Righting the Metaphor: Helping Teen Moms in the Classroom Rewrite the Metaphors that Define Them

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Abstract

Humans use metaphors to help them understand and interpret the world in which they live. Constructed socially, metaphors pilot our conceptual systems and influence what we accept as truth. With respect to the teen mother, metaphors depicting irresponsibility, burden and dirtiness continue to dominate in North American society. Young mothers report feeling stigmatized by these images that exist with profusion in not only the media, but in many of their daily experiences, as well, leaving them feeling marginalized and like they must prove their worthiness to be the mother of their child. For the educators of this demographic which is, often, behind it’s age group academically, it is important to adopt pedagogy that empowers and emboldens; when young, mothering women are given the tools to talk back to the metaphors that have come to define them, they see importance in their learning, and develop a confidence that will make them more likely to rise up and disrupt the words and images that hurt them and their children.
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Dedication

This account of learning is dedicated to the wonderful moms - past, present and future - of the Tupper Young Parents Program in Vancouver, British Columbia.
Chapter 1: Introduction

For many, if not most, images and adjectives flow easily when confronted with the idea of “teen parent”. We will think her “too young”, “incapable”, “irresponsible”, and likely, “delinquent”, a “high school dropout”, and “poor”. We will also attribute a race to her, most often Aboriginal or new immigrant, and worry that she will be, as all of “them” are, a burden on our social welfare system. Despite my work as a teacher in the Tupper Young Parents’ program of Vancouver that provides opportunity for pregnant and parenting teens under 19 years of age to complete Grade 12, I have to admit my former membership in the various socially constructed metaphors in which the teen parent is “the girl gone wrong in need of fixing”, or “the new social burden on society”; such conception of the early age parent not only shapes policies in education and social programming, but reinforces the stigmatization of the early age parent.

I first became interested in the idea of metaphor and how we use metaphor to understand our world by reading Lakoff and Johnson’s Metaphors we live by (1980), and found that their ideas apply neatly to my question: Will giving voice to young mothers help rewrite the metaphors that define them, and reduce stigmatization? Lakoff and Johnson (1980) claim that “metaphor is not just a matter of language”, but that “the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined” (p. 6) and that how we understand what we experience is “very much a matter of metaphor” (p.3). They point out that “most of our metaphors have evolved in our culture over a long period of time, and most are imposed upon us by people in power---political leaders, religious leaders, business leaders, advertisers, the media, etc.” (p.159). In the North American context, the metaphors for teen parenting are fairly young, constructed after WWII along with the advent of the brand new age group called, “the teenager”, and propelled to its present day dimensions by social class divisions. Early on in the creation of this metaphor, young pregnancy was mainly visible in minority and impoverished communities as many
privileged, middle class girls finding themselves pregnant would be hidden away until baby was born and adopted out, all so that she could continue to pursue the middle class approved path into adulthood which included post-secondary education and marriage. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) point out, it is the people with social power who “get to impose their metaphors on the culture,” (p. 157) and who “get to define what we consider to be true” (p. 157). This “truth”, in turn, reinforces the power of those making policy decisions. Certainly, for teen parents, who even before becoming parents are likely marginalized in some way, their voices do not get to be part of the conversation; instead, the voices of people who have had significant social power over them, and have known little of their realities, resonate in the metaphors of the teen parent.

Over the four years I have worked in the Tupper Young Parents program of Vancouver, I have become increasingly aware of the metaphor that defines the teen parent, and of its burden on my students, students who are not simply “children raising children”, “welfare dependent”, or “Aboriginal”, “Filipino”, or “Hispanic”; rather, they are people juggling babies and books, and their teenage concerns with their adult responsibilities. I have, many a morning, greeted a student who was worried by her baby’s crying on the bus, the awkward glances at her growing belly, and even a well-meant comment about “how well kept” her baby was. At first gently dismissive, I have come to realize the cumulative weight of their stories; at a certain point, I realized that of all the obstacles the teen parent has to overcome, the public’s conceptual system – shaped by these metaphors – was the most insurmountable.

I began to ponder the “what if”, and at every turn, felt discouraged by the impossibility of affecting change on an entire system built on a metaphor constructed by long established and internalized societal morals. Then, it occurred to me that the voices missing from the conversation were the very voices of the students themselves. I started to think of ways to make their voices accessible to the general public, of ways to re-start the conversation with the volume
turned on for the voices that count. At about this time, I was put on to the work of Lisa Christensen, an educator in the United States who has worked extensively to empower Black youth by making their voices heard. I read with interest, excitement and hope her books, *Reading, Writing and Rising up* and *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, and set about planning curriculum for my students that would not only develop community and self-esteem, but would empower them to want to tell their stories, to be proud of their stories. As well, I wanted our community to know my students not according to the pervasive metaphor, but according to the real life narratives of teen mothers. They, the narratives, were not to deny or gloss over the difficulties and hardships, but rather speak them, define them and present them in balance with what is good about being a teen parent. I had already read, mainly in newspapers, the victory stories and the sob stories, and it was not this that I hoped to mine. Rather, I wanted the human stories for it will be only through the human stories that we will all see ourselves, and it is only when we can see ourselves in someone else’s story that we will have compassion and be able to change the metaphor.

My design project, a slam poem tribute to the teen parents with whom I have been working for the past year (in some cases longer), will expose, confront and disrupt the existing metaphors, the discourses that feed them, and the stigmatization of teen parents that results. Importantly, my hope is that it will encourage these same students to continue using their writing to talk back to the words, actions and policies that stigmatize them. With my poem, I situate my students’ words at the forefront of this back talk, and will offer it, studio recorded, as a gift of empowerment and hope. As I have done with my students, my design project will reflect in every way Christensen’s (2009) pedagogy of joy and justice as I have learned that teaching for social justice is not only “what [my] students need. But it’s also what [I] need” (p. 11).
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

I have chosen, and subsequently, organized the themes of this review to optimally support and reflect the structure of my design project. Drawing from multiple publications that reflect a broad range of perspectives (medical, educational, sociological, and cultural), I will attempt to present research in the field that will argue strongly for a dismantling of society’s conceptualization of the teen mother; after an exploration of the construction of the “teen mother” and the metaphor that has come to define – and silence - her, I will move on to research that has attempted to hear her voice. Finally, I will synthesize studies and present a project whose purpose has been to change the metaphor and create more positive community norms with respect to early age parenthood.

Themes

The current metaphor, and how, disguised as public virtue, it serves to stigmatize the teenage mother, and entrench her in disadvantage. Teen mom. Poor. Uneducated. Must have been a problem child. Loose. Rebellious. Is she capable? What was she thinking? How does she think she is going to support that baby? A child having a child. So sad. Must be so hard. A burden on society. Such a shame.

This is but a sampling of the discourse that flows from the public metaphor of early age parenting. By metaphor, I mean metaphor as the conceptual lens through which we interpret our world, think, and act as explained in Metaphors We Live By (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). With respect to early age mothers, the metaphors of ‘a child raising a child’, ‘a drain on the system’, or ‘a disease needing treatment’ are all highly politicized characterizations of the “teen mother as
irresponsible, culturally deficit, and in need of regulation and surveillance” (Pillow, 2004, p. 47).

While Canadian society of the 21st Century is significantly more liberal than that of the mid 20th Century when these metaphors were established, recent studies conducted on North American populations show that they remain the primary lenses through which we regard teen mothers. In her book, *Unfit Subjects*, Wanda S. Pillow (2004), associate professor in Gender Studies and the Department of Education at the University of Utah, presents data on how predominant “discursive structures institute and reinforce barriers to [teen mothers] accessing an education” (p. 111). Initially, Pillow’s intention was to draw on her “qualitative research experiences in [American] teen pregnancy classrooms in the mid-1990’s” (p. 1), and to “write a book of data stories situated upon pregnant/mothering teen voices and experiences in schools” (p. 2). Unhappy, however, with creating a work that she felt would be yet another treatise on “the teen mother as a unit of analysis” (p. 2), Pillow turned “the lens of analysis from teen mothers as a site of investigation to…the discourses that construct who the teen mother is” (p. 2). *Unfit Subjects* focuses, thus, on the heightening “public debate and media attention on social policy issues related to teen pregnancy” (p. 3) in the United States during the final quarter of the twentieth century; this was a period in which American society purported a decline of ‘family values’, a ‘Black family crisis’, and a need for welfare reform.

The notion of ‘a child raising a child’ could almost be considered sympathetic and loving if it were not for the underlying, silent script: Pillow (2004) asserts that this script speaks of children as not yet capable of many things (certainly not parenting), of children being prone to deviance and thus in need surveillance and discipline, and of children, especially females, as not yet sexual. As Pillow (2004) states, the very term, teen pregnancy, “indicates a pregnancy that is marked as wrong” (p. 64).
On the stigmatization of early age mothers, Saint Louis University Associate Professor, Lee I. SmithBattle, PhD, RN, has conducted research for both the Midwest Nursing Research Society (MNRS), as well as for the National Institute of Nursing Research. SmithBattle’s 2013 article, *Reducing the Stigmatization of Teen Mothers*, published in the American Journal of Maternal/Child nursing, synthesizes a range of studies conducted over the last half century to illustrate how teen mothers in the U.S. continue to be hyper aware that they are seen as unfit to parent, and feel constantly in the position of having to prove themselves as capable and responsible. Citing the conclusions of four separate studies conducted since 1996, SmithBattle affirms that teen mothers do as good a job as their older counterparts from similar backgrounds, and blames media, professional discourse and advocacy organizations for portraying school age mothers as deviant and inept, girls whose lives have been derailed by their too early motherhood.

Sylvia Olsen, researcher and community development consultant on Vancouver Island, specializes in First Nations housing, but felt the need to create a forum for the voices of teen mothers in the months and years after finding out that her 14-year-old daughter was pregnant. At the heart of her book, *Just Ask Us*, “are the voices of thirteen young First Nations women who participated in focus groups” and who give “their perspectives on their own experiences” (p. 15). As one teen mother in Olsen’s (2005) research group expressed:

> You hear so much about the kids of teenage moms. It’s all over the TV and people even tell you. It’s like teenage moms are to blame for all the bad kids. Supposedly, kids who have teenage moms get lower grades at school, have behavior problems, get sick more often, have worse teeth; you name it, they got it. Then in the end they are going to end up criminals. What do you do with that? It makes you feel pretty guilty. (p. 116)

Remaining in the metaphor of ‘a child raising a child’, it is tempting to surmise that the teen mother is deviant and therefore, in need of surveillance and discipline. Her very act of
becoming pregnant was a fall from grace, and she must pay the price. While Pillow (2004) points out that many young parent programs assume the parental prerogative of tough love, the teen mother does not have to wait to be enrolled in one to feel the toughness. Locating the teen mother as maladaptive and delinquent, the metaphor gives society as a whole power to control, contain and change her deficits.

Lastly and most disturbing to our North American society is the uncomfortable juxtaposition of child and sex. Teen mothers “embody what we most fear, female teen sexuality and sexual activity” (Pillow, 2004, p. 71). Because nothing is invisible about the pregnant teen body - not the youthfulness, nor the swelling belly – the ‘baby having a baby’ metaphor is bold and raw, the child-woman an inconvenient reminder of what could befall our own daughters (Pillow, 2004).

‘A drain on the system’ is a second metaphor that feeds our conceptual lens through which we define early age motherhood. As SmithBattle (2000) points out, teen mothers are vulnerable, but this vulnerability is more due to social inequities and adverse childhood experiences prior to motherhood than it is to early child bearing. “Although it is true that teen mothers tend to be poor women,” SmithBattle (2013) explains, “it is much more meaningful to say that poor women tend to become young mothers” (p. 237). The metaphor, however, from which hails popular professional discourse, disregards scientific evidence supporting the social inequity theory, and presents this sequence in reverse, downplaying “the unlevel playing field that begins at birth for those growing up in impoverished homes and neighborhoods” (p. 237). That the early age mother is expected to be an eventual welfare recipient illustrates assumptions strongly based on “middle class norms regarding family formation and parenting” (p. 237), and ignores the fact that similar opportunities and resources are not available to disadvantaged groups.
Wanda Pillow (2004) exposes American educational policy that is firmly constructed according to the ‘drain on the system’ metaphor. She contends that the education of teen mothers has become a social welfare policy issue in the United States; focus is on the school’s role to prepare the mothering teenager to be economically independent instead of providing her with an education opportunity equal to that of her non-parenting peers. While Pillow’s research focuses on educational policy in the United States, much of British Columbia’s neo-liberal social policies reflect this same notion; the needs of the teen mother are linked to societal needs, and as such, programs and support are designed for her dual role of mother and wage earner. The ideology from which they are created presumes irresponsibility, lack of work ethic and low income (Pillow, 2004, p. 142). In Constructing ‘active citizenship’: single mothers, welfare, and the logics of voluntarism, Fuller, Kershaw & Pulkingham (2008) examine British Columbia’s “relatively new obligation-centered notion of active citizenship” (p. 157) in which paid work equals social inclusion. Policy changes enacted in British Columbia in 2002 moved social assistance towards what is termed a work-fare-oriented system which forces income assistance recipients to acquire low skill, minimum wage jobs, rather than to pursue programs to develop occupational skills and social capital that would lead to more ambitious or long term employment. Fuller et al. explain that this welfare reform disproportionately affects the single mother who is not only over-represented among social assistance recipients, but whose employment in the low wage sector is unlikely to tolerate the short notice absence she might have to take due to childhood illness or unstable child care arrangements. They add that single mothers are “particularly burdened by the rejection of care for pre-school-aged children as a legitimate alternative to full-time employment” (p. 161); where previously, single mothers were labeled “ETA” (expected to work) once their youngest child turned 7 years of age, under the new legislation they must accept minimum wage work when their youngest child is 3 years old.
Fuller et al. make a strong case for not framing poor, single mothers who care for their pre-school aged children as ‘a drain on the system’. Instead, they urge for the recognition of caring for one’s child(ren) as one type of unpaid (volunteer) work worthy of respect and social inclusion.

Our models of ‘active citizenship’ will … remain incomplete if our efforts to grapple with the tensions that inhere in volunteer activity mean we fail to appreciate its potential value to women, their families and the broader community. (p. 172)

Both Wanda Pillow (2004) and Lee SmithBattle (2000) unearth the ‘disease needing treatment’ metaphor of teen pregnancy and motherhood; while Pillow discusses the “discourses of contamination” (p. 57) that have informed American educational policy, SmithBattle talks from a medical point of view of the assumption that “becoming a mother jeopardizes a teen’s development” (p. 34). It is a metaphor given life by what the teenage mother is not; she is not normal, not what society expects. She has blindsided the ideal and become a problem needing resolution, or a ‘disease needing treatment’. Quite simply, she is “deficient by virtue of being a teen mother” (Pillow, 2004, p. 109), and

practices and policies regarding teen mothers [target] deficiencies located strictly in the self (eg. poor judgment, lack of planning, and lack of job and parenting skills) while dismissing the social sources of disadvantage that predispose teens to become parents in the first place. (SmithBattle, 2000, p. 29)

This metaphor implies that the mothering teenager had been, prior to her pregnancy (disease), on the identical upward life path as her counterpart who is without child, and that her life here on out will be altered in harmful ways (SmithBattle, 2000). Challenging this perception, SmithBattle (2000) writes that many teen mothers report pregnancy and motherhood to be a motivator, and points out that recent studies controlling for unknown background factors (unlike former ones)
suggest strongly that “deferring parenthood would not greatly improve [teen mothers’] job prospects or their future economic circumstances” (p. 35).

It is true that while all parents must overcome myriad obstacles, those of the teen parent are often more formidable. The emotional turmoil of pregnancy, delivery and early motherhood, lack of support from the father of the child, stigma, and negative responses from parents are only a possible few. Add to these unstable housing, low income, and keeping up with coursework, and it is difficult to believe that given such obstacles, a teen’s development into adulthood will not be tumultuous. While seemingly innocuous, SmithBattle (2000) maintains that this conceptualization is stigmatizing; “combining the tasks of adolescence with mothering is considered detrimental not because of the social disadvantage that precedes many teen births, but because of the teen’s failure to first achieve autonomy and become a rational thinker” (p. 34). From this perspective, pregnancy and early age motherhood debilitate the subject and derail an otherwise positive trajectory, much like a disease would do.

**What it’s like and who she is according to her.** With her book, *Just Ask Us; a conversation with First Nations teenage moms*, Sylvia Olsen (2005) curates the narratives that came from her 2003 research project on teen pregnancy and parenting in First Nations communities on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Funded by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, the study “simply wanted to hear the stories of First Nations teen parents based on their own experiences, in order to learn directly from those most affected” (p.15). At the time of the book’s publication, Olsen had lived in First Nations communities for over 30 years, a period during which she raised her children as a single parent. Reflecting what other researchers are beginning to expose, that teenage moms want to be known in a way they are not, Olsen’s book
dedication reads: “To the young moms who generously shared their lives with us, and who enthusiastically wanted this book to be written” (p. 5).

Olsen’s work informs us that teen mothers, Aboriginal and otherwise, do not want to be judged; they do not want pity, either. What they are looking for is acknowledgement and understanding. To the conversation presented in Olsen’s work, one young mother offers:

I don’t want people to feel sorry for us. We don’t need that. I want people to understand and then maybe look at us different. Then they’ll know that we’re working hard to make it work for our kids. We’re trying to give our kids the best life we can. It’s hard but it’s not all bad. We need help when our families are little, but after a while we can make it on our own. (p. 161)

SmithBattle (2000) refers to this when she accuses the present social order of failing “to see the ways in which [young moms] struggle, cope, and challenge modern assumptions of the self and society” (p. 34). Consistently, teen mothers from all demographics want it known that their struggles, often to overcome multiple and complex barriers in life, do not automatically mean that they are incompetent mothers who do not care about their children. The idea they challenge - this white, colonial perspective - is the one that has come to shape the various metaphors of the young mother (Pillow, 2004), particularly with respect to Canada’s First Nations in which teen pregnancy is increasing at greater rates than in other Canadian communities (Olsen, 2005). A participant in Olsen’s study is unable to conceal her own feelings of stigmatization when she suggests:

That’s the main thing you’re looking at here. We’re sitting here as a group of teenage moms. We’re the ones who didn’t have abortions. The white girls at school? I bet lots of them have had abortions – at least you hear about it. (Olsen, 2005, p. 75)
Olsen (2005) explains that in the traditional worldview of the Coast Salish First Nations, every child, no matter the circumstance, is “a gift from the Creator” (p. 25), so terminating a pregnancy is typically not considered in Aboriginal communities; in the same spirit, keeping the child is not perceived as the problem it is in non-Native society, as expressed by this young mother:

It’s weird now that I’m a mom and out of school. I’m half native and half white and people’s attitudes about that have never showed up so clear as now that I have a kid. I’m going to school and doing good for myself. When I meet some kids I went to high school with, white kids I mean, they look at my daughter and see that she’s smart and well dressed and doing well and they are shocked. “Oh, look at you,” they say, “you’re really doing well”. What they mean is that they never thought I would ever make anything out of myself. And they look at my kid as if she should be all backward or something. But when I’m with my native cousins, they just expect me to succeed. (Olsen, 2005, p. 32)

That “more First Nations people live in poverty than any other group in the country” (Olsen, 2005, p. 23) helps explain why “First Nations communities have more teen parents than other groups in Canada” (p. 23). Second to Aboriginals are other marginalized populations in which new immigrants are over-represented, and common to first world societies in general is that families started by teen parents are more likely to have been poor already. As Olsen (2005) affirms, “teen parents are not responsible for their poverty – teen births are a consequence of being poor” (p. 23). Indeed, research has shown that teen pregnancy can propel the teen parent living in poverty “to imagine a better life for herself and her children” (SmithBattle, 2005, p. 839). As SmithBattle (2000) notes, “some teens describe mothering…as a powerful catalyst for becoming more mature and redirecting their lives in positive ways” (p. 35), a fact that is supported by Associate Professor of Sociology at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma,
Washington, Joanna Gregson. Her book, *The Culture of Teenage Mothers*, is the result of four years working with pregnant and parenting teens in an American high school setting; her qualitative research explores mothering teens’ perceptions of pregnancy and motherhood, and confirms the motivating influence of early child bearing on young mothers to rise out of poverty and find reasons to complete their schooling (Gregson, 2009). Evidence that this same change force exists in the Canadian context, a young mother in care who participated in a 2013 Albertan study of youth ageing out of care for the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, shows she already understands the burden of her past and the resilience she will need to make a future. Her response to becoming a mother suggests the same motivating influence noted in the American research:

> I am pregnant right now, and I want to do well for my kid…be a good parent. I want to prove I can be independent and responsible. (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate [OCYA], 2013, p. 13)

This appears to be true in the British Columbian context, as well, when a young Aboriginal participant in Olsen’s book confides:

> My baby straightened me up. Once I was a mom it made me think. School wasn’t my main priority until after my son was born. That’s when I really knew I had to graduate. I wanted to give him a better life than I had. I wanted him to have a mom that had a job. (2005, p. 136)

The narrative slices presented here knit together an altered and more positive conceptualization of the teenage mother, and bring it into the Canadian conversation. Moreover, a move towards studies relying on narrative and requesting the voice of young mothers indicates a desire on the part of this population to tell their stories.
Righting the metaphor. Exposing the missing perspectives of teenage mothers is gaining greater importance as research in this field starts to favour qualitative data over “the science of probabilities” (SmithBattle, 2000, p. 31). For young mothers, having their voice heard will be paramount to “rebuilding connections…reweaving the social fabric” (p. 37), and ultimately, rewriting - righting - the metaphor. In the absence of these voices, “our cultural blindness to the strengths and vulnerabilities of teen mothers” (p. 37) will remain strong, and a new metaphor that validates their struggles, strengths and dreams will not emerge.

SmithBattle’s (2000) affirmations that parenting is not a private duty “independent of the public world and the body politic” (p. 37), and that “changes are not strictly located in the self but involve a transaction between the person and her world” (SmithBattle, 2005, p. 843) both speak to the importance of dialogue and recognition, neither of which exist for as long as the teen mother’s voice is silenced. Approaching the issue from a medical perspective, SmithBattle (2005) offers the concept of “relationship-based nursing care” as being “indispensable in supporting the young mother’s development of a coherent narrative” (p. 844) through which she develops her sense of self, agency and future. Reflecting the importance of this notion of interplay among stakeholders to a truthful narrative, The Teenage Mothers Project (TMP) in Uganda is a community based empowerment intervention for unmarried teen mothers that has been running since 2000. In their research article for BMC Public Health, Joanne N Leerlooijer’s et al (2013) evaluate the project’s success in empowering young, unwed mothers through the interaction between individual agency and the “broader institutional, social and political context” (p. 2). The report concludes that there have been many positive changes to societal norms.

While a very different context to the North American one, what is enabling an altered perspective in Uganda is the provision of opportunity for a dialogue to take place, and for relationships to be
built on true understandings; increasingly, North American research appears to conclude the benefits of similar forums in which our young mothers can participate.

In Canada, like in the United States, there have been attempts to begin a conversation between our parenting youth and their communities; opportunities and willingness to engage, however, have not been sufficient to develop a changed perspective. Teen pregnancy and motherhood “is an extremely difficult topic to reframe” writes SmithBattle (2013). “Situated as it is at the crossroads of sex, youth, and race/poverty, it seems to generate innumerable stereotypes that are deeply ingrained in American cultural thinking and politics” (p. 239). In the United States, there have been and continue to be organizations whose mandate is to destigmatize teen mothering, but efforts have met with “significant barriers and backlash” (p.238). A 2005 report on young parent programs (YPP) in British Columbia echoes SmithBattle’s (2013) claim that “restoring dignity requires the development of recognition practices that promote trust, collaboration, dialog, and understanding” (p. 239). The Young Parent Programs in B.C. – A Profile was prepared by Julie Norton for The Partners Task Group, a coalition of community organizations (Vancouver YWCA, BC Council for Families, BC Aboriginal Child Care Society, Options for Sexual Health, BC Alliance Concerned with Early Pregnancy and Parenthood) and the Young Parent Program Working Group whose purpose was to review Child Care Policy for the provincial government. Funded by The Ministry of Children and Family Development, Norton gathered information from 35 YPP to “establish a baseline of the existing programs combining educational and child care components that allow young parents to continue with school while their children attend child care on-site or nearby” (Norton, 2005, p. 1). From her findings, she concludes:
We currently have an opportunity to demonstrate that we value young parents and their children by acknowledging that they do in fact require recognition and specialized supports. (p. 2)

Finally, and perhaps with the greatest wisdom, Sylvia Olsen (2005) concludes her book with the following remark:

This project was about talking to one another. Just ask us, the girls said, and let us just ask you, and together we can learn from and understand each other…We are sharing our conversation with you…because we believe that people who are part of the conversation will work together to change policies, develop programs, create opportunities, shift community attitudes, and gradually improve the lot of young parents and their children.

(p. 160)

As in the First Nations communities about which Olsen writes, what appears to be missing from the present conversation across the North American landscape are the voices of teen parents, themselves. Where research shows the language we use serves to stigmatize this already vulnerable group, it also shows the determination and resilience that young parents must develop in order to survive; generally, the research conducted to date illustrates the gap that exists between society’s conceptualization of early age parenthood, and the reality of the young parent experience. While there have been initiatives in Canada and the United States like in Uganda that bring multiple stakeholders together in a bid to begin a conversation, they have been few and have met with significant resistance. More research that pulls from the narratives of this population will, no doubt, lay down a framework for such conversations to be had, but it cannot be ignored that early age parents, and young mothers in particular, need to be given the language tools with which to rise up and counter the current conceptualization of who they are. A strong and non-judgmental formation in written and oral expression is, therefore, paramount to young
parents authoring their own stories, and reclaiming power over how they are perceived in their society.
Chapter 3: Rationale for design project

For my design project, I rely heavily on the work of Linda Christensen, educator of and advocate for marginalized African American youth in the United States. Her two publications (*Teaching for joy and justice*, and *Reading, writing and rising up*), have strongly informed my practice this past year, and I have learned to what a great extent teaching for social justice is positive for both my students and myself; in so many ways, it brought us closer as a community and blurred the student and teacher roles as we all shared personal stories of our lives.

My design project will, thus, situate me less as the teacher, and more as the student of the young women with whom I have worked over the past ten months. Yes, I have been responsible for instructing them in English written and oral expression, but they have also taught me so much about what it means to be a teenage parent in our 21st Century, North American society. A reflection of similar projects I have given my students this year, and of the pedagogy of Linda Christensen, my design project, a slam poem, is also a deliberate attempt to experience what my students would have experienced during any given assignment this past year. I wanted to put myself in the place of my students and ask myself to be, as Linda Christensen (2009) describes it, “wild and risky in [my] work” (p. 1). I needed to trust in the story I had to tell, and in the way I wanted to tell it, and I needed to find my voice and throw it down on paper without judgment. The very act of writing it reflects a pedagogy of joy and justice; there is joy in the act of recording and sharing my poem, and for being able to communicate a deep wish, and there is justice, too, because I hope whoever listens to it might consider differently the struggles, strengths and dreams of the young moms I have come to know. There will be joy and justice, as well, if my words will give even just one of my students the strength to further “affirm [her] right to a place in our society” (Christensen, 2009, p. 2) through written and spoken word.
I have entitled my work, *u (slamming the metaphor)*, in an act of defiance to the collection of stigmatizing images that continue to cloud our modern, technologically adept, North American society’s collective lens when it comes to early age parents. I begin by addressing the ‘child raising a child’, the ‘drain of the system’ and the ‘pregnancy as disease’ metaphors using words harvested from my own personal journal, as well as from my students’ written assignments completed throughout the past year in two courses: English, and Child Growth and Development. I have used only writing that my students have chosen to publicly display either at functions or in temporary displays within the school. Mid-way, my poem switches gears and enumerates the many things that I have come to know about teen moms, and then finishes with an invitation to continue being powerful through writing and speaking. In its entirety, my hope is dual: I hope, first, that my students will see the exchange of teachings that was our relationship, and secondly, that my poem will resonate with them as an act of love - a form of tribute - as I try to celebrate them, and honour how they want to and should be known.

It is without doubt that I hope my poem continues a conversation that has just begun for my students because it is an important conversation, one that is real and honest, challenging and hopeful, and one that they are eager to have. Through a fusion of perspectives and expressive forms, of story and response to story, their voices will provoke, but will also give pause. Above all, it is my desire that the conversation will ask us all to question the metaphors that we use - often unwittingly - to label, stigmatize and ultimately, silence teenage parents in our community.

As with most all conversations that are just beginning, an introduction is necessary, and to this end, what follows are the words of seven teen moms who I have been privileged to know, to teach, and to learn from this past school year. It is from these students’ pens that I have gleaned words and phrases for my project, and it is to these students I offer my poem. Their words their
Introduction, some will share what they love most, others the origins and meanings of the name given to them, and others, yet, a personal story or an account of how they were raised. These written works were completed as in class English assignments adapted from Linda Christensen’s work that uses students’ lives to strengthen written skills (2009). My students became used to sharing their writing both amongst themselves, as well as with wider audiences; most commonly, the works to follow have been posted both in the program’s portable, as well as in the main school’s show case dedicated to the students of the Tupper Young Parents program. None of the work presented in this paper falls outside of what is prescribed in the curriculum for the various grade levels at which these students were working, and all of the work has been voluntarily offered by my students for public reading with the hope that by doing so, they can begin to dismantle the stereotypes that have come to define who they are.

Sadea by Sadea Johnston

My name means the glowing sun, beaming through the hospital window at 10:18 in the morning. My name is Sadea. I was born on a rare, warm, spring morning in North Canada. My name is Sadea. My name means "the dawning star" to the North Slavey, a sign of hope for the Sahtu people. After the long, cold and dark winter, the heat from the glimmering sun melts away the thick snow, and warms the people. My name is Sadea.

I love by M.C.

I love my son.

I love his laughter, his honesty, his loving heart.

I love his soft, brown hair, his bright red lips, and his big, brown eyes.
I love his craziness, his silliness, his cuteness.
I love that he always wants his mommy, and that he's so cheeky.
I love his dirty diapers, his thirst for milk and his crazy apple eating.
I love his soft skin, his button nose, and I love that he makes a mess intentionally, and says, "Uh-oh!"
I love him.
I love his everything.
I love my son.

My story by Susan Wilkinson

I felt
alone and scared.
Nowhere to run to.
Foster home to foster home.
I tried
to run away.
Nowhere to run to.
Moved and it happened again.
I miss
my sisters every day.
Two years and a half
it has been.
I moved
and had my son.
In my life, he's the best thing
that happened to me!
Raised by by Via

I was raised by a carin', playful, gentle and understanding, "I'll always be here for you" type of nanny "Yaya".

I was nurtured by a lovin', kinda sweet, "Do the right thing", Church going, "Respect your elders" type of grandma "Lola".

I was taught by a strict, money givin' father figure, "Stay focused and stay in school" type of uncle "Titato".

Lost by Cassie Swift

Wanted to be fearless.
Wanted to be independent.
Wanted to be fun.

Lost myself-
Drugs, destroying Young people.
Wanted to be fearless.
Wanted to be independent.
Wanted to be fun.

Lost relationships-
Wild, ambitious,
Taken over.
Wanted to be fearless.
Wanted to be independent.
Wanted to be fun.
Lost lessons-
Drinking, partying
Ruining life.
Wanted to be fearless.
Wanted to be independent.
Wanted to be fun.
Lost in the feared life.

Thala-Majal by Thala-Majal Perez

My name is Thala. Sounds like an Indian name. My teachers always ask me if my parents named me after the Taj Mahal, but I'm not Indian, and I've never been to India or to the Taj Mahal. I am Filipino. Even though my name means "leader" in Punjabi, in Tagalog, it means "star".

I have a star.
I look at it every night.
I name it Hope.
When darkness falls at each day's end,
Star will light my way,
Shining bright to give me hope
As I dream of a brand new day.
I love by J.W.

I love the hill that I am climbing,
the hill of no return.
It's a big, icy slope
with unimaginable obstacles.
I love the easy way,
but I would get to the top too fast.
I love the hard way,
so I can learn from my mistakes
upon this big, icy obstacle,
this obstacle that is my life.

And I wouldn't change it for the world.

Amelia by Amelia Johnson-Leo

Amelia. A name with six letters and four syllables. It's not a name you'll hear in a song, but a name of painters, poets and even writers. I consider Emily Carr my best friend, Amelia Earhart my plane buddy, or Amelia Bedelia a book named after me since I, too, make mistakes and take things literally. I can see it on a candy bar or a slurpy flavour, for maybe only I consider my name, Amelia, sweet and not sour.

As I address these young women with my poem, I bring, to a certain degree, my own story into the dialogue; the way I arrange their words and mix them in with my own observations reflect the interconnected nature of our lives and of the experiences we shared. The altered nursery rhyme clips placed at intervals in the first section of my poem represent the various metaphors that drive my students' feeling of stigmatization. As I have already noted, I have written my poem as a validation, a celebration, and an invitation, and I have written it as both a
teacher and a student. Ultimately, it will be a farewell tribute as I will no longer be working with this group of students in September, 2015.

And so, to follow, *u (slamming the metaphor)*, a continuation to a beginning of a conversation that needs to be had.
Chapter 4: Design Project

*u (slamming the metaphor)*

Have you ever wondered
what you
have taught me?
Thought of yourselves as the teacher
of the teacher?
Probably not
a lot –
or at all -
but let me
tell you
about your lessons
in perspective…
You give
lessons
every day
in resilience, in courage
because at your age,
society says
that you
should not be a teenage
mom.
Yet you are that.
And with that hat,
You are nailed
to the wall of social problems.
And with that hat
You are observed, judged, pitied and surveilled.
Where other mothers are hailed,
You feel jailed,
convicted of your motherhood
behind finger painted bars
built of finger pointing images
that tell not of who you are
but of what society assumes you to be.

*Mary Mary quite contrary*

*Why does your belly grow?*

You have taught me
to see
how strongly you feel
the real
world.
The comments
The stares
The rolling eyes
And the shaking heads.
The buses that pass you by
and make u cry.
Other mothers who deny
U
membership to
their sorority.
U see
&
U get it.
When u sit
on the bus,
your baby making a fuss,
and u feel u must
EVAC-U-ATE
Before it is too late,
and heads and eyes begin to roll
and the huffs and puffs begin to toll
and u are there,
holding your breath…

*Please, baby, stop. Please, baby, try.*
*Please, baby, be so still – and please don’t cry.*

…what is just life becomes your death
as u prepare to pin
that metaphorical badge of sin
to your chest,
the one that will explain u
in words that everyone but u can understand:
Too young.
“A baby having a baby”
Too irresponsible.
“A child raising a child”
Too bad.
“A drain on the system”
All because u are
a mother
and
a teenager
at the same time.

*The eyes on the bus roll ‘round and ‘round, ‘round and ‘round, ‘round and ‘round.*
*The eyes on the bus roll ‘round and ‘round When baby cries.*

U have taught me
to be
sensitive
and give
U
the chance to
tell
your story,
your pen
the chance to
yell
on paper
where it has not yelled before for
U have been silenced,
as if for not collecting the “Hurt free childhood” card
when u passed go
on the
day
of
your
birth.
What was that worth?
As if for not getting the proper license
to be a mother
and
a teenager
at the same time.
What was that fine?

One, two, if she only knew.
Three, four, what’s in store.
Five, six, what’s the fix?
Seven, eight, it’s too late.

And u
have told me
U pay
every day
a little more
of your
soul.
On the bus is the worst,
but then there is
the playground,
the grocery store,
the doctor’s office,
the many Ministry moments and
the people the people the people,
poking
and prodding
and predicting
prophetizing
penalizing
and pontificating,
all because u are
a mother
and
a teenager
at the same time.
If you’re pregnant and you know it, shame on you.
If you’re pregnant and you know it, what will do you?
If you’re pregnant and you know it, and you dare to go and show it,
If you’re pregnant and you know it, shame on you.

It is true.
I know
because
U show
U need
help.
From time to time,
there and here and
here and there,
U are a student
and because of the rent,
U are an employee.
Mother.
Learner.
Wage earner.
All u must be!
Don’t u see
what u have taught me?

Young mother Hubbard
Went to the cupboard
To get her baby some food.
When she got there
The cupboard was bare
Oh, what will she do?

It is not as simple as ABC.
It is not E-Z.
That is storybook stuff
that u fumble
as u stumble
over bright, plastic toys!
Is that a girl or a boy
U push in your stroller?
He looks so well!
She looks s-well!
So clean!
And well cared for!
U are so young
to be a
mom!
And then u remember
that
U are
a mother
and
a teenager
Mary has a little babe, little babe, little babe,
Mary has a little babe and Mary’s sweet sixteen.

And u have taught me
of your strength,
of the length
U go
to show
U love
your daughter,
your son.
Your baby boy is
your pride and joy!
She is
your world, your little girl!
Your child is
your everything!
And your biggest wish
is:
“to be a good mother.”
U say it all the time.
U write it on every line
of your journal
and u ask,
“Is that any different from
any other mother
who is not
a mother
and
a teenager
at
the
same
time?”

There was a teen mother who sat on the bus
She had a young child who started to fuss
So she gave him her phone and set him to play
She’d be judged a bad mother, but able to stay!

So, with all this,
U have taught me something more
for
at your core,
U have things to say.
Sticks and stones break my bones
but names will never hurt me.

Not so true!
You say
these rhymes sing lies
that stigmatize
U
and u want to
talk back!
tell!
write!
fight!
the stereotype.
And u want to
dismantle!
disrupt!
take down!
de-crown!
these rhymes
that are trying to define
U
without knowing who
U
even
are.

They do not know
how brave u are,
that u love laughing,
that u are kind to others,
that u are a good mother,
that u are smart,
that u feel worried sometimes,
and that u want the best for your child.

They do not know
how helpful u are,
how caring u are,
how brave and beautiful your heart is,
how excited u are for your baby’s birth,
or how proud u are to be a mom.

They do not know
that u have struggles just like anyone else,
that u are working hard to be the best u can be,
that sometimes life is harder for u,
and that u should not have to prove yourself.

They do not know
that u feel the sting of judgment,
that your stories are important,
that even if things aren’t easy, u are doing it,
that u, too, have fears
and that it is okay to need help.
And they do not know
how your smile brightens my day,
how your laughter is a gift,
how your tears hurt me, too,
how much I am thankful for u.

They do not know
how your little boy loves to sit on your lap
and listen as u read him a story,
and that sometimes,
he likes to turn the pages ALL BY HIMSELF,
and that u are so proud of him
for this.

They do not know
how your little girl always laughs
when u tickle and chase her around the house,
but that she sometimes looks lonely at the park
because other children
won’t play with her,
and that u worry
about this.

They do not know that when he
“smiles really big, laughs and giggles, and claps his hands,”
u “smile and laugh with him, clap with him, give him hi-5’s
and kiss and hug him,”
or
that when she is afraid,
U “pick her up and cuddle her and comfort her,
and rub her back to calm her down and tell her,‘It’s okay.”

These things the rhymes do not know about u.

But u have a rhyme in your heart
and u can start to impart
with the pen in your hand
an altered perspective
and give
a chance for a new
Conversa-
shun the old metaphor!
Act for transforma-
shun the old stereotypes!
Be real!
Be honest!
Be human!
Be risky!
Just be!
And maybe,
somebody
will hear
U
and not fear
U
for being
a teen mom
because
U are that
and
U are more
and
U have taught me all this
and
U can teach them, too
that just as much as sticks and stones,
names
do
hurt
U.

Please be invited to listen to my recording of “U” on YouTube:

U - A tribute to the Tupper Young Moms - YouTube

www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NKJmHfyll
CHAPTER 5: Their Learning, My Learning, and a Few Recommendations

Over the course of the past year, I have come to understand more keenly the stigmatizing effect of the dominant metaphors that are used to label early age parents, and mothers in particular. I have witnessed their frustration, their pain, and their guilt on the one hand, and on the other, their resilience, their joy and their hope when given the tools and the chance to speak out. By adapting the pedagogy of Linda Christensen, and adopting her philosophy of *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, I have seen the joy that comes from two very important things: First, that which comes from the pride of having produced a good piece of writing; the second joy comes from simply being asked about *who* you are. In this joy there is justice, for every young person in our schools, as in our society, should have equal opportunity to learn, and each should be known for who they are. As is the case with most marginalized populations, the predominant metaphors that shape their society’s conceptual lens hail not from the group itself, but rather, from the group or groups holding power (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This reality should fuel the moral purpose of all educators who truly desire to lead positive change. Especially for marginalized groups, the importance of being able to communicate well using standard English, or as Christensen teaches, the “language of power” (2009), is unquestionable. “People who lack reading and writing skills have difficulty expressing who they are. Their words are strangled and they learn to be silent” (Christensen, 2003, p. VI). It will be only with the tools of language that young people will be able to dismantle existing metaphors and begin to author their own.

Initially and for a time beyond what the B.C. curriculum prescribes, I used poetic forms to coax written expression from my students, many of whom were second language English speakers, or were significantly below grade level due to a history of gaps and struggles in their schooling. Common utterances of new arrivals to the program have always been, “I don’t like
English” or “I suck at grammar”. Through poetry, I could take away the rules, and then lead my students in determining which rules they thought would make their writing more powerful. We explored word choice, word placement, word and structural repetition, “home language” (Christensen’s term for the words/language we use when we are at our most comfortable), and punctuation, as well as a variety of literary devices, all under the guise of poetry. At first hesitant, afraid perhaps of making mistakes, students soon learned that the process was fun and without judgment. I could see them beginning to believe in themselves as writers.

I knew that I was onto a good thing when one of my students enthusiastically exclaimed, “I like writing poetry! I used to be scared of writing, but now it’s different. I really think it’s fun!” Drawing students in with poetry was further confirmed to be an excellent strategy when one young woman handed me the very first text she had written in over a year. Her pride was visible, as was the joy she experienced in this one brave act; when I told her that she had made an excellent start, “now let’s consider a few things”, her joy from simply having written something was enough to see her through her revisions. A third student, I recall, became excited and engaged when I told her that, of course, she could use the word, “ass”, in her poem if using that term gave her work an authentic voice; she did not ask for permission to write “damn” in a subsequent poem, proof of her emerging confidence and agency as a writer.

A further source of joy for my students was being asked to talk about themselves. I discovered that my students had a real and strong desire to tell their stories. For some, their stories proved too difficult to tell and thus were never written, but for those who did write, the writing was bold, honest and sometimes, defiant; without exception, students were eager to share their work not only with each other, but with the broader school community as well. They wanted their names to appear on their work, and when they put initials instead of full names, the
reason given was because “it looks cool”. That they even took the time to consider how their name would appear on their work is evidence of the ownership they felt. While offered, no one opted for “Anonymous”. Could anything be a better indication of these young moms’ desire to rise up, and talk back to the stigma?

From their joy came the justice piece of Linda Christensen’s philosophy. The importance of feeling strength as a writer cannot be overlooked, as cannot the power of witnessing your writing’s impact on another person. In the absence of these, one is silenced, and one cedes the telling of her stories to someone else, impotent to fight back if those stories are inaccurate.

While my students are not entirely there yet, and still need much practice and many more moments of success, they are proof already that a pedagogy of joy and justice works to get vulnerable and marginalized groups writing. By using their lives as the content for their writing, my students were given the chance to talk back to the powerful metaphors that stigmatize them; they found this not only therapeutic, but discovered through the sharing of their work the impact that their writing can have on others. I remember the day I asked them to share their “To my sister mamas” poem, a poem that was an address to other teen moms, and was to talk back to the stereotypes. Rather than each reading their own poem aloud, my students chose to present each other’s work; not one student made it through their classmate’s poem without tearing and choking up, leaving me, the teacher, to finish the reading. This day, my students witnessed the power of their words on one another, and came closer as a community.

This experience had an additional effect: My students now wanted their poems where others could read them. When I presented the idea of printing their poems on posters for the entire school to read, one student said: “especially the ‘For my sister mamas’ one so they will
know who we are and not think we’re bad.” And so, a series of posters came to be and with these poems (Appendix A), I saw my students’ desire to be heard, and their deep pride in being in charge of telling their own stories. This is teaching for joy and justice.

Considering the implications of teaching for joy and justice, if we as educators of vulnerable groups can make writing accessible to our students by choosing forms and content that are unintimidating and pertinent, we will be able to begin building a confidence that was, somehow, either lost or never built; our students will begin to view themselves as more powerful communicators able to confront the metaphors that stigmatize them. With poetry as the vehicle I was able to allow my students to write, initially, about more innocuous topics such as the origin of their name, or what they love most (as per writing samples used in the introductions of Chapter 4), and later, about more emotionally charged topics such as their feelings of being judged or stigmatized (as per samples of the “To my sister mamas” poem presented later in this chapter). Using this pedagogy, I was able to ease the most reluctant learners into writing pieces that were meaningful to them and their peers. When our students can see hope for themselves academically, they will begin to craft with greater agency their place in society, and I would suggest that for the school age mother, if she feels empowered by this hope, her child will be more likely to develop positive associations to learning, resulting in a more just playing field for this new generation.

**Conclusion.** Linda Christensen’s curriculum of joy and justice developed from her desire to provide marginalized African American students with safe environments in which they could brave becoming competent communicators; it is a curriculum built on the belief that teachers must listen to their students, and use their “lives as critical texts [to] mine for stories, celebrate with poetry, and analyze through essays” (2009, p. 2). She writes that “when we create writing
assignments that call students’ memories into the classroom, we honour their heritage and their stories as worthy of study” (2009, p. 4). It is exactly this message that I want my teen moms to hear; I need them to know that their stories are essential to the healthy functioning of our society.

If everyone could read Thala’s words, they would know that she is working hard not to be a ‘drain on the system’, that she wants the best future for herself and her child.

My sister mamas

This is for my sister mamas,
surviving the crazy craving,
 surviving the swinging moods,
 surviving all night crying,
 surviving the long, hard labor.

This is for my sister mamas,
 fighting to be known,
 fighting to be understood,
 fighting to speak back,
 fighting to be strong and independent.

This is for my sister mamas,
 cooking,
 cleaning,
 caring for the babies,
 cooing,
 caressing and soothing the future.

This is for my sister mamas,
 who love their baby’s smile,
 who smile at their baby’s love,
 who want to enjoy life,
 who want life to enjoy them.

This is for my sister mamas,
 who wake up early,
 who go to school,
 and then go to work,
 working to make a good life.

This is for my sister mamas:
 Be strong like a tree.
 Prove them wrong.
 Stand tall and be proud.
“Sticks and stones break our bones
and words hurt just as bad.”

- Thala-Majal Perez

Then, if everyone could read Via’s words, they would know that she is not a ‘disease needing treatment’, that she is loving and compassionate towards others.

**For my co-young moms**

This is for my co-young moms,

beautiful,
unique,
gentle,
loving, young moms.

This is for my co-young moms,
caring,
calm,
concerned,
protective, young moms.

This is for my co-young moms,
judged,
questioned,
all eyes on me,
standing out (outstanding!), young moms.

This is for my co-young moms,
thriving under pressure,
capable,
responsible,
and good enough to make our own choice for our future,
young moms.

-Via

And after that, if everyone could read Danielle’s words, they would know that she is not a ‘child raising a child’, that she is responsible and capable.
To My Young Mothers

I see you.  
I see you hiding from the judgment.  
I see you sitting all alone on the bus.  
I see you hurrying a crying baby to a quiet place.  
I see you, red-faced and defeated.  
I see you being doubted, scorned, and scoffed at.

But I see you.  
I see you wiping runny noses.  
I see you pacing with a restless child.  
I see you kissing the boo-boos.  
I see you singing away the tiny heartaches.  
I see your tired eyes glowing at a beautiful baby.

I see how much it can hurt.  
I feel how much you can love  
this tiny being, whom you gave everything for.  
I see you,  
and I am with you.

- d.b.

And finally, if everyone could read Jessie’s words, they would know that she is strong, and ready to talk back to these metaphors.

Young Warrior Mamas

To my young warrior mamas:  
We met our babies early, unplanned  
in the Great Creator's favour.

To those who struggle with  
"You're too young. You won't be able to raise a kid."  
Hard,  
Happy,  
Hurting  
Syndrome.  
Beautiful, caring, strong willed, judged mamas.
To those who struggle with
"You're on your own single mama."
Hard,
Happy,
Hurting
Syndrome.
Beautiful, caring, strong willed, judged mamas.

To those who struggle with
"I missed the bus heading to school."
Hard,
Happy,
Hurting
Syndrome.
Beautiful, caring, strong willed, judged mamas.

To those who struggle with
"Irresponsible, grew up too fast, likes to party, can't raise a kid, a baby having a baby."
Hard,
Happy,
Hurting
Syndrome.
Beautiful, caring, strong willed, judged mamas.

To my young warrior mamas:
We met our babies early, unplanned
in the Great Creator's favour.

- J.W.

With minor adaptations, Linda Christensen’s curriculum, as offered in Reading, Writing, and Rising Up and Teaching for Joy and Justice, is easy to use with teen parents, and gives them the tools to talk back to the stereotypes and metaphors that have come to define them. Using poetry as the vehicle and my students’ lives as the terrain, I witnessed first hand to what extent I could make writing unintimidating and meaningful. Later in the year, I gently eased them into shaping poems into paragraphs and then stringing paragraphs together into essays and narratives. By this point, most had found a certain confidence with their writing, and were willing to take the
plunge into the world of prose. One student of mine who will be beginning a culinary arts program at Vancouver Community College in September, 2015, is a testimony to Christensen’s pedagogy: One day early in June, she exclaimed, “Wow, Leah, I never thought I could write two essays in two days!” When just a few months before, this young woman would have considered herself incapable, she now knows she can do just that and probably more, and because she knows this, she is better equipped to talk back to the inaccurate metaphors that label her, and begin to author her own. This is joy. And this is justice.
References


Christensen, L. (2009). Teaching for Joy and Justice; Re-Imagining the Language Arts Classroom. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Rethinking Schools, Ltd.


Appendix A

My Sister Mamas

This is for my sister mamas,
surviving the crazy craving,
surviving the swinging moods,
surviving all night crying,
surviving the long, hard labor.

This is for my sister mamas,
fighting to be known,
fighting to be understood,
fighting to speak back,
fighting to be strong and independent.

This is for my sister mamas,
cooking,
cleaning,
caring for the babies,
cooling, caressing and soothing the future.

This is for my sister mamas,
who love their baby's smile,
who smile at their baby's love,
who want to enjoy life,
who want life to enjoy them.

This is for my sister mamas,
who wake up early,
who go to school,
and then go to work,
working to make a good life.

This is for my sister mamas:
Be strong like a tree.
Prove them wrong.
Stand tall and be proud.
"Sticks and stones break our bones
and words hurt just as bad."

— Thala-Majal Perez

Poetry written by teen moms to teen moms, and to all others willing to see life through a different lens
Young Warrior Mamas

To my young warrior mamas:
We met our babies early, unplanned
in the Great Creator’s favour.

To those who struggle with
“You’re too young. You won’t be able to raise a kid.”
Hard,
Happy,
Hurting
Syndrome.
Beautiful, caring, strong willed, judged mamas.

To those who struggle with
“You’re on your own single mama.”
Hard,
Happy,
Hurting
Syndrome.
Beautiful, caring, strong willed, judged mamas.

To those who struggle with
“I missed the bus heading to school.”
Hard,
Happy,
Hurting
Syndrome.
Beautiful, caring, strong willed, judged mamas.

To those who struggle with
“Irresponsible, grew up too fast, likes to party, can’t raise a kid,
a baby having a baby.”
Hard,
Happy,
Hurting
Syndrome.
Beautiful, caring, strong willed, judged mamas.

To my young warrior mamas
We met our babies early, unplanned
in the Great Creator's favour.
- J.W.

Poetry written by teen moms to teen moms, and to all others willing to see life through a different lens.
To My Young Mothers

I see you.
I see you hiding from the judgment.
I see you sitting all alone on the bus.
I see you hurrying a crying baby to a quiet place.
I see you, red-faced and defeated.
I see you being doubted, scorned, and scoffed at.

But I see you.
I see you wiping runny noses.
I see you pacing with a restless child.
I see you kissing the boo-boos.
I see you singing away the tiny heartaches.
I see your tired eyes glowing at a beautiful baby.

I see how much it can hurt.
I feel how much you can love
this tiny being, whom you gave
everything for.
I see you,
and I am with you.

— d.b.

Poetry written by teen moms to teen moms, and to all others willing to see life through a different lens
For my co-young moms

This is for my co-young moms,
beautiful,
unique,
gentle,
loving, young moms.

This is for my co-young moms,
caring,
calm,
concerned,
protective, young moms.

This is for my co-young moms,
judged,
questioned,
all eyes on me,
standing out (outstanding!) young moms.

This is for my co-young moms,
thriving under pressure,
capable,
responsible,
and good enough to make our own choice for our future,
young moms.

- Via

Poetry written by teen moms to teen moms, and to all others willing to see life through a different lens.