

Documenting an Integrated Childcare Program's Ability
to Support At-risk Young Mothers and their Children

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Abstract

In this paper the authors describe the rationale and findings from a study focused on documenting the conditions for supporting at-risk young mothers and their children within the context of an integrated childcare-lifeskills-academics program. The findings indicate that the overarching condition that supports young mothers constitutes weaving a web of relational support across several interrelated domains. Supporting the development of healthy interrelated relationships – including one's relationship with self – requires tremendous skill on the part of practitioners and flexible and collegial organizational structures that permit responsiveness to the shifting needs of individual participants. Benefits to young mothers and their children include healthy personal and interpersonal relationships, effective parenting skills, completion of their high school education, and setting and pursuing goals for their future.

The impetus for this study arose during another study in which we examined how a childcare program integrated within an alternative school for pregnant and parenting adolescent girls helps the infants/toddlers of the young mothers learn to self-regulate their use of aggression (Nicholson & Artz, 2006). In the present study we document the conditions that need to be in place in order for childcare contexts to effectively mentor at-risk¹ young mothers to develop their parenting skills while also helping them to set and achieve their educational and occupational goals.

The present study responds to Schonert-Reichl's (2000) plea for research that documents social contexts which successfully address the needs of at-risk youth. In documenting a successful program focused on working with pregnant and parenting teens we wish also to suggest that funding priorities for "innovative" programs threaten the continuation of successful programs. We firmly believe that there is sufficient knowledge in existence to inform good practice with at-risk girls. The program which is the focus of this paper constitutes an effective model that can be used to inform practice in other programs whose work centers around supporting at-risk girls.

In this paper we begin by articulating the theoretical orientation that guided our investigation into the practices that support at-risk young mothers and their children. We then review some of the literature on supporting young parents and pay particular attention to literature on childcare and educational supports. We provide a description of

¹ We use the term 'at-risk' to refer to individual, group *and* societal influences that combine to create unusual challenges for a young person to succeed in completing a high school education and making the transition from school to work. We acknowledge that not all young mothers are at-risk (Schultz, 2001) but also recognize that many young women who become pregnant and have children early in their lives have experienced challenges in their childhoods and in school (Artz & Nicholson, in press) which makes the use of the term 'at-risk' appropriate in a general sense when discussing the support needs of this group of young women.

the integrated program which comprises the context for the present study, and outline the procedures undertaken within the study before sharing our findings.

Theoretical orientation

Research on risk has tended to pay little attention on how social contexts and young people's interpretations of the world promote success for those deemed at-risk (Schonert-Reichl, 2000). Attention is focused instead upon individual and familial factors with little appreciation for how young people actively construct and negotiate meaning nor regard for how particular societal forces (e.g., poverty, school structures, discrimination based on sex, race, and culture) create extra-ordinary challenges for some young people.

From our Child and Youth Care perspective, effective practice with young people requires an understanding of their lifespace (Hoskins and Artz, 2004). Understanding lifespace requires that we acknowledge the active role young people have in constructing meanings within their surroundings. A lifespace perspective acknowledges that all people construct lives for themselves out of what is available. A lifespace orientation is an ecological approach to understanding that takes into account the relationships between a person's physical, intellectual, social and spiritual being, their physical and social surroundings, and their conceptions of the circumstances and situations of their lives (Hoskins & Mathieson, 2004). The literature on supporting young mothers helps us to develop a lifespace orientation to understanding the complexity of young mothers' lives, by highlighting the unbalanced portrayals of young mothers in the media, and critiquing the valuing of independence over interdependence.

Young mothers comprise a group of persons who are often accused, implicitly or explicitly, of not having planned or rationally chosen their future (SmithBattle, 2000). Our understandings of their situation tends to be premised upon media representations that are often punitive and condemning (Schultz, 2001) and reflect assumptions about perpetuating a life of poverty for their children. Young mothers are also stereotyped as poor students and citizens, incapable of being good mothers, and condemned for taking from rather than giving to the system (Kelly, 2000).

Advocates for improving support for young mothers argue that the notion of development signaled by increasing independence makes it possible to judge young women as deviants should they choose motherhood (Bissell, 2000). By upholding the dominant belief that the hallmark of successful adult development is the autonomous, self-sufficient individual, we overlook the ways in which development is inherently relational (SmithBattle, 2000). Such beliefs are apparent in public attitudes and government policies which rarely reflect the systemic influences of disadvantage and faulty institutional practices that are implicated in teen pregnancy (Aaron & Zweig, 2003; Rutman, Strega, Callahan & Dominelli, 2002; SmithBattle, 2000). Kelly (2000) argues that we need to replace our cultural obsession with independence with an appreciation for interdependence. Interdependence focuses attention on parenting as a societal responsibility and positions each and every one of us as responsible for the well being of all families.

SmithBattle (2000) concurs when she states that “our cultural blindness to the strengths and vulnerabilities of teen mothers stems from our allegiance to an atomistic society that deems parenting to be a personal choice and private duty that is independent

of the public world and the body politic” (pp. 37-38). Such a view denies that all families from all backgrounds rely on community assets and public expenditures to support their childrearing efforts. Research has shown that it is the life circumstances, the social contexts of women’s lives that best predict socio-economic advantage or disadvantage after childbearing (Bissell, 2000) and that when young mothers give up on their goals it often comes after teachers, counselors and parents give up on the young women or fail to take their goals seriously after the young women give birth (Schultz, 2001).

Acknowledging that young mothers have both strengths and vulnerabilities engenders a particular approach to research and practice with young mothers. It means that we neither abandon nor blame young mothers and instead consider how our relationships with young mothers empower or diminish them (SmithBattle, 2000). Schultz (2001) reminds us that “simple explanations of the impact of teen pregnancy on the lives of youth erase the complex ways youth negotiate and narrate their life decisions” (p.598). It is by listening to young women’s conceptions about their lives that we can develop more complex understandings of the role that pregnancy and motherhood play in young mothers’ school careers and futures.

Literature on Supporting Young Mothers

The literature on supporting young mothers² indicates that many support programs provide only education and access to child care, while some programs integrate education and child care with life skills, financial assistance, counseling, health services, and parenting education (Forer & Holden, 2004). Childcare and education programs

² We refer to young mothers exclusively in this paper to recognize the general absence of male parenting partners in young families and the lack of recognition in the literature and popular discourse of the roles and responsibilities of young fathers. Since it is young mothers who typically bear the primary responsibility for raising their children, it is young mothers who comprise the focus of our discussion.

which integrate academics with lifeskills and counseling are exemplary models of effective programming for young mothers.

Childcare

In order to effectively support young mothers in their multiple challenges as both developing young adults and primary caregivers of their own children, childcare services need to offer more than respite to simply allow young parents to pursue their educational goals (Nicholson & Artz, 2006). There is ample evidence to indicate that responsive relationships contribute to child development and offer the best potential for nurturing the parenting skills of young mothers (Ainsworth & Bell, 1977; Elliot, 2006; Howes & Smith, 1995; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). A child benefits when her caregiver and her parent communicate effectively, and since no one single approach can work with all parents, the ability to enact a responsive approach to caregiving relationships is critical.

“Primary caregiving” is one particularly effective childcare practice model for establishing and sustaining trusting and intimate relationships among caregivers and the children they care for, and between caregivers and young mothers (Elliot, 2006). The primary caregiver model is a childcare system in which an infant or toddler is attended to by one caregiver rather than several caregivers. Teams consisting of 2 caregivers work together so that their 6 infants become a family group and each caregiver can spend one-on-one time with an infant when needed while the other caregiver shares responsibility for the other infants. The primary caregiver model also makes it easier for young mothers to get to know and support one another as parents.

Kelly’s (2000) longitudinal study of teen mothers confirmed the importance of having on-site childcare for young parents attending high school. The young mothers in

Kelly's study reported preferring to learn about parenting informally through interacting with caregivers and other young mothers in the school daycare than through formal parenting courses. The atmosphere in the daycare in Kelly's study was reported as standing in stark contrast to highly competitive academic ethos in the school. In the school, only a select few students were recognized as having what it takes to go on to post secondary education; while all the young mothers in the daycare were seen as being, or capable of becoming an excellent mother.

Education

According to the Canadian Council on Learning (2005) approximately 40% of female "drop-outs" had children not long after leaving school. While popular opinion reflects the belief that early pregnancy *causes* young women to drop out of school, evidence exists to suggest that teenaged girls who become pregnant have experienced a gradual *fading out* of school (Alexander, Entwisle & Kabbani, 2001). Evidence of gradual fading was provided by young mothers who characterized their pre-motherhood education as a poor learning environments where teachers were unable to or uninterested in teaching them, they received no one-on-one attention, and in which they were not protected from nor supported in managing peer conflict (Zachry, 2005). Young mothers in our past research described their former schools as places where they felt discouraged, unsupported, and judged negatively by teachers and peers (Artz & Nicholson, 2007):

In addition to experiences in poor learning environments, young women may also be tempted away from school by a need to pursue relationship attachments that are lacking in school and they may also be distracted from school by commitments to provide care for others (Alexander, et. al., 2001). An inability to form sustainable relationships

with peers, adults, and even the institution of schooling itself prompts many young people to give up on school (Smyth, 2006). Students who go through school feeling lonely, isolated, or alienated experience anxiety and a low sense of self-worth (Lee & Robbins, 1998). Rather than perceiving poor school attendance as indicative of student laziness, it needs to be appreciated as a potential “means of escape from an environment that is psychologically punishing. ...Dropouts, by and large, have not found much comfort at school and for that reason their attachment to the institution is fragile” (Alexander, et. al., 2001, pp. 763/803).

Others have propounded a view of the school as an important social context in which young people must be able to establish meaningful relationships (Ainley, 2004). Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps (1997) assert that young people have specific needs for belonging, autonomy and competence that can *only* be fulfilled in a group setting such as school. Experiencing a sense of belonging and connectedness at school helps young people to develop a firm sense of self-in-relation-to others. Although most conventional classroom practices fail to engender a sense of belonging, especially among at-risk students, schools can increase the sense of belonging for all students by emphasizing the importance of the teacher/student relationship in the life of the classroom and the school community (Beck & Malley, 1998). Educational programs need to build a sense of community and trust while giving gentle but persistent invitations to all students to participate. To facilitate participation, encouragement to speak out must be followed by assurances of being heard, and competition among students must be minimized (Smyth, 2006).

The Study

The Research Context

The Victoria Society for Educational Alternatives (VSEA) which established the Girls Alternative Program (GAP) has effectively supported at-risk pregnant and parenting teens since the early 1970s. The addition of the on-site Options Daycare to the program in 1989 made it possible for young mothers to continue their education in the same facility in which their children received childcare.

Since its inception, the GAP/Options program has served over 700 at-risk teenage girls and over 130 infants and toddlers. The majority of the girls who attend the program are White, yet typically close to one-third are also of First Nations heritage. The girls tend to be referred to the program by school counselors, community agencies, or friends who either know of or have attended the program.

In its first decade, academics and life skills formed the core of the integrated program. Over the past 20 plus years, layer upon layer of challenging issues have meant that the provision of support that responds to the varied needs of at-risk girls (pregnant, parenting, and non-parenting/at-risk) has become more complex (Victoria Society for Educational Alternatives records). Most all the girls in the program have histories of enduring challenges that extend back to their childhoods. Involvement with drugs, past experiences with and current risks for sexual exploitation, mental health issues, poverty, and family instability are realities for most of the girls; rarely does a girl enter the program with an intact family and a stable social safety net.

Program records for the 2002-2003 school year show 58% of the girls had histories that included physical abuse and 38% experienced childhood neglect. Over one-

quarter of the girls had parents with substance abuse issues and/or mental illness, and a similar proportion of the girls reported having their own mental health issues. Two out of ten girls experienced unstable living arrangements and 15% were known to be at-risk for sexually exploitation.

In 2004, three Youth and Family counselors supported teachers to provide individualized programs to meet the educational and social-emotional needs of the girls in the program. Individual and group counseling sessions are part of the program as are group work on life issues related to substance use and healthy relationships. Conflict resolution training, invited guest speakers and recreational and cultural activities further complement the learning opportunities for girls in the program. Funding changes over the past several years have resulted in changes in enrolment space, and affected staffing ratios and the provision of various program components.

The Program Model

The model for the integrated program reflects the philosophy of flexibility and responsiveness common among programs associated with the alternative education movement (Broad, 1977; Fantini, 1976; Smith, Gregory & Pugh, 1981). The process of participation involves facilitating the movement of the girls from a period of sanctuary, through self-exploration, to change (de Rosenroll, 1980, 1981). The timeline for movement is specific to each individual girl who enters the program.

The period of sanctuary represents occurs when a girl first enters the program. The staff support her to feel welcomed and to see that her presence is valued. The girl learns to see that she is accepted for who she is now and is reacted to on the basis of her

current behaviour rather than her past behaviour. This period is characterized by “supportive neutrality” (de Rosenroll, 1981).

When the staff feels the girl is ready, the structure of the program makes it possible for the girl to engage in self-exploration – to search and learn about herself, her strengths and her weaknesses (de Rosenroll, 1980). After the initial honeymoon-like state of the sanctuary phase, the day-to-day realities of program participation and social interaction typically prompt the reemergence of old behaviours. The girl is faced with giving up and leaving the program or remaining in the program and with the help of supportive staff, taking the opportunity to reframe her perceptions of self and others, examine her relationships, explore her behaviours, and create room for new ideas and perceptions to take root (de Rosenroll, 1981).

The third phase of program participation involves facilitating the girl’s articulation of her own immediate and long-term goals (de Rosenroll, 1980). This phase continues the work of reframing old perceptions about past experiences with failure and helps girls work towards setting and fulfilling personal goals. As the girl begins to have some experiences with success the intrinsic rewards of this phase become self-motivating (de Rosenroll, 1981). Through skilled facilitation, the onus for growth and goal-setting is placed upon the girl herself so that the relationship developed with staff becomes facilitative of change rather than a relationship of dependency.

The model is a hierarchical framework whereby one stage must be satisfied before a girl moves on to the next stage and each stage recognizes that an individual’s basic needs must be satisfied before growth can occur (de Rosenroll, 1981). While girls progress through successive stages, regression to a previous stage is acknowledged as

likely to occur and is seen as signaling a demand to re-attune responses to a girl's present needs.

The Daycare

Since this research focuses especially upon the work of childcare providers within the integrated program, we highlight here some features of the daycare and childcare practice. The daycare in the integrated program accepts newborn infants and toddlers up to 3 years of age. Caregivers work together with the counselors and teachers to create an atmosphere of trust, support, and belonging that makes it possible for young mothers to engage in learning while their children are being cared for in the on-site daycare. Young mothers are able to have regular interactions with their children during the school day that benefits both the young mothers and the children. The childcare program works closely with the educational program staff and counselors to support the young mothers/students; thus, the childcare staff are part of a dynamic culture that works together to make a difference in the lives of the young women.

The caregivers possess a higher level of professional education than most caregivers in Canada (two staff have full ECEC certification, two other staff members possess Bachelor degrees in Child and Youth Care, and the supervisor possesses a Masters degree in Education). Canadian data shows that most caregivers (71%) hold only a one- two, or 3-year ECEC (Early Childhood Care and Education) certificate and just 1 in 10 hold an ECEC-related B.A. or higher degree (Doherty, Lero, Goelman, LaGrange, & Tougas, 2000). Most of the caregivers in the program also have experience with Gerber's *Resources for Infant Educators* (RIE). The RIE program philosophy is to

recognize infants' ability to be active participants in relationships with caregivers and the world (Gerber, 1979).

Inquiry Procedures

The primary mode of inquiry was video interviews. We offered all prospective interviewees the option of having their interview audio-taped and a few interviewees opted for audio-taping only. We conducted interviews with 7 young mothers who attended the program and whose children attended the daycare in the past ("ex-participants"), 5 ex-staff who used to work in the GAP/Options program, two current caregiving staff, and one young woman who attended the daycare when she was an infant/toddler.

The interviews were largely unstructured. Our overarching purpose in the interviews was to learn about the work of supporting young mothers and their children from the perspectives of multiple participants in varied roles within the integrated program. Each interviewee was asked to describe the dates in which they attended or worked in the program, the impetus from becoming involved in the program, and their experiences as either participants or staff in the program. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 and half hours in duration. In addition to video-recording the interviews, an audio-recording was also made of each interview for transcription purposes. A typed transcript of each interview made it easier to do the work of coding and analysis. Video footage of the interviews was used to create a video that the community partner and the researchers could use to supplement written articles for the purpose of sharing the findings from this research.

Data collection and analysis was guided by a phenomenological approach to inquiry (Moran, 2000). In interviews we focused attention on lived experience and through numerous readings of the interview transcripts were able to develop typologies of perceptions and experiences related to the phenomena of caregivers' provision of support to young mothers and their children, and young mothers' perceptions of support and its benefits for themselves and their children (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). We include quotes from the interviewees that best reflect their experiences and perceptions in order to allow readers to gain some insight into the meanings held by program participants and staff and to make it possible for readers to determine the transferability of our findings to the particulars of other contexts (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The findings from interviews with program staff, caregivers, and ex-participants in the program indicate that the conditions that support young mothers constitute a web of support that attends to the development of healthy relationships in several interrelated domains: the relationship that a young mother has with herself, the interpersonal relationship between caregivers and young mothers who love and care for the same children, the interpersonal relationship that young mothers in a parent support program have with one another, and the parenting relationship that young mothers have with their children. Quotes from the interviews³ are provided to give a rich sense of the experiences of the staff, caregivers and ex-participants in the program.

While the relationships constitute a web of support that is difficult to untangle, we have used dyad relationships to organize a portrayal of the program and its impacts. Below we use quotes to portray relational supports for young mothers' sense of self,

³ Names attached to quotes are pseudonyms.

relationships between caregivers and young mothers, relationships between young mothers in the program, relational supports for the parenting relationship young mothers have with their children. We then turn to depicting the necessary elements of effective caregiving practice with young mothers and their children and also make note of the challenges associated with such practice.

Supporting healthy relationships

While many young mothers access the program via referrals from community agencies or school counselors, the staff in the program also engage in outreach to encourage young mothers' attendance. Outreach to young mothers in the community is an effective way that the childcare program encourages young mothers to return to school to finish their high school education. Some young mothers are unlikely to attend the program without persistent encouragement.

E [the Childcare Coordinator] was doing some kind of outreach summer program and she kept calling me to come to this thing and every week I was like, 'No. I don't know how to get there. I don't really know about that.' ...And then one week she said, 'I'm just going to come and pick you guys up' and so she picked us up and then I started going. ...I kind of, myself, had a bad opinion of what ...I thought teenagers that got pregnant were like – probably prostitutes or something. ...They're like promiscuous and like the type of people I probably wouldn't hang out with. ...I was in such a tight kind of private school before that. ...Then I went there and met them like for the summer programs and I was just like, 'Oh my gosh. These are like normal girls and normal situations with nice normal kids', you know. Not like this freaky weird thing that I had thought in my mind. ...Then I did follow through and take my spot in September. ...That summer outreach is probably the only reason that I actually ended up going to GAP. – Leslie, Ex-participant

Many of the girls who attend the integrated program do not have supportive family relationships. Most do not have supportive spouses either. Almost all the girls struggle to parent on their own. As Gina's narrative below indicates, the development of

supportive relationships through the integrated program was essential to both the well-being of the young mother and her child.

I lived on the crisis line. I phoned an e-crisis line so many times because who else do you phone at 2 o'clock in the morning ...when you have been dealing with a screaming baby for the last 3 hours and you just need an adult to talk to? ...That was my lifeline. ...Just let me cry for a minute here and be someone at the other end of the line and I'm good and I can go back and do it again. ...I remember days where I would go to GAP just to get a break. ...I may not have had school that day or ...had anything arranged or anything planned but it was my saving grace. It was my sanity. You know, Mondays were heaven after a weekend. – Gina, Ex-participant

In addition to non-supportive families, young mothers highlighted the disrespect they receive from others.

Just that attitude of respect that you're not an inconvenience to society. ...The average 40 year-old soccer mom would like just be given that respect instantly. You know, they didn't have to fight for it. –Carrie, Ex-participant

Being 16 and going to school full-time and trying to find a place and nobody would rent to me because I was so young and had this little baby. ...I had one person say to me just as I walked up to the front and they took one look at the car seat and they said, 'Is that your baby?' and I said, 'Yes,' and they said, 'The place is rented.' So I got a lot of that. ...It wasn't an issue with the money, it was an issue of the young ...basically you're a 'welfare mom.' You know, the place is going to be a mess, the kid's going to be crying or you're going to be gone and nobody's going to be there looking after the children. –Gina, Ex-participant

When a girl enters the integrated program, staff turn their attention to welcoming her and helping her to feel accepted and valued. They argue that the girls need to first believe that they are valued as people before they can begin to develop authentic relationships with others in the program. During the sanctuary phase, the young mother begins to nurture a healthy relationship with herself.

Nurturing a Healthy Relationship with Self

Caregivers and participants attested to the importance of welcoming and accepting girls –as they are – in the program.

What we really have decided and learned through the years is we have a relationship; you offer what you can and ...you can't make anybody change. ...We offer who we are and we love them unconditionally. ...To get beyond the judgment, to get beyond the violence to the divine in you. I want to be able to let you touch that and reach that and maybe to just have a taste of it. And maybe if you just get a glimmer of that then I can give you a little glimmer of the potential that is in you and the potential that is out there so maybe you can make some different choices. –Delia, Caregiver

From the beginning they asked me about goals and what I wanted for myself. ...There was so much group work. It didn't take too long before I started to become a member and belong with the rest of the students. ...I never had felt respected by adults before that. ...And belonging in the group. ...The first time feeling a connection with other people and feel respect from other people. But also a sense of that everybody else isn't perfect and they're struggling and I can help support them. –Sally, Ex-participant

I fell in love with that school from the moment I walked through the front doors. ...I think for the first time in my adolescence or my 14 years, I had adults that were asking me questions about me that were respectful and that they cared about me and were interested. ...Those people, the teachers and counsellors just treated me like I was a human being for the first time ever. ... I remember sitting around the living room um, being able to talk about what I wanted for my education, even what I wanted for that day, that week. ...So yeah, it was amazing. I was never allowed to have that kind of input into my life before. –Sandy, Ex-participant

Interpersonal Relationships

I thought it was a miracle that the moms would get there, on 2 bus trips, in time, with a baby and sit down and do the school work. I mean I think that that's a miracle. I don't think people think about that. 'Okay, what time do I get up, get the baby dressed, fed, onto 2 buses, through downtown, transfer with my stroller.' ...I think you either get it or you don't. –Edith, Ex-staff

a. Caregivers and Young Moms

The basis of the relationship between caregivers and young mothers is focused around loving caring interactions with the infants/toddlers in the childcare centre. The caregiver-

young mother relationship revolves around the provision of mutual care. Caregivers recognize that their ability to mentor young mothers in parenting depends upon the development of a trusting relationship with young mothers and their interactions with young mothers are intended to signal their honour and respect for the knowledge that young mothers have of their own children.

We're acting like reflectors as the moon does, for these girls, so they can see themselves? ... We're not taking charge, right, we're not trying to control ... we're just reflecting back your light. –Delia, Caregiver

We realized we're really not the caretakers of these babies. We're just people there to help support and we needed to find out more from our moms. ... And then we would start to say, oh, okay, now we're juggling because maybe we feel something's important and they feel that something's different and important and how are we going to start having that dialogue. And I think we realized we don't have that dialogue until we have a strong relationship. And we started to really figure out ways to connect with the moms. So it meant having them in the center with us, sometimes as long as we had the babies there it meant having some time alone with mom. So the caregivers would go out for coffee with 1 mom or 2 moms and just get more connected. Find out more. We invite grandparents in. We had dads if they were involved, start to.....we would invite them in. We started to really open up to um, be a part of a family. ... And that was the way we were going to start to share some of our ideas with them. –Hannah, Caregiver

They were caring on behalf of me. ... We didn't realize until after how much they were like teaching us parenting skills that many of us couldn't learn anywhere else. ... They're 'Our structure is here, setup to support you and your success.' They're already sending you a message that 'We trust you and we believe in you and we care about you' ... so any advice that they gave was welcomed. –Carrie, Ex-participant

You just take the bottle and you start using it and watch them give it to the baby and you might just say, 'The baby isn't taking it. Do you think I could heat it up for you a little more?' Or, 'Does she still like it cold?' You just find ways to plant the message in there. ... It's always acknowledging that what they do is the most important and ... we're in this together and let's have a dialogue about how it can work for both of us. So I think we're always trying to remember to respect the infant and the mom. –Hannah, Caregiver

b. Young Mothers Together

Many of the young mothers who attend the program have not experienced ongoing, supportive relationships with other women and through their participation in the program were able to develop healthy relationships with other women – relationships which they described as being very important in their lives now.

Everybody that went into the program said, 'I don't like girls. I don't get along with girls.' ...And we often all had really bad relationships with men ...so that kind of brought it back to us, ...how can you find another relationship, like a healthy one, and it was a safe one. ...And then after a while we're like, 'Oh wow, we're actually kind of friends. ...And then you're like, 'Okay, this is how you develop it, like a grown adult relationship with women.' ...Like the barriers that you put up to protect yourself emotionally when you've been hurt and damaged in a relationship before, you carry with you everywhere. So until you are in a situation that's safe, to break those down ...like it's not going to happen. –Carrie, Ex-participant

I just didn't get along with girls before I went there. ...I just thought that I wouldn't have any friends and I wouldn't talk to anybody. ...When I left GAP I had made a lot of friends and because of GAP it has helped me to connect with women better and to build relationships with women. –Kelsey, Ex-participant

Peer relationships were also described as contributing in an important way to young mothers' learning in the program.

Those talks were huge ...you can listen to someone talk down at you but when you're talking to your peers and that's like self discovery ...you identify your own personal barriers, the walls that you've had to put up because of your experiences – you're going to be able to overcome them a lot more when you're in tune with what they are. –Carrie, Ex-participant

Becoming a senior student in Gap I think is another transformative thing ...the senior students had the model and they were the ones who were informing the new students about what we do at Gap ... not the way the staff would have talked to them about it but again coming from their peers. ...[for example] a new girl might start bad mouthing the teachers right because that's what they do. ...And the senior girls would just be appalled right, 'We don't do that at Gap. The teachers aren't like that,' they would say. ...And so taking that role as a senior student would also help them you know, when you're kind of looking backward to where you were, and then you see where you are now because you're watching the new

kids come in. It's all about getting a stronger sense of your own ability to be different. –Pauline, Ex-staff

c. The Parenting Relationship

The caregivers describe one of the principal goals of their work with infants and toddlers as that of respect through giving voice.

This was the first infant center in the city. We all were very confident working with children 3-5 or even toddlers. ... We wanted to come in and feel that we were giving the babies a voice in the same way that we worked with pre-schoolers. We felt it was important that they have a voice. But when they're not talking how do you give them that voice? So we all talked about Magda Gerber's approach and tried to incorporate some of her style and the way she worked with babies right from the beginning. –Hannah, Caregiver

The respect experienced by young mothers in their description of relationships with the caregivers transferred into their relationships with their children.

Every day that you were there, you came in the door, your self-esteem was going up and up and up. And that in turn reflected on how well you took care of your children because ...when you're a young mom you're going out in the world and people are stopping you in the street saying, 'I can't believe you're doing that; babies taking care of babies,' and all of these ...judgments. –Carrie, Ex-participant

I was still nursing my son. I nursed him until he was 2 so being able to just have that break to be able to go concentrate and I was in a room right across from the daycare. ... They were really into the Magda Gerber method and I learned all about that. ...And just respect for the baby and learning to ask, 'Can I pick you up?'. ...They would feed the babies on their laps; they wouldn't have them in a high chair or even those little plastic chairs. –Linda, Ex-participant

Teaching sign-language was a unique approach used by caregivers to help infants and toddlers with communication prior developing effective verbal skills. Sign language was also a tool that helped communication in the parenting relationship.

They taught K [son] sign language and then they taught me sign language so that I could teach him sign language. So before he could even talk he was signing to me. ...So it's helping them with their speech because you're talking to them and they can also do it at the same time so that you can understand them and they can

understand by your actions too. They can get that like, 'Oh that's more,' ...instead of crying and like getting upset and having difficulties with communicating. ...I'm the parent that I am today because of that school. If it wasn't for that school I don't know what kind of a parent I would have been. ...I was terrified of being a mom. I didn't know what I was doing. ...They help you to figure it out, 'Okay this is what you can do' and 'you can do it, no matter what.'—Kelsey, Ex-participant

Leslie acknowledges from her current perspective as an experienced parent of three children, how the caregivers' valuing of the children in the daycare influenced her daughter's sense of self and contributed significantly to her own parenting.

They were such a high quality daycare. They took videos of her like, you know, almost every day ...like little 2 minute clips and stuff and we still have it now and it's just so precious. Like even then I felt like I wasn't missing so much and they would write every day like what she was doing and you know, her first crawling, her first walking ...all of that. ...For me to focus on school, I was so thankful that she was so well cared for. ...They really value children and they let them express themselves. She wasn't held back in any way; she explored a lot. ...They just made them feel good about themselves and just who they are as individuals and I just feel like she's really just had the best young start at being herself and respecting her body and other people in many different ways. ...I think it gave us the best start really. We probably wouldn't be where we are today.—Leslie, Ex-participant

The powerful parenting mentoring that occurs in the childcare centre is guided by a philosophy of respecting the young mothers and their children. The mentoring flows from strong modeling rather than didactic information exchanges.

We're very trusting that unless it's a really serious problem that we're seeing, ...but if it's a smaller issue I think we just learn to ignore the small stuff and work on the bigger picture which we feel in the end can be what's going to make the bigger changes. ...And sometimes you may never have to talk about it because it's pretty strong the modeling that happens in the childcare program. ...If we have them there every day and they're there with a new baby and they're still feeling a little fragile themselves and really ready to soak things up and how wonderful to have someone else hold your baby and say, 'Look at the way that he's looking at you,' ... there's just so much power in that. So we're working on that right from the beginning ...to see them not heating up the bottle, or sucking the soother. There's a million things that go on that you want to say, 'Oh, don't

do that,' but you know that in time it's going to change. It's not going to be a big deal for them to do that for a little bit longer. –Hannah, Caregiver

The modeling of parenting skills rather than the teaching of parenting skills ...it is so incredible and it is so respectful. I mean these are teenage girls. They don't want to have an adult tell them to do anything, let alone come in and tell them how to treat their babies. ...And to watch a young mom come in and be you know, quite awkward and quite abrupt with their baby and to see them a year to a year and a half later when they're all sounding like, like the caregivers. It's phenomenal. ...[For example] a mom would come in, baby is sitting with their back to the mom, and pick the baby up and whew into the air and the caregiver, rather than say, 'Oh, you shouldn't do that,' which would be my instinct, [would say on behalf of the baby] 'Oh mom, that was a surprise. That scared me a little bit.' So they're getting the message but they're not being told that you were wrong. Fantastic. –Pauline, Ex-staff

The Challenges of Effective Practice

Our findings also demonstrate that the milieu that makes it possible to support the development of healthy interrelated relationships requires tremendous skill. It is not enough to simply care in caregiving work. Rather, effective practice involves hard work and demands continual attention to shifting priorities, keen knowledge of self and other, an ability to give to and receive support and care from colleagues, and faith that a caring, cooperative, and respectful philosophy for practice will engender positive results even when temporary behaviours may tempt practitioners to impose punitive, exclusionary, or restrictive measures.

Caring by itself is not enough

The work of supporting young mothers and their children is not a simple, intake-oriented process of identifying what a girl's needs and then developing a plan to carry her through her time in the program. The process of being responsive to needs, from the caregivers' perspectives, never ends. Caregivers recognize that they cannot know a young mother or her child in the instant they first meet. They allow the necessary time to

gain understanding and build the trust needed to make working *within* the relationship possible.

We always tell the moms when they first start to expect to be in the daycare for the first week, sometimes 2 weeks. ... We like the mom and the caregiver to start developing a relationship and that will help the baby. It's like matchmaking for the baby. So then the moms pass on the care to the caregiver. ... And we get to hear about the mom and her baby. ... And every day we get more information about how the mom and baby are together because they have so much to tell us. It's really interesting. They're the primary caregiver and we're just coming in to help and support them. –Hannah, Caregiver

Those band-aid kinds of programs they ... don't work because you know that it's going to end. You know you don't have enough time to open up trust, you don't feel safe. ... It comes more as a judgment; you feel more that this is a reaction to me as a problem than to you know, caring about me or wanting to see success for me. ... I have this huge history and you're going ... to fix that in 2 weeks. That is not going to happen. And I don't care what kind of money is behind you. ... It makes me feel like a drive-through person. –Carrie, Ex-participant

The caregivers practice learning to know the young mothers and children every day. As one day finishes and caregivers contemplate the day's events, they know that the next day will bring with it a whole new set of circumstances and situations that require of them focused attention, considered reflection, and mindful responses. Their work is one of constantly facilitating the development of relationships. The ability of caregivers to practice effectively requires that they live with tensions and turn to one another for support.

It's emotionally challenging. It's not just intellectual work. ... We're constantly figuring and juggling whose primary need is in focus right now ... who are we serving? ... We talk a lot, we debrief a lot, we hope a lot and we just do the best we can and try to be as supportive and loving and nurturing to the whole family as we can. ... It's a real juggle. –Delia, Caregiver

It can be quite draining. You need to be able to talk to someone at the end of the day and we're very lucky that we actually have that time at the end of the day and can debrief and we also have an afternoon off on Friday afternoons where the students aren't here so we meet as a whole staff. So we really try and keep up the

communication amongst us and also we try and look at the families holistically, and the students holistically. ...I think that as long as we can keep talking and communicating and hearing what the counselor has to say about a student, what the teacher is seeing, we can make plans and always sort of work together on a goal for our family. –Hannah, Caregiver

Effective caregiving work also requires a keen knowledge of self in order to be authentically responsive in their relationships with young mothers.

It has to be a person that's able to reflect on their work; able to talk about their path, able to make changes. ...This work attracts those that do pay attention, are reflective, do strongly believe in making connections with people, and want to establish a community and I think that that's what we've done here. The babies have a voice, the moms have a voice, the staff have a voice. We all have a voice and we share that voice and we really um, are working together. And we're respecting everyone's voice and we're making changes because of what people are thinking or saying and we value each other.-Hannah, Caregiver

Shifting priorities of dual clientele

Caregivers who work with young mothers and their children work with two clients – the young mother *and* her child. Caregivers must constantly balance and prioritize the needs of their dual clients before crafting appropriate responses.

We have a double clientele focus in the daycare. We've got the girls who are here ... then you also have the infants and toddlers. ...With the school, really their primary focus is the teenagers. ...We try to look at the whole need to, you know, juggle. Who's our clientele? Who's our primary clientele? ...That's a tough one. –Delia, Caregiver

Remaining grounded in their responsiveness also requires caregivers to enact a certain degree of faith in the midst of challenging circumstances. They trust in the relationship between theory and practice; they live their values, they enact the care-giving philosophy in their day-to-day interactions with both young mothers and their children.

A lot of us are pretty spiritual people. ...And I think why you can stay working in it is you need to have some sort of a belief that everything is as it should be ...it's

really hard to see some of the lives these girls lead and the choices they make or that they've grown up in, so you sort of have to have something or be pretty strong inside you or in the bigger picture so that you can kind of go, 'Okay,' you know, 'there's got to be a meaning, there's got to be a reason, there's a purpose'.
-Delia, Caregiver

Positive Outcomes

Ex-participants lauded the benefits derived from participating in the integrated program. Many, not surprisingly, spoke about the importance of having the on-site daycare which enabled them to feel confident that their child was being well cared-for thus enabling them to focus attention on academics. In addition to learning how to develop and sustain healthy, nurturing relationships and learning about parenting, the young mothers who attended the program also spoke about the effects that participating in the program had on their schooling and goals for the future.

I started to feel like I was not as stupid as I had felt previously to that. ...It was giving me choices around what I was in effect learning and how I best learned and with that I learned to take responsibility for my own academic world. That learning was a thing for me and not something that other people kind of shoved onto me. –Sally, Ex-participant

I learned a lot that I still use today and will probably always use for the rest of my life. Being at GAP helped me to change like who I am and helped me to find myself as a woman. ...I've got so many relationship skills that I probably would never have gotten if I didn't go there. And it helped me to set goals in life, to figure out what I wanted to do and to know that I can do it. ...They gave me the drive to succeed. ...I feel like I'm already successful because I've already completed so much. Because I finished high school, and went to college and then that I didn't amount to nothing. –Kelsey, Ex-participant

Despite lack of success in regular schools, most of the girls we interviewed who graduated from the integrated program went on to do post-secondary studies. Two of graduates had successfully completed Master's degrees, one was a Licensed Practical Nurse, one was a recent graduate of a Medical Office Assistant program, one was an

Early Childhood Educator, one was a counselor, and one was in her third year of a Bachelor of Social Work degree.

One of the key factors that assists the integrated program in providing a different educational experience is the fact that the program is housed in a facility which is separate from a regular school.

We really need a separate program that is not in the school system; is in a school that can provide the support and the nurturing and the individual work that we can do in a separate school. It's really important. I don't think we could function if we were part of a big school. Another program locally is attached to the regular school system and they have lots of drop outs. Kids can't keep up with the system there. ...I think that we've really proven over the years here that the importance of a small sanctuary really, really works for young moms to make some changes in their lives. –Hannah, Caregiver

The people that make it at the program in the regular high school are the ones that are really ready to do their full Grade 12 and graduate. So usually it's someone who has an older baby, like over 18 months, and a mom that's done Grade 11 and doesn't need the alternative curriculum or the one-to-one support. ...Some of the ones, some of the moms that come here do have that kind of life and once they come in here they find that actually there are other issues that they can work on while they're here. ...They will be able to complete their school and their academics and they're able to work on some of their issues. Whereas, once you go back into the regular stream, it's the academics that take precedent and some of those issues for them may not be worked on or looked at for years to come. ...[It] could be a healthy relationship with a partner, it could be conflict with your parents, it could be substance abuse, it could be housing. So those are the kinds of things that we can deal with in the moment while you're here and you're also taking Math 11. So it's a much more holistic program. –Hannah, Caregiver

Some of the ex-participants confirmed Hannah's perceptions of the differences between regular schools and the integrated program.

I tried distance education when I was pregnant. I tried and I tried. ... When you've been in a situation and you've just been taught like, 'You're going to fail' over and over again, you don't have the kind of patience it takes to hang on for those long reinforcements. ... You can't wait 4 months to find out if you're going to win or lose. It's just too scary. ...I finished like 13 courses within 1 year at GAP.- Carrie, Ex-participant

There was no structure [at the adult learning school]. I needed that defined structure but I still needed to know that it was on my terms. Um, like going to C-Jr High, it was very structured but it was their terms whereas ... when I went to GAP it was structured but it was on my terms. –Gina, Ex-participant

I hadn't dropped out of regular high school. ... Even that summer when I was fully 9 months pregnant I did summer school. ... So once he was born I didn't do any studies. ... I did want to finish high school. ... I would never have gone back to regular high school. ... I would have felt, even if I was segregated, I would have felt way too different than those other kids. ... There was just no way I could go back to being a regular teenager at that point. ... I would never have gone to one of those high schools with a daycare program in it. ... Not unless I was in a little section with the daycare and not unless all my classes were in that section. It just wouldn't fit. –Linda, Ex-participant

I think if it ever closes down that it would just be horrible for all the young moms and the Gappers. ... I just wished it was one big school, with one big huge daycare and there was just more money and more funding and more space so that every girl who needs to go there can. And can take that and not feel hopeless. That, you know, nothing better is going to happen and that they're going to have to go on welfare and be on welfare for the rest of their life. – Kelsey, Ex-participant

What had worked for me [at GAP] was I felt I could have at any moment ... the complete attention of a staff member, whatever the crisis was at the moment. – Carrie, Ex-participant

Leslie noted the importance of having childcare on-site and in the same building where she was in class; something that is not typical of all young parent programs attached to schools.

It gave me an extra 2 years because I probably would have either started working or just stayed home with her and tried to do it on my own which I probably wouldn't have got too far with, trying to take care of her at the same time. ... It was so nice that she [daughter] was so close down the hall that I could check on her and just go in and visit her and spend my lunch hour with her and go out on the deck and play. ... It would have been a totally different situation if I had just put her in like a community daycare somewhere far away and then you know, be gone for the entire day. –Leslie, Ex-participant

The small, intimate atmosphere of the program and the committed, caring workers whose practice for healthy development is premised upon supporting and nurturing belonging is critical to the beneficial outcomes experienced by program participants. As these ex-staff persons noted, the girls need to feel seen and accepted and the program needs to be responsive to the various needs of individual participants.

I think for a lot of girls and a lot of kids in general in a regular or a large school they feel alone. I mean you're in there with 700 people but you don't feel seen at all. ...I would say the first and the biggest thing that changes a kid, the girls who came, was unconditional acceptance. ...The staff made every effort to always have an atmosphere where the girls always felt welcomed and the girls always got the message either directly or indirectly from our staff, 'We always like you. Sometimes we're concerned about the choices you're making and what you're doing, but we always like you and we always want you here. ... We see you and we're glad that you're here. –Pauline, Ex-staff

The number one is, if you want to help kids there's nothing that does consistently make a difference for kids than the size of grouping they are in. The size is everything. I don't care whether you're in a regular school classroom or you're in an alternative program. ...That's one of the reasons that helped us be as successful as we are, is the ratio of adults to children. ...At the most we've got up to 40 students and probably say 6 staff. So every day after the kids would leave, we could meet as a whole group of people. And every Friday we had a meeting even more major. So we were incredibly in tune with each other. ...You can become very individualized in the way you work with them. –Rose, Ex-staff

While it might seem that what worked in this program hinged on supporting young mothers as individuals, the philosophy that guided the program also attended to the development of interpersonal responsibility. Once girls realized that they were accepted and were an integral part of the program community, they were also asked to take responsibility for their own participation and how it impacted others in the community. Conflict resolution and participation meetings were cited as key features of interpersonal responsibility in the program.

A girl coming into the program had to agree to take part in conflict resolution if she was asked, in order to get into the program. I mean, here we are all accepting but we had to make it clear to a new girl that that was the bottom line for us because we felt that we couldn't keep the place safe if ... people refused to do conflict resolution. So the policy was, conflict resolution, Con Res as we called it, rules applied 24/7 to girls in the program. So if they had a hassle after school, on the weekends, with someone in the program the staff would deal with if and it was a very powerful way to keep the place feeling safe but also a way for these girls to learn first hand, even if they weren't in Con Res themselves, to see how people can get through conflict. –Edith, Ex-staff

Sometimes there was hostility but I think also the benefit of ...work[ing] through a disagreement. ...I didn't know how to be assertive in any other situation without being, you know, overpoweringly loud, just like dominating a situation. ...That's so self-destructing, to not know how to resolve an argument. –Carrie, Ex-participant

Leslie and Kelsey both mentioned that their children learned conflict resolution while in the childcare program and attested to the lasting benefits of conflict resolution skills.

They did really deal with it [conflict] at an early age you know, toddlers' hitting, biting, you know, just all of it. And you know, the way they wouldn't overreact so that it would heighten it; they would just calmly explain that... 'hands are not for hitting' ...stuff like that. So I would just say from that age up she's really just learned ...how to interact with people in non-physical ways, non-violent type ways. –Leslie, Ex-participant

My son is ahead of his years. ...Being at GAP I think definitely helped that because the caregivers are phenomenal and they teach them so much.The way that they dealt with conflict with the kids ...it helps him with his relationships with other kids now that he's moved on and helps with his relationship with me. ...Like if we're disagreeing about something he will pretty much use conflict resolution and he will tell me how he's feeling like, 'I'm feeling very angry right now mom because you won't let me paint right now.' And then I'll say, 'Okay that's good that you're feeling angry but right now it's dinner time and you need to wash up.' And then he said, 'Okay mom, well can I paint or colour after dinner?' And I'll say, 'Yeah, that's fine.' –Kelsey, Ex-participant

In recent years, however, funding cuts that have resulted in fewer staff have compromised the ability to do conflict resolution with the girls.

The counselors were always the ones that were involved with conflict resolution as part of the program. We have 1 counselor now and she tries to do conflict resolution in a um,.....she still does it but it's different if you've only got 1

counselor because the way it was done here is that you would have 2 students in 2 different rooms and often with 2 different counselors. –Hannah, Caregiver

Participation meetings were held once a week. This ex-staff person described

participation meetings this way:

We would all sit around, staff and students and we'd say, 'We're all equal here. We all get a vote in what goes on. One of things is that we're all going to speak up individually for our participation over the last week. And we're going to honestly say how we've done, what we think we can improve and what we'd like to see. What we need help for.' ...And then the rest of the group can make comments. ...And we will decide as a group before the end of the meeting whether or not somebody needs to go on what we call 'committee' and that was a process for how we monitored your membership. ...One thing that we said to the girls, ... 'The expectation is you're here full-time. Because we can't help you in a way that you deserve to be helped, or we want to help you without you being here full-time.' So they would have to answer for their participation. ...It was a very intricate little program that we set up that had lots of pieces ...we got to model how it is that you can give people feedback without tearing them apart. –Rose, Ex-staff

Another way in which the program helps young mothers to develop a sense of personal responsibility was to avoid giving them permission. Instead program participants were expected to draw upon their knowledge of the community's rules in order to gauge for themselves what was acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

We would never answer questions for them right? They would say, 'Oh well, you know, uh, this afternoon, I really have this appointment and do you think I should leave now?' 'Well, I don't know. You know what the exact rules are. You know what to do. I think you can make that decision for yourself.' You know, a purposeful thing around encouraging them to make decisions and taking responsibility for them. Because they have the opportunity to come to the meeting and speak to it, so if they miss half a day because they have a doctor's appointment well, you know, people are obviously going to listen to that. But we're not going to give you permission to go by saying, 'Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.' – Rose, Ex-staff

Program participants were aware of being held accountable and while being held accountable was not always comfortable for them, they recognized its importance in maintaining respect within the community.

We got the impression that we were all liked and held accountable for what we did besides group. There was a sense of accountability. I do remember being called on things that were really uncomfortable being called on, um, gee [respect] that's a hard one to define, and yet that's a big part of it. – Sally, Ex-participant

Discussion and Implications for Practice

This study has highlighted the ways in which the social context within a program that integrates childcare, lifeskills and academics for pregnant and parenting girls effectively responds to the needs of young mothers to generate positive outcomes. Most of the young mothers who participate in the integrated program can be appropriately considered at-risk of not completing their high school education and making the transition from school to work.

What appears to be of key importance in the social context of the integrated program is attention to relationality (Kelly, 2000; SmithBattle, 2000). The caregivers within our study pay close attention to their positioning within a web of relationships and deliberately attend to strengthening relationships as a principle means of supporting young mothers and their children (Ainsworth & Bell, 1977; Elliot, 2006; Howes & Smith, 1995; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The caregivers are dedicated to becoming/being significant, caring, trusted adults in the young mothers' lives.

Caregivers begin their work with young mothers by learning about the realities of the girls' lives from the girls themselves and begin to develop relationships with the girls based upon their mutual concern for the well-being of their infants/toddlers. Although

the caregiver-young mother relationship revolves around the infant/toddler, the young mother herself is given equal consideration as caregivers situate themselves in a support role to the young mothers and practice valuing the knowledge that each young mother has about her own child. While caregivers are interested in learning about young mothers' past experiences with rejection, school failure, and non-supportive relationships, by continually affirming the capacity of the young mothers to succeed personally and interpersonally, they help the young mothers to create a new vision of their futures that is less dependent upon what they have encountered and experienced in the past.

Caregiving practice with a dual clientele requires a high level of personal awareness and well-honed interpersonal skills. To effectively develop trusting relationships that can support both the personal, interpersonal, and parenting development of a young mother, caregivers must turn to one another for support in managing the considerable challenges associated with constantly shifting priorities within multiple relationships.

In addition to the importance of the philosophy of care and respect that guides practice in the program, the program's success is also predicated upon the structure of the program. Effective structures include the on-site location of the childcare centre (Kelly, 2000), the small size of the program, and the high staff to participant ratio. These features permit the flexibility that is necessary for responsiveness to the changing needs of individual participants. Responsiveness is facilitated through a variety of mechanisms including daily staff debriefing sessions, weekly meetings that involve all the staff in the integrated program, the ability to permit young mothers spend their first couple of weeks

in the program in the daycare, and regular meetings that ask all participants to account for their participation as a member in the community.

The benefits to young mothers and their children appear unequivocal. The integrated program provides reliable opportunities for young mothers to experience attachment, develop relationships, and meet their needs for belonging, autonomy and competence (Alexander, et. al., 2001; Battistich, et. al., 1997; Smyth, 2006). Making conflict resolution skill development an integral part of the program ensures that the environment is physically and emotionally safe which reduces the likelihood of poor attendance to avoid peer conflict (Zachry, 2005). With regular attendance over an extended period of time, young mothers gain an experience with genuine acceptance, and then can begin the work of self-exploration and goal setting. Through the three-stage process young mothers gain confidence in their capacity to be in supportive, healthy relationships with other women and to be competent parents. Within the supportive atmosphere, they establish and work towards personal, interpersonal, academic, and occupational goals, all the while maintaining sight of their primary role as a parent.

Early in their relationships with young mothers (the sanctuary phase) the caregivers convey authentic acceptance and through the experience of feeling genuinely accepted by others, the young mothers take steps towards self-acceptance. As young mothers move through the self-exploration phase (de Rosenroll, 1980, 1981) they integrate the acceptance experienced in relationship with program staff with what they are learning about themselves. As they continue to learn things about themselves – even things they might not like – they continue to feel accepted and this helps them to develop self-empathy. Self-empathy – the ability to address oneself empathically; that is to

identify the fundamental needs that trigger feelings – not only increases self-respect but through improved appreciation of one’s own feelings and needs, also promotes respect towards the feelings and needs of others (Little, 2008).

The practice with young mothers within the integrated program of GAP/Options attests to the benefits that can accrue from not giving up on young mothers and their dreams. Through consistent and persistent encouragement and support, taking young mothers seriously in their desires to finish their high school education and get a good job in order to secure good lives for their children, young mothers gain momentum that assists them to leap over the hurdles that a condemning public and systemic disadvantage often place before them (Bissell, 2000; Schultz, 2001).

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