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Strategies Employed by High School Social Workers to Help Young Mothers Remain in High School

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Abstract

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MSW, Monmouth University, 2014

BA, Kean University, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

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Abstract

The focus of this study was to explore the ways high school social workers employ 6 evidence-based strategies to foster academic persistence among young mothers currently enrolled in high school. High school social workers are often tasked with helping young mothers overcome the challenges associated with motherhood. It is necessary for social workers to assess students' personal situations and provide support and resources to assist. High school social workers are essential to addressing the problem of pregnancy among young mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 years old. The roles of high school social workers are essential to ensuring academic persistence among young mothers. A qualitative action research study design was employed to explore the research-based strategies employed by high school social workers in New Jersey to assist young mothers. Data was collected via focus groups. Results indicated school social workers personally fostered relationships with young mothers, and they also worked to nurture relationships between young mothers, teachers, and guidance counselors. Developing these relationships helped to create a support and accountability team for each young mother. Improving the assistance provided to young mothers can help ensure academic persistence, graduation, and ultimately foster better long-term social, economic, and health outcomes for young mothers and their children.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my cousin Kelvin, cousin Jamila, cousin Steven, aunt Vicki, uncle David, uncle Douglas, my father Roosevelt, stepfather John (Pops), and grandparents Esther and William. Although you were unable to live to see this day, you visited me in my dreams and were with me every step of the way. I know you are all smiling down on me.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Young mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 years often struggle to continue their education after childbirth (Nissen, 2014). They often lack resources needed to continue schooling, which can prompt them to drop out of high school (SmithBattle, Loman, Chantamit-o-pas, & Schneider, 2017). Many young mothers are responsible for caring for their children with little financial and childcare assistance (SmithBattle & Freed, 2016), which impedes their abilities to remain in high school. Landau and Mason (2017) explained, "Teen mothers' beliefs about high school and the purpose of education are impacted by their pregnancy and by motherhood; for many new teen mothers, their priorities shift with the arrival of a new baby" (p. 23). Between these shifting priorities and barriers to staying in high school after giving birth, academic persistence is an issue for this population.

As conceptually defined for the proposed study, persistence refers to remaining in high school after giving birth despite barriers to doing so (Butler-Barnes, Varner, Williams, & Sellers, 2017). According to Nissen (2014), academic persistence among young mothers may be improved by providing them with resources needed to overcome common barriers associated with young motherhood. Lack of resources and social support ultimately contributes to the high dropout rate among young mothers (Boggs & Duncan, 2014; Murphy, 2016).

Despite decreases, the U.S. teen pregnancy rate remains nearly twice as high as

the rate in the United Kingdom, the country with the second highest rate of teen

pregnancy in the world (Farber, 2016). Because of the large population of young mothers

in the United States and their heavy reliance on social welfare, the issue of young

motherhood is often considered a social problem. Becoming a young mother is also a

social issue because motherhood places young girls at risk of poor health outcomes,

educational underachievement, and long-term benefit dependency (Nissen, 2014). Akella

and Jordan (2014) argued that becoming a young mother causes economic and social

hardships, which are exacerbated by dropout and poor academic achievement. A young

mother who drops out of high school is at a greater risk of poverty than one who remains

in high school (Patchen, LeTourneau, & Berggren, 2013).

Young motherhood also carries the costs associated with negative social labels

(Patchen et al., 2013), which can contribute to poor academic persistence (Pesta, 2018).

The lack of social work interventions for young mothers ultimately encourages economic

marginalization due to poor socialization and poverty, as well as educational hardships,

lack of resources, and poor emotional support (Steinka-Fry, Wilson, & Tanner-Smith,

2013). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2015), some

of the costs associated with young motherhood include healthcare, foster care, and

increased behavioral problems among children of young parents. As such, young

mothers may require assistance to raise their children more responsibly; fostering

academic persistence via the provision of needed resources and other evidence-based

strategies for improving academic achievement among young mothers may be a first and important step in improving long-term outcomes for young mothers and their children.

Social workers are responsible for extending educational opportunities to everyone, with special regard for vulnerable populations such as young mothers (Jansson, 2014). An effective program for improving academic persistence among this population may involve high school social workers providing young mothers with support and resources necessary to remain in high school (Akella & Jordan, 2014). According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2012), high school social workers must develop specialized awareness and comprehension regarding the students they serve. However, little is known about the strategies these professionals employ to foster academic persistence among young mothers. As such, a knowledge gap exists regarding potential ways to improve academic and social support provided to young mothers. A better understanding of how social workers help young mothers may guide the development and improvement of policies that can be adopted to ultimately increase academic persistence among young mothers.

Problem Statement

The problem of the proposed study is that young mothers are less likely to remain in high school than their childless peers. Only about 50% of young mothers who have a child before the age of 18 remain in high school long enough to obtain a high school diploma by the age of 22 (Martin, Hamilton, & Osterman, 2015). Boggs and Duncan

(2014) noted that emotional and financial stressors often increase for young mothers because of inadequate support and resources, which impede academic persistence. Available day care facilities are often too expensive for young mothers to afford (Dumas & Terrell, 2017). The costs of young motherhood can be lasting and pervasive; as Watson and Vogel (2017) explained, young mothers are more likely to drop out and become impoverished single parents. The children of young mothers are more likely to experience health issues, poor academic achievement, and problem behaviors (Norton, Chandra-Mouli, & Lane, 2017).

Assistance from high school social workers may improve academic persistence among young mothers (CDC, 2015). According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU, 2014), young mothers often drop out of high school because of impractical and unaccommodating high school rules that make it difficult for them to stay in high school. High school social workers provide an important connection between school, home, and the community to assist students with academic persistence (NASW, 2012).

Given punitive stances toward young mothers and welfare reform that has reduced assistance available to young mothers (Tach & Edin, 2017), it is particularly important that other professionals tasked with helping young mothers provide the most effective and research-based strategies to improve academic persistence. Further, as SmithBattle (2007) explained, there is significant disjointedness in terms of researchers' and leaders' perceptions of needs among teen mothers, and perceptions of those needs

among the professionals tasked with helping them. Thus, research on strategies high school social workers employ to foster academic persistence among young mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 may ultimately explain ways to improve the support provided to young mothers.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of the proposed qualitative action research study is to explore the social support strategies that high school social workers employ to foster academic persistence among young mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 in an urban high school district in New Jersey. The following essential question will guide the proposed study:

RQ1: What social support strategies do high school social workers employ to improve academic persistence among young mothers?

Key Terms

Key terms for the proposed research are conceptually defined, as follows:

Academic persistence: In this study, academic persistence refers to remaining in high school after giving birth; it means continuing one's education despite barriers (Butler-Barnes, Varner, Williams, & Sellers, 2017). By persisting in high school, young mothers may be more likely to graduate. As Butler-Barnes et al. (2017) explained, "academic persistence enables students to continue to engage in academic tasks even when facing challenges and has been associated with mastery of skills and content areas" (p. 715).

High school social workers: Social workers are professionals tasked with providing parenting education and support to young mothers, including emotional, personal, and academic support (Hepworth et al., 2016).

Social support: As defined by Unger and Wandersman (1985), social support describes the degree to which an individual feels his or her needs for support are met.

Social work programs: Social work programs are those that provide resources used by high school social workers to help young mothers remain in high school (Boggs & Duncan, 2014).

Teen pregnancy: Teen pregnancy is defined as the delivery of a child prior to a young woman's 20th birthday (Turney et al., 2011).

Young mothers: Building on the definition of teen pregnancy, young mothers are defined as females between the ages of 15 and 19 who are mothers to young children.

Contribution to Professional Social Work Practice

Findings from this study may be used to improve social workers' abilities to help young mothers remain in high school by guiding them to effective support services. According to Dulmus (2012), the objective of the discipline of social work is to restore social functioning and promote social justice among individuals, families, groups, communities, organizations, and society, with an emphasis on vulnerable populations. Understanding the strategies that high school social workers employ to foster academic

persistence among young mothers is essential to improving long-term outcomes for young mothers and their children.

Nature of the Doctoral Project

The nature of the proposed study is qualitative. An action research methodology was used to explore the strategies that high school social workers employ to foster academic persistence among young mothers. I selected the action research design because of its utility for researchers who seek to examine and address social problems. According to MacColl, Cooper, Rittenbruch, and Viller (2005), action research is an interactive method that combines theory and practice. The cornerstone of action research is collaborative analysis with participants, followed by collaborative changes determined by participants and researchers. This design is focused on action, change, collaboration, and participation, and is best suited for intervention-based studies. Because the proposed research is based on the development of solutions to a pressing social problem, an action research design was deemed most appropriate. Data were obtained via a focus group comprised of six high school social workers. This six-step analysis process consisted of the following (performed for each data source):

1. Review data repeatedly by reading and rereading

2. Generate list of codes from data

3. Combine codes into themes and subthemes

4. Analyze themes theoretically

5. Define each theme

6. Write up results of analysis

The sample for the proposed study consisted of six high school social workers who are currently employed at two high schools located in a single urban high school district located in New Jersey. The high school district was selected due to its close proximity to my home and because the county in which the high school district resides has one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy in the State of New Jersey. I selected a criterion-based purposive sample focused on current high school social workers at one of the two selected high schools who have earned a minimum of a master's degree in social work, have at least 2 years of experience as a high school social worker, and have experience working with young mothers.

Significance of the Study

The proposed study involved an investigation of the social support strategies high school social workers employ to help young mothers remain in high school. Understanding the strategies that high school social workers leverage to foster academic persistence among young mothers is essential to improving long-term outcomes for young mothers and their children. The potential social implications from this research are vast, as improving the assistance provided to young mothers may help ensure academic persistence and graduation, and ultimately foster better long-term social, economic, and health outcomes for young mothers and their children.

Theoretical Framework

The framework for the proposed study is Cullen's social support theory. Social support describes assistance from social networks or other systems of support that are essential to meeting the needs of individuals (Cullen, 1994). According to Colvin, (2007) "social supports can occur at both the micro level and the macro level of society" and "can be more or less present within a complex organization" (p. 370). Social support is comprised of multiple factors, such as social integration, attachment, alliance, and guidance (Shaefer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1981).

Importantly, differences exist in terms of individuals' perceived social support and their actual social networks. According to Shaefer et al. (1981), social networks are links that exist between groups of people. Social networks may refer to the actual social resources an individual has access to, while perceived social support describes the emotional and relational support that individuals perceive they have access to. Secco and Moffatt (1994) described social support as "a complex, multidimensional construct" (p. 517). Social networks describe support that is contingent upon individuals' relationships with others. In the proposed study, young mothers' relationships with their parents, teachers, and social workers all represent relationships within their social networks. Social support consists of the actual resources and emotional support provided to them. . As Secco and Moffatt explained, an examination of social support is essential to research on young mothers.

Values and Ethics

The aim of the NASW Code of Ethics is to guide clinical social work practice and ensure that social workers employ options for all students to access education. These options will allow young mothers the opportunity to remain in high school. Practitioners acquire and continue to develop specialized knowledge and understanding regarding the histories, traditions, values, family systems, and artistic expression of major client groups served (NASW, 2017).

The proposed study is guided by three of the ethical principles outlined on the NASW Code of Ethics, including the following:

1. Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and address social problems.

2. Social workers challenge social injustice. Young mothers are often considered a disadvantaged or marginalized population. To prevent social injustice, these young mothers should be provided with the support they need to achieve desired outcomes, such as obtaining an education and raising healthy children.

3. Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships. Collaborative relationships between social workers, young mothers, family members, and other community members are essential to the provision of this support.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Processes and Steps

The aim of this section is to examine relevant academic and professional literature related to the strategies that social workers employ to help young mothers remain in high school. I used Walden University's online library, as well as academic databases including PsycINFO. I used a number of key terms, including *social workers*, *roles, young mothers*, *teen mothers*, *graduation*, *academic persistence*, *childcare*, *resources*, and *education*. In general, most of the included literature was published after 2013. When appropriate, older or seminal studies with significant relevance were included. The literature review provides important information to conceptualize the proposed research. The approach used to organize this literature review involved starting with broader research and moving to more specific and relevant studies.

Teen Pregnancy

Nationwide, the rate of unintended teen pregnancies has declined. According to Filner and Zolna (2014) the overall reduction in the U.S. teen pregnancy rate is mostly a result of the drop of pregnancies among young women between the ages of 18 and 19. Between 2001 and 2008, the overall rate of unintended pregnancies in the United States increased among disadvantaged groups; however, the rate of teen pregnancies declined during this period (Filner & Zolna, 2014). The decline in teen pregnancy between 2001

and 2008 is reflective of the trend in declining teen pregnancy rates that has occurred since the 1990s (Kost, Henshaw, & Carlin, 2010).

According to Hamilton and Matthews (2016), the U.S. teen pregnancy rate reached historic lows every year between 2009 and 2016. Data were aggregated by race and mothers' age at birth. Hamilton and Matthews found that several factors may have contributed to the decline in teen pregnancy, including increase in abstinence, decreases in sexual activity among teenagers, increased use of effective contraceptives, and increases in pregnancy prevention programs aimed at teenagers (Hamilton & Mathews, 2016). This increase in contraceptive use is likely the leading contributing factor to the reduced rate of teen pregnancy (Lindberg et al., 2016).

Despite the decline, U.S. teen pregnancy remains a pressing social issue. Each day, approximately 1,100 girls between the ages of 15 and 19 become mothers (Linton & Rueda, 2014). The rate of births among U.S. teens remains higher in the United States than in any other industrialized nation (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, 2015). The average rate of pregnancy among U.S. girls between the ages of 15 and 19 is 57 per 1,000 females (Sedgh, Finer, Bankole, Eilers, & Singh, 2015). Young mothers are more likely to drop out of high school, become single parents (Martin et al., 2015; Watson & Vogel, 2017), and experience significant emotional and financial stressors (Boggs & Duncan, 2014).

Young Mothers and Dropout

Dropping out of high school is a persistent problem for young mothers. Only about 50% of young mothers who have a child before the age of 18 remain in high school long enough to obtain a high school diploma by the age of 22 (Hamilton et al., 2015). Boggs and Duncan (2014) noted that emotional and financial stressors often increase for young mothers because of inadequate support and resources, which impede academic persistence. For example, available day care facilities are often too expensive for young mothers to afford (Dumas & Terrell, 2017); thus, they may not be able to afford childcare in order to return to high school after giving birth. Dumas and Terrell (2017) conducted four focus groups with 19 young mothers to explore unmet needs and barriers faced by these women, in terms of social and medical support, and results indicated that the most significant and common challenges among these mothers related to child care and transportation. An increase in social support resources such as childcare is essential to helping young mothers overcome challenges.

In addition, young mothers may drop out because of unaccommodating high school rules that make it difficult for them to continue their education (ACLU, 2014). According to SmithBattle et al. (2017), young mothers often lack resources needed to continue schooling, which can prompt them to drop out of high school. Findings from this study suggest that although young mothers may encounter barriers to completing high school, their desire to do so may actually increase as a result of having children.

Because many young mothers are responsible for caring for their children with little financial and childcare assistance, lack of access to childcare can serve as a major impediment to their ability to remain in high school, despite the desire to complete their education.

High School Social Workers

High school social workers may play an active role in improving the academic persistence of young mothers as they help students who are economically, socially, politically, or personally marginalized by creating partnerships between students and high school and home environments. In these roles, high school social workers may work with students and teachers, individually, to address the unique needs of each student. As Cooper (2016) explained, "school social workers possess the skills, knowledge, and ability to intervene or advocate for students, as individuals or in groups; while simultaneously, formulating systemic interventions to address the students' needs and behaviors" (p. 7). Specifically, these professionals are tasked with developing interventions as well as preventative plans to help meet the educational and social needs of students. In these ways, social workers may play an essential role in helping young mothers remain in high school, by providing them with the social support and resources they need to persist academically.

The demand for high school social workers has grown as U.S. high schools have become increasingly diverse. In the absence of social workers, high schools experience

difficulties addressing nonacademic barriers to student learning, such as truancy and teen

pregnancy (Bye, Shephard, Partridge, & Alvarez, 2009). Often, school social workers

partner with large social work organizations to develop collaborative partnerships, gain

support, and access resources needed for their work (D'Agostino, 2013). As Constable

(2016) explained, high schools have broadened their mission over the last century to

address the needs of each learner and foster respect for their unique differences and

needs. Because school social workers are tasked with meeting the complex needs of

students with specific barriers and challenges, their roles are often dynamic and complex.

These professionals must possess the skills and training needed to deal with students'

educational barriers. School social workers must work to ensure that all children are

included in the educational process, and the individual differences of learners are

respected (Goldkind, 2011). Often, school social workers possess ample skills in terms

of relationship-building, advocacy, and problem-solving.

Social Support Strategies for Young Mothers

High school social workers are dedicated to providing resources and support

needed by young mothers to prevent a variety of detrimental consequences. According to

Domenico and Jones (2007), the support provided by school personnel determines young

mothers' academic paths. Unfortunately, most of the support programs developed for

teen pregnancy are focused on prevention through abstinence and sexual education rather

than providing assistance for young women who have had children (Domenico & Jones,

2007). High school staff's lack of intervention to support young mothers often results in the postponement or termination of their education. Consequently, it is beneficial for social workers to assist young mothers by building their confidence and self-esteem.

It is necessary for social workers to provide young mothers with effective resources to improve their academic persistence. Due to the lack of social workers who provide social and economic resources in school settings, students rarely return to school once they drop out (Michailakis & Schirmer, 2014). The goal of the social work practice is to help others acquire knowledge regarding sources, consequences, and answers to social issues (Michailakis & Schirmer, 2014). Linton and Rueda (2014) said that support from social workers may help young mothers remain in high school, which is essential to improving life outcomes necessary for them to acquire the skills needed to solve problems and succeed. That is, high school social workers may help young mothers address the problems associated with young motherhood via the provision of support and resources. The support and resources provided by high school social workers may help young mothers deal with life changes via access to tools and strategies needed to meet their financial, educational, and emotional needs. According to the CDC (2015), providing support services within the high school system is essential to improving the academic persistence of young mothers. By removing obstacles and providing support, social workers may help young mothers manage challenges and remain in high school (Leplatte et al., 2012).

Social workers are essential to community and school-based programs that aim to decrease young mothers' dependency on welfare, reduce the likelihood of repeat pregnancies, and decrease the dropout rate (Hepworth, Rooney, & Strom-Gottfried, 2016). Through engaging and connecting with young mothers while maintaining a nonjudgmental attitude, social workers can motivate these girls to remain in high school and view social workers as people they can connect with to seek out support services. Additionally, social workers provide a channel through which young mothers can communicate freely, helping them to identify goals, strengths, and career paths that allow them to maximize their abilities and function independently while addressing their diverse social, emotional, and financials needs (Hepworth et al., 2016). The trusting environments created by social workers may facilitate engagement and connection with school among young mothers, helping them feel more involved, committed, and invested in achieving their short- and long-term goals. Seitz (1999) determined that the majority of young mothers did not complete high school due to the burden of motherhood responsibilities, economic constraints, and reliance on welfare, social stigma, emotional stress, and physical exhaustion.

Becoming a young mother often leads to role conflicts because parenting responsibilities interfere with high school commitments and career development (Hepworth et al., 2016). Barber and East (2014) tested whether high educational aspirations among pregnant adolescents are related to a rejection of pregnancy and

whether those thoughts led to parenting stress and inadequacy later. Students'

educational ambitions were related to greater avoidance of pregnancy. Young mothers

who did have a child felt trapped by parenting at 6 months after birth. This feeling was

also related to parenting that lacked displays of affection and feelings of inadequacy in

mothering one year following birth. Becoming a young mother was disruptive to

academic persistence and gave rise to poor parenting styles later.

Thus, high school social workers must employ strategies to help young mothers

remain in high school. An important responsibility of high school social workers that

may improve academic persistence is connecting with and engaging young mothers while

creating supportive environments that integrate effective support systems and resources.

The interventions set forth by high school social workers within the school system may

also benefit entire communities by providing strategies to foster academic persistence

among young mothers while reducing associated social and economic burdens shouldered

by communities.

Because of inadequate social and economic resources, young mothers rarely

return to high school after dropping out (Michailakis & Schirmer, 2014). Thus, it is

necessary that young mothers are provided with resources that foster academic

persistence in order to prevent dropping out in the first place. Education provides young

mothers with better life outcomes by equipping them with the necessary skills to solve

problems and provide for themselves and their children. High school social workers may

help young mothers deal with challenges of motherhood by teaching them how to meet their own financial, educational, and emotional needs. Unfortunately, the educational needs of young mothers are often neglected by high school social workers, and little research exists to understand why this happens. According to the CDC (2015), support services within the school system are essential to helping young mothers remain in high school.

By decreasing high school dropout rates among young mothers, high school social workers may help relieve associated financial and social burdens shouldered by society. According to the CDC (2013), teenage pregnancy cost taxpayers an estimated $9.4 billion in 2011, alone. Hamilton, Martin, and Ventura (2015) explained that young motherhood often has persistent ramifications for mother and child; such consequences are usually of economic nature and shouldered by taxpayers. Career advancements are hindered as young mothers drop out of high school and are unable to attend college, ultimately limiting their contributions to society. The CDC (2013) noted that some of the costs to society include healthcare, foster care, and increased imprisonment rates among the children of teen parents.

Historically, high school leaders have focused on sex education as an intervention to prevent teen pregnancy (Barbee, Cunningham, van Zyl, Antle, & Langley, 2016; Coyle et al., 2001). According to the CDC (2014), sex education programs focused on abstinence may also provide information on safe sex; however, these programs do little to

address teen pregnancy after it has happened. Consequently, additional guidance and resources are needed by teen moms in order to foster academic persistence among this population (CDC, 2013). The foundational support provided by high school social workers may help young mothers enhance their educational goals, decrease dependency on welfare, and save tax payer dollars.

    Emotional/social support. Emotional and social support may be essential to effective interventions for young mothers. In a qualitative study using in-depth interviews with 16 African-born refugee young women in Melbourne, Australia, Watts, Liamputtong, and McMichael (2015) found it is necessary for service providers to engage young mothers in activities that help them manage their stress levels because excess stress negatively affects their education. According to Ngum Chi Watts et al. (2015), the collaboration of service providers is necessary to resolve some of the problems young mothers face, which can ultimately disrupt their educations. The ways young mothers adjust to life changes influence their educational achievement, and failure to adapt to those changes can increase dropout risks (Watts, Liamputtong, & McMichael, 2015). These findings may suggest that high school social workers who are unprepared to help young mothers may be unable to help them manage challenges and barriers to education, including stress and mental health issues.

    Poor emotional health associated with depression and anxiety affects different aspects of life (Leplatte et al., 2012). Adolescent mothers often require counseling from

high school social workers to help them psychologically prepare for the challenges associated with young motherhood (Watts et al., 2015). Raising a child involves a number of challenging activities and demands that can adversely affect the education of young mothers who lack adequate support (Letourneau et al., 2004). Another existing challenge is stigma associated with young motherhood, which can make young mothers reluctant to seek out support services (Leplatte et al., 2012). School social workers play an important role in helping young mothers manage and reduce associated emotional stressors (Akella & Jordan, 2014).

Social support in the form of familial support, support from friends, and support from the wider community are essential to improving the educational achievement of young mothers (East, Chien, & Barber, 2012). Familial support may help ensure young mothers return to high school. The social and health consequences of young motherhood have direct effects on educational outcomes. Regret among young mothers is the cause of many mental health issues (East et al., 2012). Education and awareness programs for young mothers are essential to shaping students' awareness of the challenges associated with pregnancy and young motherhood.

Tangible outcomes. In addressing the challenges facing teen mothers, there is a need for social workers to focus on improving parenting outcomes, education, and economic self-sufficiency. Remaining in high school is crucial to ensuring young mothers are employable and self-sufficient. The educational needs of young mothers

require a social support system that begins with school social workers. Stigma against young mothers may exist in educational institutions, and challenges exist with managing the multiple responsibilities forced upon young mothers (Smith et al., 2012). Social work initiatives are essential to dealing with such issues. Moreau and Kerner (2012) found that childcare is a major challenge for young mothers. In addition, Moreau and Kerner (2012) suggested that financial difficulties associated with childcare costs can impede the educational achievement of young mothers. Thus, tangible financial support from institutions is essential to helping young mothers shoulder financial responsibilities.

Access to information. Access to information needed to persist in high school may also help improve academic outcomes for young mothers. A number of studies demonstrate the link between young motherhood and social problems such as poverty (East et al., 2012), which may be related to a lack of informational support. Young mothers are usually beginning parenthood while they are still dependent on their own parents.

It is necessary for high school social workers to implement intervention strategies focused on the social welfare and guidance of young mothers in order to positively affect their academic futures. Parenting education enables young mothers to complete high school while managing the responsibilities of parenthood (Ricks, 2016). Continuing education after pregnancy is a challenge and young mothers often require educational alternatives. Educational alternatives are important interventions for improving academic

persistence (Ricks, 2016). As such, high school social workers should exercise their responsibilities in making sure young mothers return to high school after giving birth.

Summary of Solutions Used to Assist Young Mothers to Remain in High School

Various solutions have been developed to help young mothers remain in high school. These solutions increase the likelihood that young mothers graduate by providing the comprehensive services to facilitate the completion of high school. Some of the solutions offer childcare services as an incentive for young mothers to remain in high school. The Graduation Reality and Dual Role Skills (GRADS) program was implemented in Seattle to help young mothers develop work and parenting skills (White & Cummings, 1995). In this program, high school social workers provide expecting and young mothers with the tools necessary to decrease stresses related to motherhood (White & Cummings, 1995). The GRADS program provides young mothers with essential parenting skills, thereby reducing the time spent to learn the basics of taking care of children (White & Cummings, 1995). In this regard, mothering students are able to dedicate more of their time to studying. GRADS is an effective solution because it helps young mothers in finish high school by providing them with convenient on-site daycare (White & Cummings, 1995). The assistance of high school support staff provides pregnant and young mothers with opportunities to graduate as scheduled. According to Leplatte et al. (2012), support services encourage positive mother-child relationships while addressing the social and emotional needs of young mothers.

Services that provide support to young mothers foster academic persistence whereas those that prevent pregnancy reduce the educational difficulties associated with early childbearing. Steinka-Fry et al. (2013) noted such programs are effective in reducing school dropout and increasing the enrollment rates among young mothers. Although multi-service programs and attendance programs have proven to increase graduation rates by 11 to 13%, they do not entail the responsibility of high school social workers addressing the issue from several different aspects. Moreover, some of the existing programs do not assist those who are currently young mothers.

High school social workers are also important for addressing existing myths and misconceptions about the educational progress of young mothers. Proper educational policies increase the ease of re-entry or continuation of education despite challenges associated with pregnancy and parenting (SmithBattle, 2007). Therefore, these programs must incorporate the aspect of social work to improve benefits of academic persistence among young mothers. Young motherhood is a common cause of dropout among high school girls. Moreau and Kerner (2012) that such services could be developed within existing programs and include activities to promote self-awareness, health, and some form of exploration of values, faith, and family.

Watson and Vogel (2017) conducted a qualitative case study that involved six parenting teen mothers who attended three different educational settings. The aim of the study was to explore the factors that played a role in mothers' educational. The study

highlighted the struggles and successes they faced as mothers in high school. Four themes emerged, including struggle, support, hope, and perseverance.

Summary

Young mothers often lack resources needed to persist academically, which can result in dropout (SmithBattle et al., 2017). Between shifting priorities and the barriers to staying in high school after giving birth, academic persistence is a significant challenge for young mothers. Research indicates that academic persistence among young mothers may be improved by providing them with resources needed to overcome common barriers associated with young motherhood.

Assistance from high school social workers may improve academic persistence among young mothers (CDC, 2015). SmithBattle (2007) explained, existing research reveals significant disjointedness between the perceptions of needs among teen mothers and the perceptions of those needs among the professionals tasked with helping them. Thus, research on the strategies high school social workers employ to foster academic persistence among young mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 may ultimately shed light on ways to improve the support provided to young mothers. Thus, the purpose of the proposed qualitative action research study is to explore the social support strategies that high school social workers employ to foster academic persistence among young mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 in an urban high school district in New Jersey.

Social workers' knowledge and skills may help young mothers reach their educational goals and complete high school. By enhancing social workers' roles through knowledge and skills, they may be better equipped to help young mothers overcome obstacles and complete high school. The issue can be effectively addressed by implementing and following procedures to improve academic persistence among young mothers. Intervention strategies may help young mothers continue high school.

This section provided an introduction to the proposed research, including a background of the problem, the problem statement, purpose, and guiding research questions. The significance, nature of the study, and framework were also discussed. A review of the professional and academic literature provided further context for the proposed research while highlighting the gap in knowledge that will be addressed by the proposed research. The following section provides details of the proposed study's methodology.

Section 2: The Project

The problem of the proposed study is that young mothers are less likely to remain in high school than their peers without children. Only about 50% of young mothers who have a child before the age of 18 remain in high school long enough to obtain a diploma by the age of 22 (Hamilton et al., 2015). The costs of young motherhood can be lasting and pervasive. The children of young mothers are more likely to experience health issues, poor academic achievement, and problem behaviors than children of older mothers (Norton et al., 2017).

The purpose of the proposed research is to explore social workers' use of social support strategies to improve the academic persistence of young mothers. Findings from this investigation may be used to improve the services that high school social workers provide to young mothers to facilitate educational continuation. The aim of this section is to present methodological details of the proposed research, including the study design, sources of data, and ethical procedures.

Research Design

The problem of the proposed study is that young mothers are less likely to remain in high school than their peers without children. The following question guided the proposed study: What social support strategies do high school social workers employ to improve academic persistence among young mothers? The nature of the proposed study is qualitative and involves an action research design to explore the social support

strategies that high school social workers employ to foster academic persistence among young mothers.

Methodology

Prospective Data

The proposed study consists of focus group data. As detailed later in this section, all data was thematically analyzed using the procedures recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). Six individuals from the two selected high schools participated in two focus groups (one focus group for each school). My decision to use two focus groups is based on the initial sample size of seven total participants and the desire to keep focus groups at a small and manageable size of three to four participants, each. Dworkin (2012) noted that the sample size in qualitative research is often smaller as it is concerned with gathering a thorough understanding of an occurrence or collecting data that represent perspectives and experiences. The focus group protocol (see Appendix C) was designed to align with the evidence-based strategies for improving academic resilience among young mothers that I identified in the existing body of research. The focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes and took place in a conference room at a local public library.

Participants

The sample for the proposed study consisted of six high school social workers who are currently employed at two schools located in a single school district in a large

urban city in New Jersey. The school district was selected due to its close geographic proximity to my location, as well as the high rate of teen pregnancy in this particular area. Participants were a criterion-based purposive sample based on the inclusion criteria that they were current high school social workers at one of the two selected high schools, had earned a minimum of a master's degree in social work, had at least 2 years of experience as a high school social worker, and had experience working with young mothers.

In qualitative research, appropriate sample size is determined by saturation, which is the point at which no new ideas emerge from collected data (Tracy, 2013). Ultimately, in order for qualitative data to be considered trustworthy, saturation must be achieved. A number of recommendations exist to guide qualitative researchers in determining an appropriate starting sample size. Because the proposed study involved rich data from a focus group, I selected a smaller sample of six participants.

In order to recruit participants, I obtained organizational consent from administrators of the two high schools. A solicitation email was sent to administrators at the two selected high schools which explained the purpose of the study and participation requirements and requested permission to interview high school social workers employed at each of these locations. Once permission was granted, I requested the email addresses of high school social workers at each school in order to send out study invitations. Email invitations (see Appendix A) provided details of the study and participation requirements. Individuals interested in participating were asked to reply to the email in order to

schedule times for the focus group. Upon confirming eligibility, I sent participants informed consent forms, and asked that they read, sign, and return them via email before the scheduled focus group. In addition, the email contained a brief demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B), which participants filled out and returned via email.

Instrumentation

A focus group protocol was used to guide the data collection process. The focus group protocol was developed based on the evidence-based strategies for improving academic resilience among young mothers that I identified in the existing body of research. The questions in the focus group protocol were designed to foster social engagement and interactions across the group.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze study data, the focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed by me. In this way, the final raw form of data consisted of one focus group transcript. Data were thematically analyzed following the procedures described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This six-step process consisted of the following performed for each data source:

1. Review data repeatedly by reading and rereading

2. Generate list of codes from data

3. Combine codes into themes and subthemes

4. Analyze themes theoretically

5. Define each theme

6. Write up results of analysis

The first step in the analysis process involved reading and rereading textual data. I immersed myself in the data by reading through them three times each in order to be familiarized with the data and start to recognize potential codes. Once complete, I moved on to step two of the analysis process, which involved the generation of codes. During this step, I made note of words, phrases, and ideas that were repeated in the data and assigning a code to each. All coding and analysis was done manually; no software was used. To help organize data during the coding and analysis processes, I used Microsoft Excel. After coding was complete, I moved onto the third step of identifying themes. During this step, I began to sort the codes that were identified during the previous step into themes and subthemes. I looked for relationships between the codes that were developed to determine if they could be combined into themes or subthemes. During this step, I also dismissed codes that no longer seemed relevant to any of the identified themes or subthemes, and which were not strongly aligned with the framework and research questions.

During the fourth step of thematic analysis, I refined the themes that were roughly identified in the previous step. By refining the themes, I reorganized and combined them, and broke larger themes down into subthemes. This process helped to ensure themes were distinct from one another, aligned with the research question and framework, and

that they were divided into subthemes as necessary to allow for adequate discussion and analysis. Once themes and subthemes were finalized, I moved on to the fifth step of the analysis process, which involved defining and naming themes and subthemes. Finally, during the last step of the process, I wrote up the results of the analysis, which is presented in the following section of this project.

Trustworthiness

The rigor of qualitative research is ensured via trustworthiness. Trustworthy data is that which accurately reflects the actual experiences, ideas, and thoughts that participants intended to convey via qualitative data collection (such as interviews and focus groups). The trustworthiness of qualitative data is established by ensuring study dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

Credibility describes how closely data reflect the ideas participants intended to convey (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility will be enhanced in the proposed research via the use of multiple techniques. A reflexive journal was also maintained, which helped prevent any personal thoughts, opinions, or biases from influencing study data. I wrote in the reflexive journal as a strategy to compartmentalize personal thoughts, opinions, and biases in order to prevent any subjective thoughts from influencing study data. The reflexive journal entries were not a source of data in this study, and nobody reviewed it but me; it was simply a tool to help improve the credibility of data. Member checking was also employed of the initial analyses to improve credibility. In addition to

improving the credibility of data, member checking empowered participants to become

co-researchers by taking an active role in the process of data analysis. To conduct

member checking, copies of the initial analyses was sent to participants, via email. I

requested that participants review the preliminary analysis to ensure it aligned with the

ideas they intended to communicate during the focus group. Participants had a week to

review the preliminary analysis and share their feedback.

Transferability describes how well study findings transfer to other samples and

contexts (Anney, 2014). Bitsch (2005) recommended increasing transferability via thick

description and purposive sampling; I will employ both of these strategies in the

proposed research. Detailed records of all study procedures were maintained and any

deviances from the planned methods were reported. In action research, transferability is

dependent on readers' decisions about how findings transfer to other contexts.

Ethical Procedures

A number of safeguards were employed to ensure the ethical treatment of study

participants. Before any study data was collected, I obtained approval from Walden

University's Institutional Review Board. Once university approval was obtained, I

secured consent from the district superintendent, as well as administrators from each of

the two study sites. After these three levels of permissions were secured, I solicited

prospective participants.

I obtained signed consent from each participant prior to data collection. The consent form detailed the study's purpose, participation requirements, risks, and benefits. In addition, the consent form explained that participation was completely voluntary and that all participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any point, with no penalty. The consent form also detailed protections provided to ensure confidentiality. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, as well as the study site high schools. No direct quotes that contain potentially identifying information or other identifying information from the focus group was included in the study results.

I did not retain a link that connects participants' actual names with their chosen pseudonyms. If a participant wishes to withdraw from the investigation, they will have to identify themselves by their chosen pseudonym so that I may remove their data from my analysis. No incentives were provided for participation. In order to prevent any potential conflicts of interest, no participants with whom I had current or previous professional relationships with were included. No threats of coercion regarding participation existed on any level. In addition, the basic ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report were adhered to. These principles included respect, justice, and beneficence.

In terms of the security of study data, all data was stored in their electronic forms on my personal password-protected computer. I personally transcribed the focus groups, such that I was the only person who has access to raw data. All study data will be stored

for a period of 5 years, as required by Walden University; after that time, all raw data will be permanently deleted.

Summary

It is necessary for high school social workers to employ effective, research-based strategies to improve the high school retention of young mothers. Pregnancy and young motherhood are significant barriers to educational attainment (Akella & Jordan, 2015), as motherhood is stressful and requires significant resources that young mothers often lack. Among the many responsibilities of high school social workers are working with young mothers to ensure academic persistence. Without the necessary social support and encouragement, young mothers are at an increased risk for dropping out of high school.

With the proper resources and guidance, young mothers may be more hopeful about remaining in high school and continuing their education with confidence. However, little is known about the social support strategies that high school social workers employ to help young mothers. A better understanding of these strategies may shed light on ways that the assistance provided to young mothers may be improved, or how high school social workers may be better trained to help young mothers obtain the assistance and support they need to ensure academic persistence.

This section provided details of the study's methodology, including the method, design, and sampling strategy. Data and study instrumentation were also described, as were data collection, analysis, assurance of trustworthiness, and ethical treatment of

participants. The results are presented in Section 3.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to explore the social support strategies that high school social workers employ to foster academic persistence among young mothers between the ages of 15 and 19. Participating social workers were employed in two high schools in an urban New Jersey school district. The following essential question guided this investigation: What social support strategies do high school social workers employ to improve academic persistence among young mothers?

Data were collected via two focus groups, which consisted of a total of six participants. I originally intended to obtain a sample of seven focus group participants; however, finding school social workers who were willing to participate in this study proved more difficult than expected. After several weeks of inquiries, I was able to set up two focus groups with two different schools. Three participants were scheduled for the first focus group, and four were scheduled for the second one. However, one of the social workers did not show up for the first focus group, reducing the total sample to six. I opted to proceed as planned, with an understanding that if saturation was not indicated by focus group data from the six participants, additional social workers would be recruited and a third focus group would be conducted. Fortunately, preliminary analysis of focus group transcripts revealed that saturation was met, as no new themes or information emerged toward the end of the analysis.

The two focus groups were conducted as planned and described in Section 2 of this project. Data collection took place at a public library. I led the focus groups, following the focus group protocol in Appendix C. Informed consent was collected prior to data collection, and focus groups were audio recorded with permission from all participants.

This section contains results from the thematic analysis of focus group data. The section begins with a description of the data analysis process that was followed. Study findings are then provided, including a step-by-step breakdown of the processes for coding and theme development. A description of the sample is also included. The section closes with a summary and transition to Section 4, a discussion of how findings apply to professional practice and implications for social change.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data for this project were collected over a 3-week period. The first focus group was conducted during the second week of June, 2019, and the second one was conducted during the first week of July, 2019. The focus groups lasted approximately 60 minutes, with the second one slightly longer because it consisted of more participants. Besides the unexpected no-show of one member of the first focus group, as previously mentioned, both groups were conducted as planned and described in Section 2.

Sample Description

The final sample consisted of six school social workers who were currently employed at two high schools in the State of New Jersey. Two participants were male and four were female. A brief description of each participant, identified by his or her chosen pseudonym, is provided.

Tracey. Tracey participated in the first focus group. Tracey is a 56-year-old Caucasian male who has been a school social worker for 15 years. He holds a master's degree and worked previously as a group home director.

Mike. Mike participated in the first focus group. Mike is a 36-year-old African American male who has been a school social worker for 3 years. He holds a master's degree and previously worked as a hospital social worker.

Meeka. Meeka participated in the second focus group. She is a 42-year-old African American female who has served as a school social worker for 10 years. Prior to this work, she was a crisis counselor. Her highest level of completed education is a master's degree.

Natalie. Natalie participated in the second focus group. Natalie is a 40-year-old female African American/Latina who has been working as a school social worker for 16 years. She holds a MSW.

Felicia. Felicia participated in the second focus group. Felicia is a 42-year-old African American female with three years of experience as a school social worker. She

possesses two master's degrees. Her former professional experience includes serving as an assistant principal.

Mark. Mark participated in the second focus group. Mark is a 49-year-old male African American/Latino who holds a master's degree and has worked as a school social worker for 19 years. Prior to this position, Mark worked as a social worker for a group home.

After data collection for both groups were complete, I personally transcribed audio recordings of the two focus groups. Data analysis was conducted as detailed in Section 2. This six-step process consisted of the following:

1. Review data repeatedly by reading and rereading

2. Generate list of codes from data

3. Combine codes into themes and subthemes

4. Analyze themes

5. Define each theme

6. Write up results of analysis

During the first step, I read the focus group transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the data. During this step, she began to make notes of ideas, utterances, and phrases that were repeated during the focus group sessions. During the second step, I coded all of the study data, assigning codes to each set of ideas, words, or phrases that repeatedly appeared. All coding was manually performed; qualitative data analysis

software was not used. Codes were organized into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The final list consisted of 30 codes; each code and its corresponding frequency are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequency of Codes

Code	Frequency
Healthcare	4
Identify current supports	8
Academic barriers	5
Counseling	5
Refer to programs/resources	19
Communicate with teachers	2
Onsite daycare	4
Free daycare	8
Transportation assistance	3
Parenting skills	3
Vouchers	2
Provide information	7
Coach/encourager	3
Help applying for assistance	5
Government assistance	9
Help finding employment	4
Education on financial literacy/budgeting	2
Food	3
Clothing	2
Tutoring	3
Student/teacher relationships	7
Student/teacher meetings	3
Don't do home visits	7
Guidance counselors	5
Look to the future	3
Mental health/resilience	3
Attendance	3
Flexibility	4
Autonomy	5
Personal responsibility	7

As indicated in Table 1, the most common code to appear was referring to programs/resources (n = 19). Other prominent codes included government assistance (n= 9), identifying current supports (n = 8), free daycare (n = 8), not doing home visits (n = 7), personal responsibility (n = 7), and student-teacher relationships (n = 7). The frequency of the remaining codes ranged from 2 to 5.

For steps 3 and 4 of the data analysis process, I began the process of organizing codes into themes and subthemes, and then differentiating and defining each theme. I examined similarities between codes and arranged them into common groups. During this process, the 30 codes were grouped into the following six themes: (a) childcare assistance, (b) fostering positive educational outcomes, (c) meeting basic needs, (d) providing information, support, and resources, (e) fostering positive change, and (f) home visits. A total of eight subthemes emerged, including (a) overcome barriers, (b) collaboration with teachers/guidance counselors, (c) financial assistance, (d) essential requirements, (e) information and support, (f) resources, (g) improving self-sufficiency, and (h) improving self-perceptions. Each of these themes and their corresponding subthemes and codes are represented in Table 2.

Per step five of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedures, I defined each theme as follows.

Childcare assistance. The strategies and resources provided by school social

workers to help young mothers secure the childcare needed to return to school and secure employment.

Fostering positive educational outcomes. The strategies school social workers employed to help young mothers overcome barriers and achieve academic success.

Meeting basic needs. The strategies provided by school social workers to help young mothers meet basic financial and material needs.

Providing information, support, and resources. The information, support, and resources provided by school social workers to help young mothers overcome challenges related to young motherhood.

Fostering positive change. The ways that school social workers fostered improved self-sufficiency and self-perceptions among young mothers.

Home visits. Home visitation conducted by school social workers to follow up on the needs and progress of young mothers.

Table 2

Themes and Corresponding Codes

Theme	Subthemes	Corresponding Codes
Childcare assistance	--	• Onsite daycare • Free daycare
Fostering positive educational outcomes	Overcome barriers	• Academic barriers • Tutoring • Attendance • Flexibility
	Collaboration with teachers/guidance counselors	• Communicate with teachers • Student/teacher relationships • Student/teacher meetings • Guidance counselors
Meeting basic needs	Financial assistance	• Help finding employment • Vouchers • Government assistance • Help applying for assistance
	Essential requirements	• Healthcare • Transportation assistance • Food • Clothing
Providing information, support, and resources	Information and Support	• Provide information • Identify current supports • Counseling
	Resources	• Refer to programs/resources • Parent skills
Fostering positive change	Improving self-sufficiency	• Autonomy • Personal responsibility • Education on financial literacy/budgeting
	Improving self-perceptions	• Look to the future • Coach/encourager • Mental health/resilience
Home visits	--	• Don't do home visits

After themes were defined, member checking was conducted. Member checking empowers participants to become co-researchers by taking an active role in the process of data analysis. To conduct member checking, I sent copies of the initial analyses to participants, via email. Participants were asked to review the preliminary analysis to ensure it aligned with the ideas they intended to communicate during the focus groups. The period of member checking lasted one week. Feedback from all six participants was positive; member checking resulted in no changes to the analysis. Finally, step six consisted of writing up study results, which are presented in the following section.

Findings

Study findings are presented thematically. Each theme and its corresponding subthemes are discussed. Examples and quotes from focus group data are used to illustrate each theme and subtheme.

Childcare Assistance

The first theme of childcare assistance was defined as the strategies and resources provided by school social workers to help young mothers secure the childcare needed to return to school and secure employment. Four participants specifically mentioned onsite daycare options they would help eligible young mothers utilize. For example, Meeka's school provided young mothers with onsite daycare as long as they maintained an attendance rate of at least 85%. The free daycare available through Tracey's school required young mothers to maintain at least a C grade average to access the services.

Tracey explained that when young mothers were not eligible for the onsite daycare program, or when the program was full, he would refer mothers to other resources to help them obtain the childcare they needed, at no cost. Natalie's school also provided onsite daycare, and she explained that when working with young mothers, "I also talk with the daycare director at my school to see what are the steps for possibly applying for a spot in the school daycare." Mike connected young mothers to his school's free onsite daycare; when doing so, he would also connect them to home instructional resources to help mothers return to school after giving birth without falling significantly behind in their studies.

When young mothers were unable to access on-site childcare services, participants referred them to other sources of free daycare. Meeka explained that she would arrange childcare "through local organizations such as the Leaguers who provide onsite weekly support and case management." Natalie described a "Programs for Parents" intervention, through which young mothers could obtain vouchers for childcare. Similarly, Felicia explained, "I also provide information for schools that offers free and affordable childcare, such as Abbot programs, because it gives young mothers many options for childcare."

When asked about the strategies they used to help young mothers, academically, Tracy and Mike both emphasized the importance of connecting the women with free childcare options. For both of these participants, free daycare was viewed as an essential

part of helping young mothers succeed in school; daycare was not discussed in silos, but as a component of more comprehensive programs aimed at helping young mothers. For example, Mike described a school-based program that provided mothers with free childcare as well as additional resources to meet other needs. Tracey, who worked at the same school as Mike, described this program as a grant-funded initiative that provided young mothers with free childcare, as well as classes to develop parenting skills and early intervention services for children in need.

Fostering Positive Educational Outcomes

The second theme of fostering positive educational outcomes was defined as the strategies school social workers employed to help young mothers overcome barriers and achieve academic success. This theme consisted of the following two subthemes: overcome barriers and collaboration with teachers/guidance counselors.

Overcome barriers. School social workers fostered positive educational outcomes by helping young mothers deal with challenges related to learning and attending classes. Participants shared that many young mothers struggled academically, both before and after having a child. For example, Meeka shared, "I often experience young mothers who are struggling academically either before or after the birth of their child." Later, Meeka added that young mothers "frequently do not understand what is needed to bring up a grade or how to obtain academic success," suggesting that some of the challenges experienced by young mothers may relate to poor understandings of

academic requirements. Mike acknowledged the common academic barriers experienced by young mothers and worked to proactively set them up with home instruction options to prevent them from falling behind after giving birth. Mark shared that he would "develop academic strategies to help the student overcome academic, social and emotional impediments to learning by conducting student/teacher conferences, modifying student schedules, and emphasizing home study assignments." Mike emphasized reliance on peer tutors, explaining he would connect young mothers with peers tutors to obtain help in any subjects that young mothers struggled with.

Tracey, Mike, and Meeka all felt that connecting young mothers with tutoring resources could help them excel academically. Meeka worked directly with teachers to negotiate after school hours, during which teachers could provide individual academic assistance to young mothers. Tracey echoed this sentiment, sharing: "I also encourage them to utilize tutoring from teachers if they struggle to understand a particular subject."

Two participants (Meeka and Tracey) specifically mentioned the importance of helping young mothers maintain high attendance rates, as a key to ensuring academic success. Tracey explained that he expected students to "maintain a good attendance record." Tracey also mentioned the importance of holding young mothers accountable and following up on their class attendance. Mark and Felicia both acknowledged that regular attendance at traditional schools could be difficult for young mothers; these participants emphasized the importance of educational flexibility to ensure academic

success. For example, Mark shared, "I talk to teachers about providing flexible academic instruction for students," later adding that encouraging teachers to modify schedules and assignments for young mothers could foster improved academic outcomes. Felicia also believed that less rigid schedules were helpful for young mothers: "I think a combination of night and day school options will assist with flexibility."

      Collaboration with teachers/guidance counselors. Another way that participants fostered positive educational outcomes among young mothers was through effective collaboration between young mothers, teachers, and guidance counselors. For example, Meeka emphasized the importance of maintaining communication with teachers and keeping them "in the loop about students' academic experiences." Natalie, Felecia, Tracey, and Mike all emphasized the importance of fostering healthy student/teacher relationships. Natalie explained, "I meet with the young mother and the teacher together and discuss concerns the young mother has. The teacher and I then strategize and work with the student to best assist her." Similarly, Felicia shared, "I try to encourage a proactive approach as opposed to a reactive approach, as it pertains to student/teacher relationships." Mike employed "social listening learning" to educate teachers on the needs of young mothers and foster strong student-teacher relationships through compassion. Three participants (Natalie, Meeka, and Mark) specifically described using student-teacher meetings to build relationships between young mothers and their teachers. Meeka also used student-teacher meetings as a tool to facilitate young mother's

autonomy, explaining that she encouraged young mothers to take the initiative to reach

out to teachers, set up meetings, and engage in frequent conversations about their

academic progress.

Three participants (Meeka, Natalie, and Felicia) also emphasized the importance

of collaborating with guidance counselors to ensure the academic success of young

mothers. For example, Meeka stated, "I help maintain transparent communication with

teachers and guidance counselors; it keeps everyone on the same page and appears to

help the mothers progress." Meeka later shared that she met with young mothers'

guidance counselors each grading period to keep young mothers' abreast of their progress

and help them understand the impact of their academic progress on future college and

career options. Natalie enlisted guidance counselors to help young mothers understand

expectations and requirements for completing their education. Felicia shared that regular

meetings with guidance counselors helped young mothers maintain pace with their

academic responsibilities.

Meeting Basic Needs

The theme of meeting basic needs described the strategies provided by school

social workers to help young mothers meet basic financial and material needs. This

theme consisted of the following two subthemes: financial assistance and essential

requirements.

Financial assistance. Financial assistance was viewed as essential to young mother's academic success. Without meeting their financial needs, young mothers are placed positions where they must focus on the survival of themselves and their children, de-emphasizing long-term academic success. The two main ways that school social workers helped young mothers meet their financial needs was through (a) helping them obtain employment, and (b) helping them obtain government assistance. Natalie, Felicia, Tracey, and Mike all mentioned ways they assisted young mothers with finding employment. For example, Natalie shared, "I also encourage the young mothers to finish school and help them apply for programs or trade schools, to help them access training that would lead to full time employment." Felicia provided young mothers with information on summer employment to help them "obtain some kind of financial stability." Tracey provided young mothers with employment resources and assisted with filling out job applications. When asked about the resources he provided to young mothers, Mike specifically mentioned helping them find jobs.

Participants also helped young mothers learn about and apply for government assistance to ease their financial burdens. Meeka described helping young mothers fill out WIC applications, while Natalie connected them with programs that helped them apply for aid through WIC, Medicaid, food stamps, or Section 8. Natalie also helped young mothers gather the documentation necessary to complete such applications. Similarly, Marked shared: "I refer them to county social services for WIC, Food Stamps,

SNAP and rental assistance programs." Tracey would help young mothers set up TANF grant when necessary.

Essential requirements. Similar to the importance of making sure young mothers' financial needs were met through employment or government assistance, participants also shared ways they helped ensure essential needs (such as food, healthcare, transportation, and clothing) were met. Mark referred young mothers to nursing programs where they could obtain neonatal care. Tracey mentioned that the program at his school provided care intervention services for young babies, while Meeka communicated with young mothers' primary care providers to identify unmet healthcare needs, which she could then work to address.

Transportation was another essential need that participants assisted young mothers with. Reliable transportation is not only essential to getting to and from jobs, but also between school and daycare providers. The program at Meeka's school connected young mothers with transportation so they could get to and from school; she explained: "This can be in the form of bus tickets or van transport through a community organization for mothers who are classified." Felicia and Tracey also mentioned transportation services they often connected young mothers with.

Finally, participants described helping young mothers access the essential resources of food and clothing. Felicia provided referrals to food banks. Mike shared that he would "try to find whatever resources they need such as food and clothing."

Tracey referred young mothers to donation services "so they can get any needs, like food, clothes, pampers, and holiday gifts."

Providing Information, Support, and Resources

The theme of providing information, support, and resources was defined as the information, support, and resources provided by school social workers to help young mothers overcome challenges related to young motherhood. This theme consisted of the following two subthemes: information and support and resources.

Information and support. Many participants viewed the provision of information and support as essential to their professional roles. The code provide information was one of the more prominent codes in the dataset. Felicia shared that she provided young mothers with information for referral services; she also provided information to schools that could be distributed to help young mothers access services. Tracey mentioned providing information on childcare services, while Felicia gave young mothers information about summer employment. Mark provided young mothers with information about parenting programs, as well as resources to ensure they had safe environments.

An important form of support mentioned by four participants was counseling. Natalie shared that she often provided young mothers with one-on-one counseling: "Individual counseling helps give them the opportunity to vent, as well as work through social emotional issues they may be facing." Felicia offered both individual and group

counseling to young mothers, while Mark provided counseling to help young mothers improve their life skills. Mike cited counseling as one of the first strategies he leveraged to help young mothers.

In order to provide young mothers with valid and applicable information, participants also worked to identify supports they currently had, as well as those they did not have but were available to them. For example, when asked about the strategies she used to foster social support among young mothers, Meeka replied, "It is important for young mothers to first meet with the social worker to identify what current supports are in place." Following this line of thought, Natalie shared, "it is essential that they know there is support available for them." When asked how she helped young mothers access necessary financial resources, Meeka started with "An assessment of what is currently in place."

Resources. Overwhelmingly, all participants described their responsibilities for referring young mothers to the academic and personal resources they needed to stay in school and excel. In this way, participating school social workers often did not directly provide young mothers with essential resources; rather, they educated them and helped them access resources. The code refer to programs/resources was by far the most prominent one in the dataset, appearing 19 times across the two focus groups. All six participants described the ways they referred young mothers to essential resources. Felicia described referring young mothers to support groups for young parents, while

Natalie often referred them to programs that provided "resources such as a free doulas for delivery, assistance with applying for programs such as WIC and Medicaid." Mark referred young mothers to programs to obtain healthcare and parenting skills. Tracey and Mike both referred young mothers to the on-site program at their schools, as well as outside resources that were not available through the on-site program.

Most participants described referring mothers to programs where they could obtain free childcare. Mike specifically mentioned referring young mothers to home-based schooling options to help circumvent academic setbacks associated with the challenges of young motherhood. Mark referred young mothers to county social service programs, while Tracey gave referrals to donation services. Similarly, Mike mentioned referring young mothers to churches for charitable assistance. Felicia gave "referrals for after school programs that assist with assignments." The following sentiment from Tracey seemed to convey the comprehensive approach that participants took when referring young mothers to resources: "We pretty much are able to link teenage mothers to whatever services are needed."

Fostering Positive Change

The theme of fostering positive change was defined as the ways that school social workers fostered improved self-sufficiency and self-perceptions among young mothers. This theme consisted of the following two subthemes: improving self-sufficiency and improving self-perceptions.

Improving self-sufficiency. Improving young mothers' sense of self-sufficiency was viewed by participants as essential to their academic progress and personal success. For example, when asked about the social support strategies she leveraged, Felicia referred young mothers to parent support groups because she believed they fostered self-sufficiency. The counseling sessions that Mark provided to young mothers emphasized "decision-making and personal responsibility," which may then create improvements in their sense of self-sufficiency. As previously mentioned, Tracey encouraged young mothers to take initiative and arrange meeting with their teachers, as this could foster a sense of autonomy and personal responsibility.

Mark emphasized the importance of providing young mothers with skills needed to practice resilience and perseverance so they can learn to act in the best interests of themselves and their children. Similarly, Meeka shared that she helped "students learn how to effectively identify and communicate their needs, manage their time and fulfill their responsibilities." Felicia encouraged young mothers to regularly meet with their guidance counselors because this could help them understand and keep pace with their academic responsibilities. Felicia and Mark both mentioned helping students develop financial literacy and budgeting skills, fostering financial responsibility. Overall, by facilitating a sense of responsibility and autonomy among young mothers, school social workers might help young mothers improve their sense of self-sufficiency, boosting their confidence, motivation, and academic outcomes.

Improving self-perceptions. Participants also helped young mothers improve their overall self-perceptions and personal orientations. For example, Meeka and Natalie both worked to foster positive future orientations among young mothers. Meeka had "conversations with students are around how their academic success impacts their ability to provide the best future for their child," while Natalie helped young mothers "weigh the pros and cons of finishing school, and help them look ahead to the future." Because mental health is essential to healthy self-perceptions, participants also discussed the importance of checking up on young mothers' emotional and mental states, and employing strategies to foster a sense of resilience. Natalie believed the counseling she provided helped young mothers deal with social and emotional turmoil, while Mark focused on instilling a sense of resilience and perseverance "to protect against feelings for depression." Also, by providing life advice, participants were able to serve as coaches and encouragers to young mothers, which could help to bolster their self-perceptions.

Home Visits

Home visits are visitations conducted by school social workers to follow up on the needs and progress of young mothers. Although research indicates that home visits may help school social workers better assist young mothers, none of the participants in this study utilized them. When asked to describe the ways they used home visitation to help young mothers continue their education, Meeka shared that she had never conducted

home visits. Natalie explained that home visits were not part of her current practice.

Tracey and Mike both admitted to not conducting home visits. While Felicia agreed that

"home visits can improve the academic persistence of young mothers," she shared "I

have not personally done any." Mark also felt that "home visits would be great," but

explained, "I don't do them, it's just not something the school has set in place."

Summary

The aim of this study was to explore the social support strategies that high school

social workers employed to foster academic persistence among young mothers. Data

collected from two focus groups consisting, totaling six participants, shed light on a

number of ways that school social workers are essential to fostering academic success

among young mothers. Six themes emerged from the analysis, revealing fundamental

strategies used by school social workers to improve the academic outcomes for young

mothers: (a) childcare assistance, (b) fostering positive educational outcomes, (c) meeting

basic needs, (d) providing information, support, and resources, (e) fostering positive

change, and (f) home visits. A total of eight subthemes emerged: (a) overcoming

barriers, (b) collaboration with teachers/guidance counselors, (c) financial assistance, (d)

essential requirements, (e) information and support, (f) resources, (g) improving self-

sufficiency, and (h) improving self-perceptions.

Overall, participating social workers emphasized the importance of connecting

young mothers with the resources and services they needed, not only for school, but also

for their personal lives. If young mothers' basic needs for food, shelter, clothing,

transportation, and healthcare are not met, it may be unreasonable to expect them to stay

in school, maintain a high attendance rate, excel, and graduate. Thus, the first line of

action taken by school social workers was to help young mothers obtain the help they

needed to meet basic needs; this was done in a number of ways, such as connecting them

with programs, helping them fill out applications for government assistance, assisting

with job applications, referring them to free childcare services, and connecting them with

sources of transportation sources, food banks, charities.

In addition to ensuring their basic needs were met, participants also provided

social and emotional support, either directly (through counseling) or indirectly (by

connecting young mothers with resources such as parenting programs). Participants also

worked to foster positive change in young mothers, helping them develop a sense of

autonomy, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility. They tried to orient young

mothers to the future, teaching them to make decisions based on long-term implications

and instilling a sense of hope for the future.

In terms of the ways participants directly worked to improve academic outcomes,

participating school social workers described fostering relationships between young

mothers and their teachers, creating collaborative partnerships with teachers and guidance

counselors, referring young mothers to tutoring services, and arranging more flexible

educational options, such as in-home instruction. Surprisingly, none of the participants in this study conducted home visits with young mothers.

This section provided an in-depth review of study results. Section 4 contains a discussion of these findings, particularly how they may be applied to professional ethics in the social work discipline. Recommendations for social work practice are provided, as is a discussion of implications for social change. The project concludes with my reflection and final message.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to explore the social support strategies that high school social workers employed to foster academic persistence among young mothers between the ages of 15 and 19. Data were collected via two focus groups which consisted of a total of six participants. Participating social workers were employed in two high schools in an urban New Jersey school district.

The following essential question guided this investigation: What social support strategies do high school social workers employ to improve academic persistence among young mothers? The following six themes emerged from the analysis, revealing fundamental strategies used by school social workers to improve academic outcomes for young mothers: (a) childcare assistance, (b) fostering positive educational outcomes, (c) meeting basic needs, (d) providing information, support, and resources, (e) fostering positive change, and (f) home visits. A total of eight subthemes emerged: (a) overcoming barriers, (b) collaboration with teachers/guidance counselors, (c) financial assistance, (d) essential requirements, (e) information and support, (f) resources, (g) improving self-sufficiency, and (h) improving self-perceptions.

Participants emphasized the importance of connecting young mothers with the resources and services they needed, not only for school, but also for their personal lives. In addition to ensuring young mothers' basic needs were met, participants also provided social and emotional support, either directly (through counseling) or indirectly (by

connecting young mothers with resources such as parenting programs). Regarding

academic outcomes, participants worked to foster positive change in young mothers,

helping them develop a sense of autonomy, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility.

Participants also fostered relationships between young mothers and their teachers,

creating collaborative partnerships with teachers and guidance counselors, referring

young mothers to tutoring services, and arranging more flexible educational options, such

as in-home instruction.

Findings from this study contribute new knowledge to the discipline of social

work that may be used to improve school social workers' abilities to help young mothers

remain in high school. Prior to this study, scant research existed on the professional

strategies used by school social workers to help young mothers. The current project

explains effective strategies leveraged by these professionals, as well as gaps in practice

that may be addressed to improve the assistance provided to young mothers.

Understanding the strategies that high school social workers employ to foster academic

persistence among young mothers is essential to improving long-term outcomes for

young mothers and their children.

The final section of this capstone project provides a discussion of study results,

how these results advance knowledge, and how they may be applied to professional

practice. The section begins with a discussion of how results may be applied to the

professional ethics of social work practice. Next, professional recommendations for

school social workers are provided. Important implications for social change are discussed, and the section closes with concluding sentiments.

Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

The current study was guided by the following three ethical principles outlined in the NASW Code of Ethics. A discussion of how findings from the current study may be applied to each of these principles is provided. The aim of this study was to ultimately address the pressing social issue of poor academic persistence among young mothers, which is a social problem. Young mothers are often financially stressed and possess inadequate social support (Boggs & Duncan, 2014); this lack of support impedes academic persistence. The social and economic costs of young motherhood are pervasive, often leading to high school dropout rates and poverty for these young women (Watson & Vogel, 2017).

According to the CDC (2015), school social workers can help improve the academic outcomes of young mothers. Findings from this study revealed five main ways that school social workers fostered academic success among this population. The five categories of strategies were: (a) providing access to childcare assistance, (b) fostering positive educational outcomes, (c) helping to ensure mothers' basic needs were met, (d) providing young mothers with information, support, and resources, and (e) fostering positive changes in young mothers' lives. Overall, findings from this study revealed a number of ways that school social workers intentionally worked to help young mothers

succeed in school; these strategies may be adopted in professional practice to help young

mothers throughout the country.

As stated by Dulmus (2012), a primary professional responsibility of social

workers is to restore social functioning and promote social justice among members of

society. Young mothers are often considered a disadvantaged or marginalized

population. To prevent social injustice, they should be provided with the support they

need to achieve desired outcomes, such as obtaining an education and raising healthy

children. According to the ACLU (2014), young mothers often drop out of high school

because of impractical and unaccommodating high school rules and schedules. One of

the ways that social workers in the current study helped improve young mothers'

academic outcomes was to provide them with more flexible schooling options, such as

home instruction or night school opportunities.

Given punitive stances toward young mothers and welfare reform that has

reduced the assistance available to them (Tach & Edin, 2017), school social workers can

also address injustices by helping young mothers access the resources they need to thrive

and succeed. In the current study, social workers did this by connecting young mothers

with resources that could provide financial assistance (such as government assistance or

securing after-school jobs), basic needs (such as food, healthcare, transportation, and

clothing), and other resources required to foster academic success (such as childcare and

support groups). Findings from the current project suggest that school social workers

employed in schools throughout the country may leverage flexible school options and the provision of key resources to help young mothers, thereby addressing social injustices related to inequities faced by this population.

The focus of this investigation was the social support strategies that school social workers employed to help young mothers persist academically. Collaborative relationships between social workers, young mothers, family members, and other community members are essential to the provision of this support. In the current study, school social workers personally fostered relationships with young mothers, and they also worked to nurture relationships between young mothers, teachers, and guidance counselors. Developing these relationships helped to create a support and accountability team for each young mother. Findings suggest that the development of these relationships may be a valuable strategy that all school social workers could leverage to improve outcomes for young mothers.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

Practical Recommendations

Findings from this study revealed a number of valuable ways that school social workers helped to improve the personal and academic outcomes of young mothers. In addition, findings revealed a gap in practical strategies that could signal an area for improvement. In this section, practical recommendations for school social workers are provided.

Childcare assistance. All focus group participants mentioned the importance of helping young mothers secure childcare assistance. Whether referring mothers to onsite daycare options at their schools, connecting them with outside programs that provided free daycare, or helping them secure funding for daycare in other ways, all participants endeavored to help young mothers access the childcare they needed. Participants acknowledged that access to childcare was integral to young mothers' educational success; if they cannot obtain childcare, young mothers are less likely to be able to attend school and graduate on time.

Accordingly, an important practical recommendation for school social workers is to make sure that young mothers have access to childcare. Following examples given by participants in the current study, school social workers should endeavor to connect young mothers with outside childcare options when onsite care is not available. For schools that provide onsite daycare, school social workers should make sure young mothers understand the eligibility requirements (such as maintaining a certain GPA or attendance record). By ensuring that young mothers have access to free or affordable daycare, school social workers can eliminate a major hurdle to academic persistence and improve success for this population.

Fostering positive educational outcomes. Another practical recommendation to emerge from this study is for school social workers to intentionally focus on fostering positive educational outcomes for young mothers. Two ways that participants did this

was by helping mothers overcome barriers and developing collaborative relationships with teachers and guidance counselors. Based on examples from the current project, school social workers may help young mothers overcome barriers by providing them with flexible schooling options, connecting them with tutors, and following up on their attendance records and academic progress (that is, holding young mothers accountable for their own academic success).

Another way that school social workers can help young mothers overcome barriers is by fostering relationships between young mothers, teachers, and guidance counselors. These relationships help develop a school-based support team that not only helps to provide young mothers with the assistance they need, but also keeps tabs on their performance to ensure young mothers do not fall through the cracks. This type of academic support team could also provide young mothers with a sense of social support and encouragement that could foster educational attainment. Thus, school social workers should actively engage with teachers, social workers, and young mothers to foster communication and accountability while improving mothers' sense of support.

Meeting young mothers' basic needs. Similar to the emphasis placed on ensuring young mothers had access to childcare, results from this project indicated another practical strategy that school social workers should employ is to make sure young mothers' financial and basic needs are met. Without basic resources (such as money, food, clothing, shelter, and transportation), young mothers may be unable to focus on

school or dedicate time to education. Thus, school social workers should connect young

mothers with resources required to meet these basic needs, as education is secondary to

survival resources, such as food and shelter. Some of the ways that school social workers

may help young mothers with their basic needs include: (a) help them secure jobs, (b)

help them obtain government assistance (such as WIC, Medicaid, food stamps, or Section

8), (c) connect them with programs that provide free healthcare to mothers and babies, (d)

provide them with transportation vouchers, or (e) refer them to food banks, housing

assistance, or charitable organizations that help disadvantaged populations.

Providing information, support, and resources. Perhaps the most salient

practical recommendation to emerge from the current project is for school social workers

to provide young mothers with information, support, and resources they need for their

personal and academic success. Many participants in this project viewed the provision of

information and support as essential to their professional roles. Further, all participants

felt professionally responsible for referring young mothers to the academic and personal

resources they needed to stay in school and excel.

Often, participating school social workers did not directly provide young mothers

with essential resources; rather, they educated them and helped them access available

resources. In this way, an important practical recommendation for school social workers

who engage with young mothers is to remember that an essential part of their role is to

research available resources, educate young mothers about them, and then help them

access those resources. For example, school social workers should stay abreast of any changes in policies related to government assistance, as well as new programs or organizations that may offer help to young mothers. It is also essential that school social workers not only teach young mothers about the resources available to them, but also that they help young mothers access those resources. Young mothers often feel overwhelmed and unsupported, and by stepping in and guiding them through the processes of obtaining the support they need, school social workers may make profound differences in the lives of young mothers.

Fostering positive change. School social workers should also work to foster positive change for young mothers. The main ways that participants in the current study did this was by nurturing young mothers' sense of self-sufficiency, teaching them to take personal responsibility, and helping to improve their self-perceptions. Improving young mothers' sense of self-sufficiency was viewed by participants as essential to their academic progress and personal success. Participants also helped young mothers improve their overall self-perceptions and personal orientations, which they believed could increase mothers' self-esteem, resilience, and confidence.

Based on examples from the current project, school social workers may foster young mothers' self-sufficiency and sense of responsibility by referring them to educational support groups, providing counseling and life skills, encouraging young mothers to take initiative in their own education, and teaching them how to identify and

communicate their needs. By facilitating a sense of responsibility and autonomy among young mothers, school social workers might help them improve their sense of self-sufficiency, boosting their confidence, motivation, and academic outcomes.

It may also be valuable for school social workers to work with young mothers to improve their self-perceptions. Some of the ways they may do this is by helping to create future-oriented perspectives among young mothers, providing them with counseling to help them cope with the social and emotional challenges of young motherhood, and assessing their mental health. In addition, school social workers may provide young mothers with practical life advice, serving as coaches and encouragers, which may help bolster their self-perceptions.

Conducting home visits. A final practical recommendation to emerge from this project is based on an important strategy that none of the participants leveraged: conducting home visits. Although home visitation can be valuable for young mothers (Barnet et al., 2007), this strategy was not utilized by school social workers in this project. Although I did not follow up to ask why home visits were not conducted, participants' responses during the focus groups indicated that their employing schools did not have home visitation strategies or policies. Thus, it may be necessary for schools to develop and implement home visitation policies for school social workers, while also providing them with the time and resources to conduct home visits. Home visits could

provide school social workers with new opportunities to help young mothers, meeting them where they are rather than forcing young mothers to come to them for help.

Application to the Researcher's Personal Practice

Although I am not a school social worker, findings from the current project may certainly be applied to my professional practice as a psychotherapist. Because I often work with teenagers and young mothers, I may be able to apply the strategies from this project to help my clients. Importantly, as emphasized by findings in this project, I will pay closer attention to ways I can help young mothers locate and access resources to meet their personal and educational needs.

Application to Broader Policies

Because teen pregnancy is a persistent social problem in the United States, findings from the current project provide useful hints about the ways revisions to broader policies may provide better help to young mothers at risk for academic failure and dropout. Overall, the assistance provided to young mothers must be comprehensive and dynamic. It is important to understand that young mothers have a number of pressing needs that must be simultaneously met in order to optimize their personal and academic outcomes. For example, if young mothers are required to maintain a strong attendance record to be eligible for certain resources, it is critical to ensure that they have access to free childcare so they are able to attend school. Similarly, one cannot expect a young mother to prioritize her education if she is at risk of becoming homeless or is unable to

provide food for herself or her child; thus, policies must acknowledge that young

mothers' basic needs must be met before they can be expected to attend school regularly

and maintain passing GPAs. Resources should not be withheld or provided in silos;

instead, young mothers need access to comprehensive programs that help them learn

about and access all the resources they need to succeed, at once.

Because none of the participants in the current project conducted home visits, this

is another area where policy revisions may be needed. Home visitation can provide

school social workers with valuable opportunities to better understand young mothers'

social, emotional, financial, and psychological needs, while also fostering close, trusting

relationships. Current policies may prohibit home visits due to inadequate financial or

staff resources. However, because home visits have the potential to be very valuable,

changes should be made that allow school social workers to take advantage of this

strategy.

Limitations

The current project was subject to limitations. First, data were collected from two

small focus groups consisting of six school social workers employed at two high schools.

The small sample and qualitative nature of this study precludes generalization of

findings; however, generalizability was not a goal of this study. A larger study consisting

of more focus groups, or a larger focus group with more participants, may have fostered

greater discussion and interaction, resulting in richer data. The scope of the study was

limited to school social workers employed at two high schools in the same geographic

region. It is possible that school social workers employed in other school districts and

regions may have different strategies for fostering academic persistence among young

mothers. As admitted at the beginning of Section 3, I also experienced some difficulties

securing the sample for this study. Although I originally intended to secure a sample of

seven participants, one individual did not show up for the first focus group, reducing my

total sample size to six. Fortunately, saturation was still indicated with data from the six

participants, so this limitation was accepted.

The time of data collection also created a minor limitation for this project.

Because I collected data during the summer months – when school is not in session –

school social workers may have shared slightly different perspectives and experiences

than if I had conducted the focus groups in the middle of the school year. That is, it is

possible that participants may have felt somewhat removed from the topic of academic

persistence among young mothers during the summer months, which provide a brief

vacation from their professional responsibilities.

Admittedly, qualitative data from sources such as focus groups is always subject

to the perspectives and information that participants choose to share. Although I

protected the identities of all participants (as well as the schools they worked for), it is

possible that participants may have reported using strategies more often than they

actually did. I believe that the nature of focus groups helps to prevent this. Especially

because all of the participants in each group were co-workers, it seems that participants would feel more accountable for their answers and likely to keep their responses truthful. However, this is an inevitable shortcoming of interview and focus group data that should be acknowledged.

Recommendations for Future Research

Findings from this study indicate opportunities for future research on the roles that social workers play in improving the academic outcomes of young mothers. Because the current project only included a small group of school social workers employed at two high schools in the same district, future researchers may replicate the current investigation with larger focus groups. It is possible that bigger focus groups consisting of more school social workers would spark greater conversation and reveal additional insights about the strategies employed to help young mothers. Similarly, future researchers may expand upon the scope of the current project by replicating this project in other school that are located in other parts of the country. The incidence of teen pregnancy varies by geographic region, so school social workers in other regions may have different experiences and strategies to share.

Because participants in the current study did not conduct home visits, future researchers may specifically examine the issue of home visitation. Researchers could conduct a nationwide survey to explore how often school social workers conduct home

visits with young mothers. In addition, researchers could examine the barriers that exist to home visits and how those barriers may be overcome.

Finally, future research is required to understand the needs of young mothers, from their perspectives. Scholars could conduct interviews with young mothers to understand their perspectives of personal and academic needs. Such an investigation may shed light on any discrepancies that exist in the needs that school social workers emphasize and address, and the needs that young mothers actually experience and express.

Recommendations for Dissemination of Findings

It is important that findings from this study be disseminated to the stakeholders who may find them useful, including school social workers and educational policymakers. To share findings with school social workers, I intend to develop a *brief* that highlights the project's purpose, findings, and practical recommendations. This document will be kept short (two to three pages), as I recognize that school social workers have limited spare time. I will share the brief with principals at high schools in the study site district and encourage them to pass those findings along to their school social workers. I would also like to write an article that shares findings and recommendations from this project, and have it published it a professional trade magazine for school social workers and psychologists.

As for policymakers, I intend to convert this project into a white paper that can be shared with educational leaders and policymakers. I will share the white paper with appropriate professionals (such as leaders at the New Jersey Department of Education). I would also like to disseminate this white paper to superintendents throughout the state, to help spread recommendations for school social workers that emerged from this study. Importantly, I believe that developing and disseminating a white paper has the potential to be a powerful tool for addressing the needs of young mothers, who are often marginalized in this society. It is important that their needs are met, and for school social workers to be provided with the freedom and resources they need to help young mothers. Findings from this study also emphasize the cumulative challenges faced by young mothers, which may help policymakers understand that helping this population requires comprehensive and dynamic interventions.

Implications for Social Change

Findings from the current project have a number of valuable social change implications. These implications can be applied at different societal levels, in practice, and in research. A discussion of these implications appears as follows.

Micro/Macro Levels

Social change implications of this study exist at multiple levels. At the micro level, recommendations could be applied to improve the lives of young mothers at individual high schools. At this level, strategies applied to help individual mothers may

also benefit their children and families. When young mothers persist and complete high school, far more opportunities exist for them – whether those opportunities open doors to college, technical training, or careers that require a high school diploma. As a result of these increased opportunities, young mothers may enjoy better long-term outcomes, in terms of their quality of life and professional accomplishments. The children of young mothers may also benefit when their mothers persist academically, not only because of the improved standard of living the mother will be able to provide, but also through the positive role model their mother becomes, as a young woman who was able to overcome substantial challenges and complete her education.

At the macro level, strategies that help young mothers persist through high school also have significant social change implications. Because young mothers often require government assistance, those who do not complete high school are less likely to earn a livable wage and become independent of public assistance. Education creates professional opportunities to earn a better living, independent of financial assistance. In addition, at the societal level, young mothers who finish high school and are able to persist into further education or career opportunities, and become economic contributors and taxpayers.

Practice

Findings from this study provide a number of practical ways that school social workers may improve the assistance they provide to young mothers. As previously

mentioned, these areas of recommendation include (a) providing childcare assistance, (b) fostering positive educational outcomes, (c) ensuring that the basic needs of young mothers are met, (d) providing young mothers with information, support, and resources, (e) fostering positive changes, and (f) conducting home visits. Importantly, focus group participants emphasized simultaneously addressing the many needs that young mothers experience. Thus, the practical strategies to emerge from this investigation should be implemented simultaneously, not in silos.

Research

While a number of recommendations for future research emerged from the current project, one of the most salient practical implications for research is simply that more research on this topic is needed. This project highlighted the lack of research on the ways school social workers may help young mothers succeed, despite their very central roles in the lives of these young women. Thus, future research on best practices with young mothers may be used to help these professionals improve the assistance they provide to this population.

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Summary

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Young mothers often struggle to continue their education after childbirth (Nissen, 2014). They often lack resources needed to continue schooling, which can prompt them to drop out of high school (SmithBattle et al., 2017). Social workers are responsible for extending educational opportunities to everyone, with special regard for vulnerable

populations such as young mothers (Jansson, 2014). An effective program for improving academic persistence among this population may involve high school social workers providing young mothers with support and resources necessary to remain in high school (Akella & Jordan, 2014). However, prior to the current investigation, little scholarship existed on the strategies employed by school social workers to help young mothers.

Accordingly, the purpose of this action research study was to explore the social support strategies that high school social workers employed to foster academic persistence among young mothers. Six themes emerged from analysis of two focus groups with school social workers, revealing fundamental strategies used by these professionals to improve academic outcomes for young mothers. These strategies included: (a) childcare assistance, (b) fostering positive educational outcomes, (c) meeting basic needs, (d) providing information, support, and resources, (e) fostering positive change, and (f) home visits. Overall, participants in this project were eager to help young mothers and emphasized the importance of simultaneously addressing the many needs that young mothers experience.

Young mothers face major social, economic, emotional, and even physical challenges that can create barriers to completing high school. Interventions aimed at helping this population should be comprehensive. If one need is unmet, others can be affected, creating a domino effect that impedes the academic progress of young mothers. Thus, the practical strategies to emerge from this investigation should be implemented

simultaneously, not in silos. From individual school social workers' interactions with single young mothers to policy-level decisions regarding government assistance and resources available to these mothers, strategies designed to help these girls must be comprehensive.

Regarding the specific roles of school social workers, an essential message is that districts must provide these professionals with the resources and autonomy needed to best assist young mothers. More schools should consider programs that provide on-site daycare and incentives that encourage young mothers to persist academically. School social workers can be an incredibly valuable resource for young mothers; however, in order for them to best perform their duties, they must be provided with all the tools they need.

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Appendix A: Study Invitation Email

Dear _____,

My name is Rosetta Stephens and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am conducting a research study as part of my doctoral degree requirements. My study is entitled, Strategies Employed by High school Social Workers to Help Young Mothers Remain in High school. This is a letter of invitation to participate in this research study. The purpose of the study is to explore the strategies High School Social Workers can employ to assist young mothers with remaining in high school. The study's findings will lead to the specific information about how academic persistence among young mothers may be improved by providing them with resources needed to overcome common barriers associated with young motherhood.

In order to participate in this study you must be, (a) current high school social worker at one of the two selected high schools, (b) have earned a minimum of a master's degree in social work, (c) have at least 2 years of experience as a high school social worker, and (d) have experience working with young mothers. Your participation in this research study is strictly voluntary, and you may choose not to participate without fear of penalty or any negative consequences.

In advance, I thank you for your attention to this important matter. I look forward to hearing from you.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will participate in a focus group. Please note that the focus group is a group interview, in which other high school social workers from your school will hear your responses. The focus group questions will address strategies to academically support young mothers and educational barriers young mothers face while in school.

The focus group session will be audiorecorded. Videorecording is not allowed during the focus group session. There is a minor risk of other participants repeating what you say in the focus group should you participate in the study. Participants will be informed that no information from the focus group session should be shared with individuals outside of the focus group. If you have any further questions about the study, please email or contact me at ███████████████████ ██████████.

Sincerely,

Rosetta Stephens

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

Study Pseudonym:

Sex: (M/F)

Age:

Race:

Level of highest education completed:

Appendix C: Focus Group Protocol

1. Research indicates that social support is essential to the academic success of young mothers. What strategies do you use to foster social support to help young mothers?

2. A major educational barrier that young mothers face relates to access to childcare. What support strategies do you use to help young mothers access childcare needed to enable them to return to high school?

3. Young mothers often struggle financially. Financial support to help ensure basic needs are met is an essential strategy for helping young mothers complete their education. What support strategies do you use to help young mothers access the financial resources they need?

4. Another factor that plays a role in the academic persistence of young mothers is student-teacher relationships. Research indicates that encouragement from teachers, especially, can foster academic persistence within supportive student-teacher relationships. What strategies do you use to help foster healthy relationships between young mothers and their teachers?

5. Home visitation can help to improve academic persistence among young mothers. Please describe any ways you use home visitation to help young mothers continue their education.

6. Having high expectations of young mothers' academic success may improve their academic persistence. Please describe any ways you exercise high academic expectations of young mothers to help them continue their education.

7. Please discuss any other social support strategies, not already mentioned, that you feel are helpful for improving the academic persistence of young mothers.

Follow up: How do you employ these strategies?