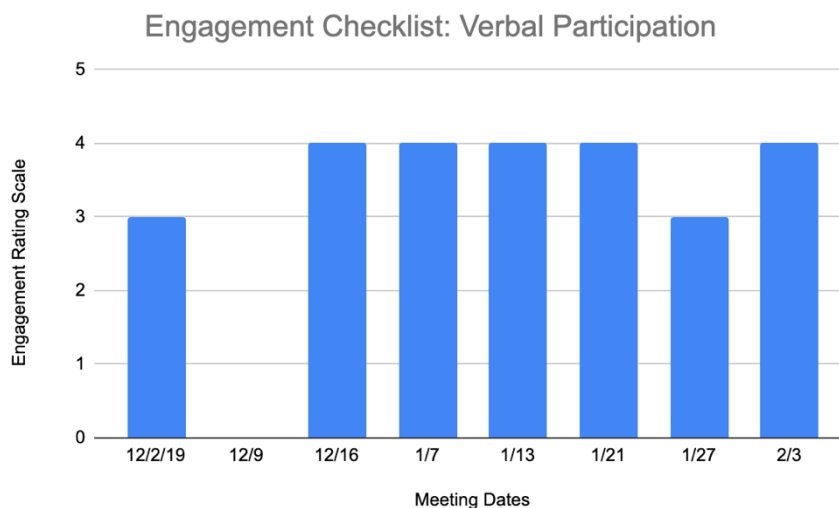


Figure 3: Engagement checklist: verbal participation

The average overall level of student engagement for all seven weeks evaluated in the study was 3.8 indicating high levels of engagement. In Figure 3 students' verbal participation is

highlighted, as medium (3) and high (4) scores indicated that students were feeling connected to the problem-solving process. The overall score for *verbal participation* was 3.7 out of 5, indicating a medium to high level of engagement and buy-in from the students. The session with lowest ratings of verbal participation were in session one when students were asked to answer “get to know you” questions (see Appendix D) which students seemed to find only mildly interesting. Session seven was a review and catch up session. This was a very teacher directed lesson with less opportunity for students to share their thoughts. Clearly, they liked working on personal issues in their own lives. We also discussed feelings about ending the study and students seemed a bit disheartened that the study was coming to an end. It is key to mention that engagement was never observed or perceived lower than three or medium. This indicates that the students were interested in addressing their life challenges and learning how to *take charge* of their lives.

After analyzing the quantitative data from the second portion of the SEWC, the data regarding student engagement stood out as being significant. Figure 4, below, reveals how *meaningful* students found the Taking Charge Program (TCP).

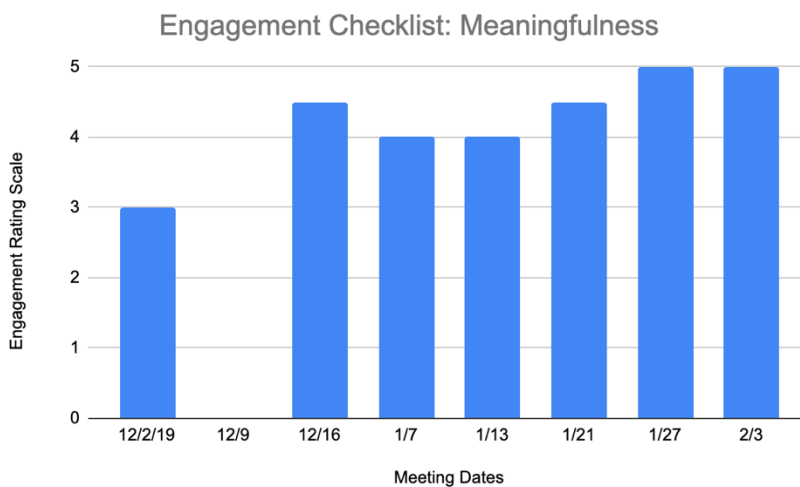


Figure 4: Engagement Checklist: Meaningfulness

The category of *meaningfulness of work* of the SEWC, measured how interested, challenged, and connected students felt toward their work. Here, scores were quite significant averaging 3.5 out of 5 during weeks 1-3, and 4.6 out of 5 in weeks 5 through 8. It is important to notice that in weeks 7 and 8 of this intervention the loftiest ratings occurred showing maximum scores of 5. This denotes a 21% increase as the study progressed. Furthermore, the observer put a smiley face and the comment, “Wow!” in the margin next to Meaningfulness of Work portion of the checklist during week 7.

The final category in the SEWC of note is the *clarity of learning* category. Each week this category was rated steadily at 3, medium. This category queried if students could describe the purpose of the lesson or unit. On the last day of the study, *clarity of learning* was appraised at 4, which affirms increased student interest and engagement.

Analysis of Student Short Answer Responses

At the conclusion of each session, students responded to questions about their learning. The entries were coded so that qualitative data could be utilized to further investigate the action research question, and multiple themes emerged. Three themes emerged from the analysis of student short answer responses including: *applied learning*, *weather/transportation*, and *food*. Detailed information on these themes can be found in Table 1. Thematic data were collected in two ways. First, by means of short answer responses in a Google classroom query and also through individual, handwritten responses to both the *Action Plan Response* worksheet (see Appendix B) and a small group discussion titled: *What I Learned about Myself: Strengths and Weaknesses* (see Appendix G).

Table 1.

Summary of Themes as Seen in Student Short Answer Responses

Themes	Student Quotes		
	<u>Example 1</u>	<u>Example 2</u>	<u>Example 3</u>
1. Applied Learning: Students demonstrate how they use information from TCP in their lives.	“It gives me an idea on how to deal with difficult problems.” Angelina-12/2/19	“I want to accomplish my diploma and career.” -Elena 12/9/19	“Helping us figure out how to take charge of challenges.” Paula-2/2/20
	“The barrier that stands between me and the thing I want to be different is thinking of my mom and stress.” Bella-1/13/20	“I want to be able to have a good relationship with my daughter/family. Also, I want to accomplish my diploma and career” Shannon-1/13/20	“I want to have more peace in my life and less hatred. I want to live a happy life with my family.” Sofia-1/27/20
2. Weather: How weather affects school attendance.	“I need to make plans if it seems like rain.” Shannon-12/9/19	“I don’t like to take BART with my baby when is rain.” Maya-2/3/20	“Sometimes it’s to cold for walk with baby.” Gabriella-1/13/20
3. Food: Provision of food increased school attendance and engagement among students.	“I am looking forward to eat breakfast.” Yani-12/16/19	“The good food makes me want to go to school” Lola-2/2/20	“I am looking forward to Teresa making chilaquiles for us for breakfast.” Elena-1/27/20

Notes: Many students do not speak English fluently as evidenced in some responses.

Students' *applied learning* was cited 12 times on both Google classroom short answer responses (see Appendix G) and on completed Task Planning Worksheets (see Appendix C). See Table 1 above for students' quotes showcasing their applied learning.

Weather and *transportation* were brought up a total of 8 times in student responses as cited in data extracted from Google classroom data in response to the following question: *What are two reasons you don't come to school?* Both inclement *weather* and lack of reliable transportation (Table 1) impeded students from attending school, thereby relegating student engagement at New Beginning High School. I mention these themes in tandem as they both weigh heavily as significant, compounding, factors contributing to high rates of student absenteeism.

Food was mentioned a total of 18 times in the TCP Google Classroom query: *What are you most looking forward to in the next Taking Charge program session?* This question was published as part of an exit ticket questionnaire conducted after TCP sessions, 1 thru 7. Each week, no less than three students mentioned food in their response, meaning 100% of the time, food was mentioned by at least one person, although some weeks it was mentioned more frequently.

Analysis of Teacher Journal

Data were evaluated qualitatively by means of a teacher journal where I recorded my thoughts and findings, after each TCP session. In addition to the weekly, post TCP session journals entries, there were 23 additional journal accounts related to teacher reflection and thoughtful musings with regard to student engagement. Journal entries included notable and unexpected happenings and ranged in length from a paragraph to two to three pages of written text. The entries were coded so that qualitative data could be utilized to further investigate the

action research question, and multiple themes emerged. Three themes echoed the themes which emerged from Student Short Answer Responses, and another more personal theme. The four significant themes were *applied learning*, *weather*, *food*, and *personal engagement*.

Applied Learning. My teacher journal also included observations about students' applied learning in real life. The theme of applied learning appeared a total of 21 times in my teacher journal. Students practiced using the problem-solving strategies they acquired during the third TCP session which focused on solving problems or challenges related to students' personal relationships. The following examples demonstrate how students applied their learning addressing such challenges:

Elena a student whose mother lived far away, but works close to our school, planned to meet her mom for dinner on Friday and intended to make bi-monthly, if not weekly plans to get together with her thereafter (December 9, 2019).

The father of Angelina's baby was very much disconnected from his daughter. During the TCP session focusing on Personal Relationships in week 3, Angelina reached out to her baby's this father which resulted in him seeing his daughter twice. Angelina reported that he planned to continue to see his daughter on a regular basis (December 16, 2019).

Student Ana made a lunch date with her somewhat estranged mother. Her goal for the week was to "connect more" with her mom. After making note of this in my journal I followed up with Ana and jotted down her thoughts and plans related to her weekly goal (January 7, 2020).

Lily seemed to be struggling as to whether or not to remain in a relationship with her baby's father and was weighing her options. She has since moved in with her parents. Her parents are very supportive of Lily continuing her education after high school. She

plans to go to a community college closer to her parents upon graduating as they can assist her with childcare, but only if she goes to school (February 3, 2020.

Weather. Students' lack of consistent transportation to school made attendance challenging throughout the duration of this intervention, thereby affecting a student's ability to engage in school. Adverse weather conditions further exacerbated this problem. Many moms in this study missed school on cold and rainy days as bringing a baby to school on mass transit, with a stroller and baby in tow was too cumbersome. This project took place during the winter months with days that were cold, dreary and/or rainy. Weather during the second and third sessions of this action research project were atypically sunny and warm for December. These dates boasted highest attendance with all regularly attending students present. Regularly attending students were defined as those whose attendance was greater than 80%, which comprised just under half of the total students enrolled at New Beginnings. These students drove by themselves or got a ride to school.

Food. Each day of the intervention I prepared a warm breakfast for students to encourage them to come to school—usually a crockpot of steel cut oats with various toppings. Students entered the classroom with smiles and positive dispositions when they walked into the room and often commented on the appetizing aroma that filled the room. Food gave students an extra incentive to come to school on TCP session days. Students kept encouraging me to bring chilaquiles which I *did* provide on the final day. In addition to a hot breakfast, I would always bring three-dozen donut holes. *Food* was mentioned time and again, with 13 recorded mentions in my teacher journal.

Personal Engagement. In my teacher journal, there were several statements which mentioned a newfound sense of personal engagement and commitment to my students. Upon

reviewing my teacher journal, I discovered eight statements depicting a solid sense of a newfound sense of *personal engagement* in my teaching. These journal entries began in November (pre-intervention) and continued through mid-April (post-intervention). I have included data regarding my personal engagement in the following section:

I am feeling anxious yet excited about starting my ARP (November 26, 2020).

I am feeling much more connected to my classes (December 16, 2019).

I am really working to connect with a disengaged, frequently absent student (January 14, 2020).

I texted, messaged, and posted to Facebook to encourage students to come to school (January 16, 2020).

My commitment for the remainder of the school year is to reach out to parents more and include them more. Finally reaching Melanie's (on maternity leave) guardian has been inspiring! I got the first photo of her new baby (February 11, 2020).

Had a long phone conversation with Espe as her excellent attendance pattern has shifted (February 14, 2020)

Spent my lunch break in my room and played Spanish lullabies for the girls and their kids (February 20, 2020).

Connecting/engaging has paid off during this quarantine. Networking with school nurse and Younglives (ministry group). Have had ongoing texts with half of our student body.

Principal reached out to me to get in touch with students who have been "missing in action" I successfully connected with them! (March 20, 2020).

Zoom class meetings four times per week seem to be keeping students engaged (March 28, 2020).

Learned via Zoom that Gabriella is need of clothes for both her and her daughter. She also needs highchair. I acquired items quickly and delivered them to her (April 16, 2020).

The focus of this action research project was student engagement, however the data in the preceding citations revealed an unexpected newfound theme of personal engagement for me as teacher!

Summary

The purpose of the action research project was to determine if participation in an eight-week intervention program, Taking Charge, would increase school engagement and attendance among teen moms at New Beginnings High School. This intervention provided students an opportunity to practice problem-solving skills each week as they wrote down which particular problems they needed to address in their lives. Students discussed the steps they would take in their small groups, guided by a teacher and/or school psychologist who facilitated each session. Data was collected both quantitatively and qualitatively. Analysis of the quantitative data gathered from the Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist (SEWC) showed scores of medium to high engagement throughout the study. The final two weeks of the study show significant gains in *Meaningfulness*. Through the course of the study the SEWC measured engagement in all categories from medium to very high. Not once was there a score, below 3, medium, in any category observed.

Analysis of the qualitative data gathered from both student responses and my teacher journal revealed three common themes: *applied learning*, *weather/transportation* and *food*. In addition to the three common themes in my teacher journal and students' written responses, a fourth common theme was discovered. This was a theme centered on my own *personal engagement*.

In the following chapter I will go into more detail, interpret the findings, and compare them to studies mentioned in my review of the literature. I will expand on the subject of attendance and will further explore the results of this action research project and the inquiry's effect on my future plans as a transformative teacher leader.

Chapter V

Conclusions

The Taking Charge Program (TCP) was chosen as the intervention strategy for my action research project because teen mothers at our school were frequently absent and did not appear particularly engaged in learning. The TCP seemed promising as the curriculum offered a way for teen mothers to create opportunities for themselves as they learned to navigate their challenges in life and become more self-sufficient and self-assured. Bandura (1997) coined the term, *self-efficacy*, which describes the state one achieves when one overcomes a challenge and is able to use learned behaviors to produce specific, desired outcomes. Simply stated, the TCP teaches teen moms to solve problems in their everyday lives. The focus of the program is to challenge students to critically analyze issues in their lives and work through specific problem-solving steps to address these issues. The program encourages culturally relevant teaching practices, which promotes inclusivity of students, thereby fostering classroom engagement (Gay, 2002). Culturally relevant teaching practices are more engaging and tend to cultivate self-efficacy—which makes way for personal growth, and promising future outcomes for such students.

Students at New Beginnings High School were often on their phones checking social media or texting. This occurred frequently during class time. Teachers were often *talking at students* using traditional, didactic, teaching methods. Students often appeared to find class time boring. In my classroom, students knew that they would lose attendance points when they were on their phone, and for the most part they complied with my classroom expectations. However, there was not a consistent rule at school, and each teacher enforced cell phone use individually. To compound the problem students were late to class, off task, and appeared disconnected from the learning process. This behavior challenged teachers to find engaging, inclusive curriculum

activities which students *wanted to do*. The Taking Charge Program seemed to fit the bill. I hoped that teen mothers would be interested in its program content, which embraced student-centered learning and exposed teen mothers to problem-solving processes with specific tasks to achieve their personal goals.

Each session focused on one problem students would like solved in their lives. For example, if a student had been tardy to school each day, she would decide what specific steps she would need to take to improve this problem. Perhaps she needed to get up earlier or take her shower before bed rather than in the morning? In the next session, the student would report her progress. Students were consistently rewarded for completing tasks on time and attending school. For many students the school itself represented security; a good, safe place for them to practice problem-solving skills, and learn to make decisions that put them on a positive life trajectory. As students developed such skills, they attained self-efficacy enabling them to *take charge* of their lives. This challenged me to answer the question: *What effect will participation in the Taking Charge Program have on teen mothers' school engagement and self-efficacy at an alternative high school?*

In Chapter IV, the findings were shared from the triangulation of data assembled throughout the duration of this action research project. The data regarding students' increased school engagement and self-efficacy among teen moms at New Beginnings High School was consistently positive. This suggested that students were becoming more engaged in school with a general sense of improved self-efficacy. Chapter V will analyze and interpret the data described in the previous chapter. This chapter is structured into five segments: summary of findings, interpretation of findings, limitations, summary, and my plan for future action. In section one, findings from three methods of data collected over eight weeks are summarized. The data were

collected to ascertain student engagement, including: an observation checklist, student short answer responses, and finally, my teacher journal. The next section offers an interpretation of my findings. The third section will describe limitations to this action research study, while the fourth section will summarize my action research project in its entirety. Lastly, in the fifth section, I discuss my plans for future action as the result of the completion of this current study.

Summary of Findings

I utilized a mixed-methods approach to accurately appraise the effects of the Taking Charge Program on school engagement among teenage mothers at an alternative high school. Three data collection strategies were used to examine student engagement. These instruments included a Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist (SEWC) (see Appendix A), student short-answer responses (see Appendix G), and teacher journal (see Appendix F). These measurements were used consistently each week. All students enrolled in New Beginnings High School were included in this study. To maintain anonymity, the exact number of participants is not provided. Although attendance was inconsistent from week to week, these tools portray consistent engagement trends among those students who attended each session.

Student short answer responses were recorded on an Action Plan worksheet (see Appendix B) during week 2, which asked students a series of questions pertaining to their goals in life, barriers to these goals, as well as the assets students had to overcome these barriers. This set the stage for the weekly intervention which had students write down specific problems they needed to overcome. Students would address challenges related to their personal relationships, education, career, and parenting. Students used Task Planning Worksheets (see Appendix C), distributed during weeks 4 through 7, to complete their weekly task. During the final session students worked in small groups in response to a culminating statement: What I

learned about myself: strengths and weakness (see Appendix F). Group results were recorded by a student acting as recording secretary.

Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist (SEWC). The SEWC showed consistent evidence of engagement throughout this action research study. Scores were observed and documented from medium to high. The higher scores appeared as the study progressed in many areas. The category of meaningfulness had the highest scores of all. The first week had a rating of 3 medium with each progressive week scoring higher and higher with the final two weeks a highest possible rating of 5.

These findings proved the TCP proved both meaningful and worthwhile for students. This was demonstrated in observations in the SEWC where students were shown on task, interested, and engaged in the problem-solving process. Although attendance fluctuated throughout the study, this did not affect student engagement. The results found in the SEWC demonstrate, as a whole, participants were extremely engaged in the activities they participated in throughout the study. This strongly suggests that the students participating in the Taking Charge Program were consistently and meaningfully engaged in problem-solving making the program very appealing and worthwhile.

Student short answer responses. Three themes emerged from an analysis of students' written responses: *applied learning*, *weather/transportation*, and *food*. Students demonstrated their *applied learning* repeatedly in their written responses in the Taking Charge Google classroom, on written worksheet responses, and in their small group discussion. Various student statements showed this applied learning and suggests that students were gaining confidence as they were overcoming obstacles.

For instance, *weather* and *transportation* were a very common theme in student responses. Students often reported about their struggles getting to school due to transportation issues. On days that were very cold or raining the weather compounded their transportation issues exponentially as one recalls Maya saying, “It’s just too much!” *Food* was also mentioned very frequently by students. It was clear they liked the special Taking Charge breakfast. It made for a fun way to start the week, and also let me mother and care for my students by doing something special for them. On the last day of the TCP study one student wrote in a comment thread in the TCP Google classroom, “Will you ever bring us breakfast again?” This demonstrates that breakfast was both an important and nurturing component of the program.

Teacher Journal. The teacher journal, where I recorded my reflections and observations before, during, and after each TCP session, proved to be quite significant as, once again, the themes of *applied learning*, *weather and transportation*, and *food* were present. However, in my journal I reflected on my own applied learning as a TCP leader. I allowed myself the needed time to ponder and reflect about my feelings and discoveries before, during, and after my research took place. It was here that I discovered an unexpected fourth theme; a newfound *personal engagement*, which connected me to my students like never before! I will expand more deeply in the section that follows under the title Personal Engagement as Teacher.

Interpretation of Findings

A culminating analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data assembled from strategies applied during this action research project resulted in the following conclusion: participation in the Taking Charge Program increased school engagement and self-efficacy. I attribute this increased engagement to subject matter which was both personally relevant and meaningful to the teen moms I served. This answered my action research question: *What effect*

will participation in the Taking Charge Program have on teen mothers' school engagement and self-efficacy at an alternative high school? This conclusion was drawn from data collected by way of teacher journal, and student written responses and aligns with research on engagement as previously mentioned in the review of the literature. As a reminder, the work of Levy and Weber (2010) and their *Mirrors of Motherhood* project engaged teen mothers in a most meaningful way by making their lives as mothers central to the photography project. My work with the Taking Charge program similarly engaged teen moms. The TCP allowed students to focus on their personal lives which very much revolved around challenges related to their lives as young mothers.

My review of the literature included the theories of both self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002). As a reminder, Bandura coined the term self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or *accomplish a task*. Bandura also believed that social cognitive learning happened more organically in group settings (1977). The TCP allowed students to accomplish tasks in such a setting. As these teen mothers learned to overcome the challenges in their lives via problem-solving, they were able to make tremendous gains in their self-efficacy. The TCP enabled students to work through the four steps of self-efficacy: performance accomplishment, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and emotional arousal. These four components were experienced by the teen mothers in this study as they worked through steps to achieve goals and/or solve personal problems, thus improving their self-efficacy.

Geneva Gay's (2002) educational research surrounding culturally responsive teaching proved that students thrive in school environments which take into consideration their cultures and families. This proved to be especially true in this ARP. Students were able to focus on their

personal relationships which often included their families. This notion was mentioned earlier in Gonzalez' (2019) research regarding the concept of *familismo* or familial solidarity. Once again, we see that the TCP has addressed this issue with resulting positive outcomes as some students were able to better connect with or repair broken ties with their family members.

Student engagement and applied learning. Students who participated in the Taking Charge Program demonstrated applied learning in a variety of ways. Participation in the TCP allowed students to learn as they engaged in direct application of newly acquired problem-solving skills to address challenges in their lives. In regard to applied learning, one activity was of special note. The focus was on practicing problem-solving using a fictitious character. At the end of session three, students were given a scenario involving a teenager who was five and a half months pregnant. They had to name her and create a problem for this pregnant teenager to overcome. Students decided to name this young mother "Maritza". There was a unanimous agreement that Maritza's biggest life challenge was attending school regularly. Her greatest barrier to attend school involved consistent transportation.

Students were really applying their learning here, as many of them could relate to Maritza! They established that Maritza's baby daddy was a "shitty boyfriend" and her relationship with him was unstable. During this particular session there was a buzz of excitement in the air with a profound sense of engagement. Students were smiling, laughing, and calling out characteristics for the character Maritza. A picture of Maritza was drawn on the whiteboard (see Appendix H) and discussion ensued about the plight of this character. She was the center of discussion for days to follow! Over the course of this inquiry, my classroom was also the break room where students often hung out during their free periods. Students who were absent for Session-three were spontaneously told about the character featured on the board by assorted

students. This was most certainly a memorable highlight of the study! I did not need to update any students who had missed session three, as the students happily reported their Maritza tale.

As the study progressed, applied learning was seen in several other scenarios depicted in my teacher journal. I noted that two students checked in with me a few days prior to an upcoming TCP session knowing they would be absent due to essential appointments (one needed a cavity filled, the other had an ongoing medical condition). They wanted to see what they could do to make up for the missed class. These particular students had *never* checked in prior to an absence. This notion of planning ahead depicted their applied learning in planning ahead for an upcoming school absence. This was something we had discussed when addressing Maritza's transportation problem. Students together came to the conclusion that one needed to plan ahead with regard to school. One student, Shannon, clearly stated, "You can't just wake up in the morning and try to figure out how you're gonna get to school, you gotta plan like two days ahead!" Students seemed to *really* realize, that in order to graduate, they needed to find a way to attend school more regularly. They also learned to communicate with teachers when they knew they were to be absent.

Another example of applied learning was apparent when a student volunteered (unprompted) to work with two students who had missed a TCP session and needed to get caught up. She demonstrated her applied learning as she shared her notes and explained to them about how to complete their weekly Task Planning Worksheet (see Appendix C). On a separate occasion another student, poignantly, stated that she needed to come to school more regularly. She shared with her group that her "baby's getting lazy." I asked her to expand on this. She admitted that a lack of a good routine had resulted in her baby sometimes sleeping until noon. She now realized that missing school was negatively impacting her toddler.

Other cases of applied learning with regard to personal relationships was illustrated in the following situations; Espe realized her unhealthy relationship with her boyfriend was bad for both her and her baby and decided to break up with him. She utilized sessions with our school counselor (TCP program co-leader) to assist her in this difficult process. Both Elena and Ana desired to see their mothers with more regularity and made plans to see them. Ana came to school and happily reported that she had taken her mom to lunch over the weekend. Elena also made a date to meet her mom for dinner that Friday. Elena's mom lives far away, but sometimes works in the area. Elena realized that by planning ahead she could find a way to see her mom with more regularity. Three girls discontinued unhappy relationships with their boyfriends. I asked them if participation in the TCP impacted their decisions and they agreed that it helped them realize that they needed to make changes in their lives for both themselves and their children. Teen mom Espe decided to move in with her dad because living with her boyfriend's family was proving to be quite stressful. Espe summed this up stating, "I think that it (TCP) helped me realize what's best for Sabrina and I."

Student engagement weather/transportation. The theme of *weather* had considerable effect on student engagement at school. If students lack consistent transportation, they will undoubtedly miss more school. This past school year only 15% of students at New Beginnings High School attended regularly, attending 90% of the time or more. Of these students, 14% drove themselves to school and 86% lived at home with their families and a parent or guardian was available to take them to school each day. Sadly, 85% of the students enrolled at New Beginnings this past school year did not attend school regularly. Only one student lived close to school and another student must walk 45 minutes, with her baby in a stroller each day she attends. She did not come to school when it was very cold or raining.

During this action research project, days that were cold, rainy or overcast had had lower attendance rates. I extracted the following statements from my teacher journal noting the impact of weather on school attendance and engagement:

Rough first week back after Thanksgiving. Dreary, wet weather which often results in poorer attendance (33% regular attenders present) (December 2, 2019).

Weather was much better today! (100% regular attenders present!) (February 9, 2020)

(First day back after winter break) Just a handful of students today...weather very cool and foggy, 40 degrees (33% regular attenders present) (January 7, 2020).

The preceding statements confirm the fact that adverse weather conditions have a profound, harmful, effect on student attendance. I recall once again, Maya's reflection on the impact weather had on her attendance as she stated emphatically, "It's just too much!" For Maya taking rail and bus to school in the cold and/or rain proved to be "just too much." This shows the magnitude weather and transportation have on student attendance.

Student engagement and food. The TCP program creators highly recommended providing a meal to increase engagement and attendance in the program (Harris & Franklin, 2008). Students clearly enjoyed this nurturing aspect of the intervention as provision of a warm breakfast was very well received by all students. Kalil and Zio-Guests' (2008) research about caring and relationship building instruction proved that teacher support was pivotal in engaging racially marginalized adolescent mothers. Confirmation of this is seen in my teacher journal as shown below:

The students came into class smiling making note of the "yummy smell" of the oatmeal with cinnamon. Student says she'd love chilaquiles one day for breakfast (December 2, 2019).

Students noticed I brought extra donut holes. This was inspired by one regularly attending student who mentioned that donut holes were one her favorite things (December 9, 2020).

Students suggested I make chilaquiles next week. I told them I needed a good recipe and that perhaps we could do this on the last day of the session (January 21, 2020).

I posted two different chilaquiles recipes soliciting input from students as to which one seemed the best. One student suggested particular brands of ingredients (January 27, 2020).

Chilaquiles were a hit today! The students said I did a good job and that the chilaquiles were “legit.” I noted (CRT) in the column of my journal denoting that having students help with recipe was a good example of culturally relevant teaching in action! (February 2, 2020).

Food also proved to be a very important component of my action research project and enabled me to “mother” my students and let them know that I cared about them as I prepared a special meal each week. The students seemed to really like the monkey bread and donut holes. A student suggested chilaquiles as a breakfast menu item during the first session. This particular food was mentioned on several occasions which inspired me to prepare it for the last day. Food most definitely increased student engagement and interest at school.

Personal engagement as teacher. Throughout my teacher journal there were remarks made showing my increased *personal engagement* as a teacher. As I write this analysis it is of great consequence to mention that all schools in California are currently sheltering in place due to a global pandemic involving the Corona Virus. Teachers and students alike are acclimating to teaching by way of distance learning. My increased personal engagement with students has

proven to be invaluable in maintaining connectedness with students during this unprecedented time as I am able to maintain a link with scores of students enrolled at New Beginnings. This school year I utilized multiple avenues to try and connect with my students. These included social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp. I also called and texted students when they were missing and contacted parents to celebrate student successes as well. I have come to realize that our students, while they may seem very grown up and mature, are really just teenage girls. Often times I bypass their parents as many live quite independently, but I have learned that one must not make any assumptions when it comes to teenage parents and their families. Although, many live with their baby's daddy, many more still live with one or both parents, or a guardian, who is very interested in both their well-being and academic performance

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the time frame was restricted; The Taking Charge Program would be more effective if research had commenced at the beginning of the school year when attendance was at its best and students were motivated and excited about returning to school. Additionally, the second and third quarters of the school year have historically lower attendance rates. The TCP is designed to last 8-12 weeks and due to the restraints of the MATL program, the maximum time allowed for this project was 8 weeks.

The time for each TCP session was limited. My colleagues were not always accommodating in allowing my TCP session to last longer than the prescribed 40-minute class period. This was unfortunate as I had planned weeks in advance for the study/intervention and it appeared there was an understanding that one day per week for eight weeks I was likely to need to keep students longer. Program creators, Harris and Franklin (2008) recommended 60-80 minutes allotted per session. Due to scheduling conflicts, the only day of the week available for

me to conduct this study was on the first day of each school week, usually a Monday. While it was nice to have a consistent day of the week to conduct my research, the first day of the week tends to be a day with less students in attendance.

Maternity leave was another significant limiting factor, and as luck would have it, some of my best attending students were on maternity leave, unable to participate in the second half of this research project. Lastly, the weather was quite cold as this project had to be conducted during the winter months, and as mentioned earlier, inclement weather adversely affects student attendance, which was most definitely the case on some days.

Summary

Overall my research using the Taking Charge program lived up to its expectations as being both meaningful and practical. There is a plethora of research which supports the notion that teachers have a profound effect on the students they serve. Educators who genuinely care can create classrooms which feel like home to students which can have significant, profound effects on their students (Murphy, 2006). With this in mind, I am committed to making school as engaging as possible for my students.

The theoretical rationale embraced in the action research project focuses on Gay's (2002) culturally relevant teaching model and Bandura's (2003) work with regard to self-efficacy as it relates to his social learning theory. The TCP embraced these theories wholeheartedly. Teen mothers who participated in my action research project discovered a strong sense of self as they solved problems in their group learning sessions (Harris & Franklin, 2008). A review of the literature enabled me to first, investigate challenges to school engagement for adolescent mothers, and second, to focus on successful, research-based, strategies to promote student

engagement. This included quality programs for teen mothers, caring, relationship-building instruction, and culturally responsive teaching practices.

This action research project was conducted over an eight-week period. Participating students were involved in problem-solving curriculum as they spent four weeks finding solutions to their personal problems in four life domains: *education, personal relationships, parenting* and *career*. Students commenced this process by completing questions asked on their Action Plan Worksheet (see Appendix B), which asked them to answer five questions related to life goals and desires. They built upon this Action Plan for four subsequent weeks, during which time students worked to overcome specific challenges in their lives. Students put their plan in action as they wrote down their ideas and solutions on accompanying Task Planning Worksheets (see Appendix C), which helped them work on their selected weekly goal.

As I culminate my research we are in the midst of an unprecedented time in education. Due to Covid-19, a global pandemic, we are having to teach from home. Distance learning is very challenging, but I am at a considerable advantage since my students are quite used to having me reach out to them by means of social media, texting, or phone calls. It is not unusual for me to contact them to touch base. Just this morning I received a text from a student, Ana, who has been out of the loop for weeks. I was very relieved to read her text: *Hey sorry I had a little problem I'm okay now thanks for checking on me*. This text was followed by a pink heart.

Overall, students experienced success in facing their challenges as they worked to solve various problems in their lives. This resulted in an increase in their self-efficacy as they gained confidence in their capacity *take charge* over their lives. Students were motivated to use their newfound problem-solving strategies to better achieve their personal goals. These hard-working

and determined teen moms learned to believe in themselves and implement strategies and behaviors to achieve their personal aspirations (Bandura, 1963, 1977, 1997).

Plan for Future Action

The theoretical foundation for my Action Research Project was largely influenced by the work of Geneva Gay (2002), whose work showcases the importance of culturally competent teaching. Gay asserts that teachers must use “the cultural characteristics, experiences and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively,” (p.114). The author challenges teachers to consider the cultural identity of their students in all aspects of what occurs in the classroom.

As mentioned by researchers Chablani and Spinney (2011), depression, poverty, and fatigue can make it difficult for adolescent mothers to remain engaged in school. Teen mothers who are feeling depressed, fatigued, and live in poverty, are especially in need of schools that are places where they find refuge, resources, and extra encouragement. As I proceed in my career in education I will continue to connect, engage, and provide opportunities for students to gain self-efficacy. Teen mothers, their babies, and babies-to-be are surely worth the effort! With this in mind, it is my intention to incorporate the Taking Charge Program in Parent Education class again this fall and extend it as needed. The goal of my action research project was to increase student engagement and connectedness at school and overall this has been a successful and worthwhile endeavor.

This Fall 2020, I plan to conduct an attendance focus group. Several weeks ago, I emailed one of the Taking Charge Program founders, Dr. Cynthia Franklin. She referred me to Dr. Harris stating that she had more “hands-on experience with the program” and encouraged me email her. Dr. Harris and I made an arrangement to speak by phone. This was a most inspiring

conversation! Dr. Harris was very encouraging and we spoke for nearly an hour! It was Dr. Harris' suggestion that I begin next year with a very small focus group with no more than 2-3 teen moms with a history of poor attendance. She said that there might be a need for more than one focus group. She suggested that I lead this group bearing in mind the following question: *What are these students' specific barriers which prohibit them from attending school?* This promising practice will help me understand and address the variety of reasons why so many of my students are absent. A pattern which has beset many of them since kindergarten.

Additionally, Dr. Harris mentioned how effective incentive programs with community partners had on her students' engagement and attendance. Students with steady attendance during her experience with the TCP received gift cards from Papa Johns, Walmart, and Vons supermarket. These incentives proved to be very helpful in encouraging teen mothers' school attendance. In our conversation Dr. Harris made three very profound statements about teen mothers, a) "They are *still* kids" b) "The child in them is still there!" and finally, c) teen moms still want to be mothered. I know all of these statements to be true, but this was still a very good reminder for me. It is easy to treat these hard-working, dedicated mothers as adults. Young motherhood has in many ways, thrust them into adulthood, however they are still teenagers, and we need to keep learning playful, relevant and fun!

New Beginnings students for the most part, are hard-working, and dedicated mothers. They must often overcome numerous obstacles working to balance high school, working, and raising their children. These mothers, in an effort to better their lives and the lives of their children, prove to be powerful young women who persist relentlessly to improve their stations in life. Many of these young women demonstrate strength and determination to avoid their high risk for dropping out of high school. Having babies early in life often inspires these mothers to

overcome the odds as they do everything in their power to graduate and plan for their futures (Sadler, 2007; Watson, 2017).

The Latinx teen mother students I am surrounded by in my daily work are most appreciative when their culture is featured and celebrated in their classrooms. As a reminder, on the final day of my action research study I used a chilaquiles recipe I got from a student and brought it in for breakfast. A student gave me kudos as she emphatically stated, “This is legit Teresa!” My intention is to continue being a “legit” teacher.

Teen mothers can become self-sufficient, members of society with the right support. Programs such as Taking Charge can contribute to more positive outcomes for teen mothers and their children as they become emboldened to improve their situation in life. Since more than 70% of the young women attending New Beginnings were born to teen mothers, they are at very high risk for dropping out of school. The reality is that many teen mothers do not graduate from high school, thus, an endless cycle of poverty and teen pregnancy continues. The students participating in my research study demonstrated a strong desire to overcome problems and take charge of their lives. Student attendance, prior to this unexpected school closure had been steadily increasing. I am confident that my unrelenting encouragement was a contributing factor here. Through my work in this MATL program, I have become more assured and confident in my teaching. As such, it is my desire to create the conditions for my teen mom students to empower themselves and be advocates for themselves and their babies. It is my hope that students who participated in this action research project benefit not only now, but in the future. I know my students now have the tools and confidence to address and overcome many of their challenges in life.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist

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Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist

OBSERVATIONS

	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Positive Body Language	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students exhibit body postures that indicate they are paying attention to the teacher and/or other students.					
Consistent Focus	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
All students are focused on the learning activity with minimum disruptions.					
Verbal Participation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students express thoughtful ideas, reflective answers, and questions relevant or appropriate to learning.					
Student Confidence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students exhibit confidence and can initiate and complete a task with limited coaching and can work in a group.					
Fun and Excitement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students exhibit interest and enthusiasm and use positive humor.					

PERCEPTIONS

	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Individual Attention	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students feel comfortable seeking help and asking questions.					
<i>Question to Ask:</i> What do you do in this class if you need extra help?					
Clarity of Learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students can describe the purpose of the lesson or unit. This is not the same as being able to describe the activity being done during class.					
<i>Questions to Ask:</i> What are you working on? What are you learning from this work?					
Meaningfulness of Work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students find the work interesting, challenging, and connected to learning.					
<i>Questions to Ask:</i> What are you learning? Is this work interesting to you? Do you know why you are learning this?					
Rigorous Thinking	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students work on complex problems, create original solutions, and reflect on the quality of their work.					
<i>Questions to Ask:</i> How challenging is this work? In what ways do you have the opportunity to be creative?					
Performance Orientation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students understand what quality work is and how it will be assessed. They also can describe the criteria by which their work will be evaluated.					
<i>Questions to Ask:</i> How do you know you have done good work? What are some elements of quality work?					
Overall Level of Student Engagement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Appendix B

Action Planning Worksheet

Action Plan for Taking Charge

Step 1 Answer this question: What do I want to be *different* in my life?

Step 2 Answer this question: What *barrier* stands between me and the thing I want to be different?

Step 3 Answer this question: What *treasures* do I have in myself and in my life that can help me to get past these barriers?

Step 4 Answer these questions: What are some possible *strategies* that I can follow to get past the barriers? Which strategy is likely to work best?

Step 5 Answer this question: What are *two things I can do immediately* to carry out my strategy?

Step 6 Now, as the Nike commercial says, *just do it!!*

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Appendix C

Task Planning Worksheet

Task Planner

First Task for _____

Group member

Goal area

Strategy: _____

Description of task: _____

What I will do to accomplish this task: _____

I will do this by _____, and I will ask _____ for help if I need it.

Date

Helper

Second Task for _____

Group member

Goal area

Strategy: _____

Description of task: _____

What I will do to accomplish this task: _____

I will do this by _____ and ask _____ for help if I need it.

Date

Helper

Signature

Date

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Taking Charge

Harris, M. B., & Franklin, C. (2007). Taking charge : A school-based life skills program for adolescent mothers. Retrieved from <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
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Appendix D

Game Starters

Introduction Game for Session 1

Cut out these statements separately, fold each, and put into a container. Each member draws one as the container is passed and it is her turn to introduce herself. After telling her name and something about herself, she reads her statement, completing it as it applies to her.

My favorite time of day is _____ because _____.

If I could live anywhere in the world, I would live _____ because _____.

When I was a little girl, my favorite food was _____. Now it is _____.

The person I enjoy talking to most is _____ because _____.

When I was little, my favorite toy was _____. Now my favorite "toy" is _____.

If I could have any job in the world, I would like to be _____, because _____.

My idea of a perfect day is when I can _____.

The person I most want to be like is _____ because _____.

My favorite holiday is _____ because then I usually _____.

My favorite TV show is _____ because _____.

If I could have any pet, I would want a _____ because _____.

A perfect vacation for me would be _____.

I like to get presents from _____ because _____.

My favorite relative is _____ because _____.

The thing I like best about my baby's father is _____.

The thing I like least about my baby's father is _____.

Something I've always wanted to do but haven't gotten to yet is _____.

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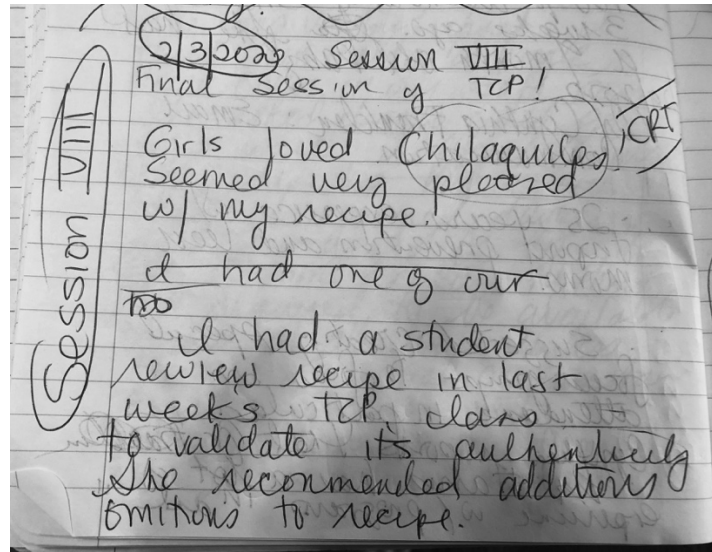
Chapter 3 The Taking Charge Practice Training Manual

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Harris, M. B., & Franklin, C. (2007). Taking charge : A school-based life skills program for adolescent mothers. Retrieved from <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
Created from stmarysca-ebooks on 2019-10-12 11:05:21.

Appendix E

Teacher Journal Notes

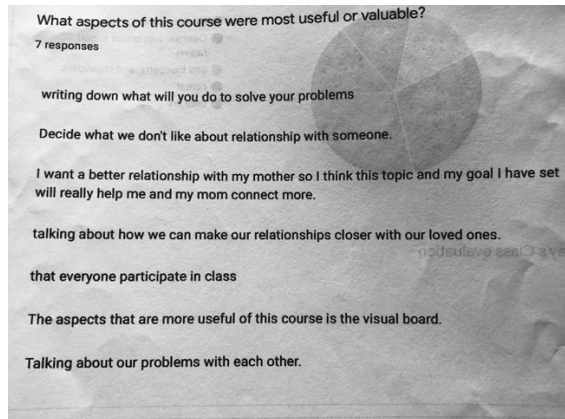


Session VIII: FOOD

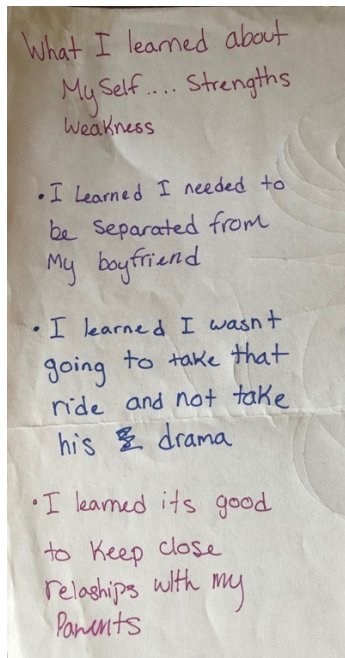
Teacher Journal Excerpt from February 3, 2020. Final Day of TCP

*"Girl loved the chilaquiles! Seemed very pleased with the recipe. **CRT** (culturally relevant teaching). I had a student review recipe in last week's TCP class to validate it's authenticity. She recommended additions and omissions to recipe."*

Appendix F: Individual and Small Group Responses



Individual Responses



Small Group Responses

Appendix G: "Maritza"

