



MONASH University

Younger motherhood and educational connectedness:
"The story starts from here."

Jodie B. Long

Bachelor of Arts

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Abstract

This thesis is a qualitative, thematic study grounded in a feminist research framework. It explores the meaning that secondary school student mothers give to their educational experiences and connectedness. The stories of these 26 young mothers have been explored through 46 extended, unstructured interviews and field-work in their educational environments. Their stories describe their experiences before pregnancy, during pregnancy and as mothers in an educational context.

The aim of this thesis is to examine how younger mothers see themselves, their educational trajectories, and how broader social and political representations impact on their educational connectedness. Hearing student mothers' accounts of their educational experiences and connectedness is critical to understand how they experience current supports and what types of support might offer education or training pathways that are most meaningful to them.

There is a dichotomous construction of younger motherhood in the public, political and academic domain. Much discourse frames younger motherhood as deterministically negative as well as educationally, socially and intergenerationally problematic: a smaller body of more recent research frames the phenomenon as a positive, life-changing force. By examining these constructions and focusing on the class values that underpin both motherhood and education, this thesis illuminates how younger mothers see these supports and constraints and how they exercise agency in this context.

This thesis considers that these younger mothers are living, mothering, making decisions and creating their future pathways in the context of social constructions that position younger mothers as either needing to emancipate

themselves from their problematic past or as socially dependent drains on a meritocratic neo-liberal society. Both of these constructions diminish younger mothers on many fronts.

The student mothers who volunteered significant amounts of their time to contribute to this research framed their pregnancies and motherhood status as opportunities. They outlined the positive difference that their children had made in their lives and to their lives. They spoke of how their lives were improved, and told stories of hope and aspiration whilst acknowledging the challenges posed by judgment, stigma, loss and fear. They wanted to give themselves and their children the best chance of 'success' and they understood education to be at the heart of these aspirations. Having described challenging childhoods and complex family structures, they described their current vision of success in traditional ways. They wanted strong families, engagement in community and inclusion in the workforce.

Their narratives also reflected feelings of judgment and stigma to which the participants consistently referred. Understanding that society sees younger motherhood as largely problematic created resistance in these young mothers. In their narratives and lives, they attempted to reposition the discourse and perception and to live well for their children and themselves.

Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Jodie Long', with a stylized, cursive script.

Print Name:

Jodie Long

Date: 8 November, 2019

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I need to be here, at school. I need to build a future for my kids. And for me. And for everyone else that said I couldn't. I want to be here. I am here ... But you've got no idea. It's not exactly a walk in the park.

-Jannah

Chapter 1: Introduction

Most experiences of announcing a pregnancy include stories of joy, family, celebration, congratulations, anticipation and a few nerves. However, if pregnancy occurs outside the socially sanctioned norms of age, temporality or family structure, these stories are likely to be different. Younger mothers in Western countries in particular face a litany of negative responses and assumptions as they come to terms with their impending motherhood status. These negatively framed responses to younger pregnancy and motherhood directly link deterministic negative outcomes with younger motherhood, often minimising other complexities in the lives of younger women.

As for all first-time mothers, the lives of younger mothers change dramatically when their baby is born. However, unlike many other new mothers in Western countries, these younger mothers have not completed schooling and may have a pre-existing tenuous relationship to schooling arising from other complexities. In spite of this, the young women in this study speak about the importance of their future pathways and say that these pathways predominantly involve further education.

Motherhood itself is a highly contested space and younger motherhood even more so. Younger motherhood invokes judgment from many who believe it to be inherently 'costly' to social welfare agencies, social workers, health workers, teachers, researchers, the children of younger parents and society at large. Consequently, younger mothers are seen to have made 'bad' choices in a notionally meritocratic society that assumes a plethora of opportunities and choices for young women. These negative assumptions are made in the context of changing societal attitudes towards family structures, youth behaviour, sex, sexuality, parenting, poverty and welfare costs (Macvarish, 2010). These assumptions contrast strongly with the stories that younger mothers tell of pride, love, responsibility, joy, autonomy, connection and motivation to succeed (Shea, Bryant, & Wendt, 2016). These incongruent perspectives raise significant questions about how societal, cultural, and

political discourses impact on younger mothers' experiences of and connectedness to education. It is to these issues that my qualitative study with these 26 young mothers speaks.

This project has arisen as a result of my work over almost two decades with marginalised young people who have been excluded from the mainstream education system for a variety of reasons, including being pregnant and/or parenting students. It became evident to me that there was embedded structural support available for many young people excluded from mainstream schooling (in the form of alternative education sites for issues such as behavioural concerns, physical and/or learning disabilities and differing educational needs) and that these alternative sites were generally well advertised, recognised and respected within the educational arena. When school exclusion occurs because of school disconnection, Victorian schools have a policy that answers to the 'Melbourne Declaration on Education' (Dawkins, 2008), which promotes equity, excellence and positive outcomes for all Victorian students. However, my experience is that this policy does not support an equitable education for students who have been disconnected from school due to pregnancy and/or parenting, which is a patently gendered exclusionary situation (Osler, Street, Lall, & Vincent, 2002). This cohort of student mothers bridges the temporality between child (student) and mother (adult) seemingly creating a confusing space in which the 'adult' temporality is viewed as usurping the 'student' temporality. This gap warrants further investigation.

In addition, my work with marginalised young people exposed contradictions in the representations of adolescent mothers – by the media, by professional colleagues and by the young women themselves. Media headlines from the past 15 years in Victoria, Australia where I worked include value-laden language that assumes that all pregnancies within this cohort are unplanned and unfortunate; academic articles include words such as 'crisis', 'tragedy', 'preventable', 'shame' and 'epidemic' in their titles and content (Vincent & Thomson, 2013). When communicating with other professionals about young women in the initial stages of pregnancy, I found that their responses were

generally concerned and caring, but inevitably disappointed for the young woman and often assigned her to a fate that excluded education beyond pregnancy. This was rarely (if ever) how young mothers understood, spoke about or made sense of their experiences. In this era, young women use terms such as 'choice' and 'options'. In my experience, these young women were actively moving towards motherhood, rather than falling into it, as suggested by the media and many professionals. Many young women were reporting to me (as their teacher) an increased motivation for school, a sense of purpose regarding what it means to reach higher educational aspirations and a renewed sense of the value of education. However, the increased motivational levels that these young women were consistently reporting did not appear to manifest in long-term educational engagement. The contradiction of this increase in younger mothers' motivation to return to school but their decrease in school attendance and completion (Hanna, 2001) has inspired this project.

As a professional in the field of educational connectedness and retention, I am interested in the perspectives and experiences of student mothers. I am keen to understand more about how these perspectives and experiences influence their decision-making processes with regard to educational opportunities and their connectedness (real and perceived) to the broad educational community.

Positioning

Turnbull (1987, p. 15) states that 'the reader is entitled to know something of the aims, expectations, hopes and attitudes that the writer brought to the field with him (sic), for these will surely influence not only how he sees things but even what he sees'.

I am a white, middle-class, Australian woman. I became a mother at 31 years old. I am a teacher and the daughter of two teachers, which has shaped my interest in education. I understand education as both an emancipator and an oppressor in varying circumstances. With this background, I acknowledge a

particular status and position of power. I regularly find that this causes me to perceive the world differently to my students, who have often come from backgrounds of trauma and/or disadvantage, and also distinguishes me from many of the participants in this research. I have worked in a variety of non-mainstream educational institutions as a teacher and as a youth worker. I have worked with many school-connected mothers as well as school-disconnected mothers who were of school age (17 years or under), although I have never worked in an institution or program specifically for adolescent mothers. I have worked primarily in Victorian locations, including rural regions. In this research therefore I was conscious of preconceived ideas and how my background may affect my analysis. I worked hard towards reflexivity and on establishing short-term relationships with the research participants so I could follow up on any sections of their transcripts I was uncertain about or found ambiguous.

What do we know?

Much of the research uses terms such as ‘adolescent pregnancy’, ‘teenage pregnancy’, ‘teenage motherhood’ and ‘younger motherhood’ and defines these mothers as between 15 and 19 years old (inclusive) at the time of their first baby following the World Health Organization definition (World Health Organization, 2018). Unless otherwise stated, this thesis adopts this definition. All of the 26 participants for this study were in this age range at the time of their first baby’s birth.

2% of the 15–19-year-old Australian female population is pregnant and/or parenting (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019), with less 15 year olds than 19 year olds becoming mothers. From postcode data, in some areas (including one of the sites studied for this project), this figure is as high as 24%. There is significant research from the US and the UK (and a smaller body of research from Australia) regarding interventions to prevent adolescent pregnancies and how to best support young mothers and their babies ([both detailed in Chapter 2; Situating the research](#)). Whilst there is research regarding mother-craft education for the adolescent mother, there is limited

research comparing the quality and substance of education available to young mothers with that available to their non-parenting peers. There is also limited research comparing the outcomes and equality of pathway options accessible to younger mothers and their non-parenting peers. This is important knowledge as education can enhance health, wellbeing and social outcomes for adolescent parents by providing a conduit for personal development and 'social capital' (Barling, 2007). Social capital is a term defined in various ways but generally encompasses the understanding as being 'captured from embedded resources in social networks' (Lin, 2017).

Some have argued young mothers have been denigrated due to perceptions they are actively choosing an alternative existence to their middle-class peers (Harris, 2004; SmithBattle, 2013), a choice that does not comply with contemporary societal norms and expectations (Wilson & Huntington, 2006). Recent critiques of quantitative research have led to a small body of qualitative research offering an analysis of younger motherhood from first-hand experiences. This research challenges dominant perceptions of school-aged pregnancy as a deterministic and devastating situation for young women but also positions younger motherhood in the broader construct of class-based notions of success and failure.

This predominantly qualitative research focuses on the direct experiences of pregnant and mothering young women in order to understand how they make sense of their pregnancy and motherhood status. This research has exposed an alternative discourse of younger motherhood offering evidence that younger motherhood can be a catalyst for positive change in the lives of some young women as opposed to a pathway of marginalisation and disadvantage (Anwar & Stanistreet, 2014; Brown, 2015; Carlson, 2016; Wenham, 2016). It has found that becoming pregnant can support young women to re-evaluate their aspirations and goals and that this can include a renewed sense of motivation for education (Kendall et al., 2005; Pillow, 2004; SmithBattle, 2009). This research is significant as previous qualitative and quantitative research has found that younger mothers are likely to have experienced disengagement, low attendance or a history of tenuous connection to

education prior to pregnancy (Arai, 2003; Coleman & Cater, 2006; Dawson, 1997; Dawson & Meadows, 2001).

Aims

This thesis aims to explore and privilege the voices of younger mothers and provide a better understanding of the meanings young women give to being student mothers. A vast majority of previous research positions young motherhood as detrimental; a smaller, more recent body of research suggests younger motherhood can be 'a remarkable turning point' (Barn & Mantovani, 2005, p. 239). This thesis locates both of these positions as constructing a 'successful' young woman as engaged in education or employment. These particular younger mothers therefore requiring 'fixing'. If younger motherhood is a 'turning point', the young woman is someone who requires such a 'turning point'. This thesis aims to challenge these dichotomous constructions of younger motherhood and deterministic discourses of success for younger mothers.

This thesis builds on previously conducted research which privileges the voices of younger mothers, offering a critical exploration of participants' stories of younger motherhood as a positive catalyst in their lives. It examines the meanings they give to their newly formed educational connectedness and the supports they say help maintain this engagement. This thesis explores the best ways to support the renewed connection to genuine educational opportunities that pregnant and parenting young women say they desire. However, it also accounts for the link between this renewed motivation, the dominant discourse and normative judgments about the 'good' mother and the 'good' student, and the stories of redemption and aspiration that society pressures these young women to tell. The women reveal their personal narratives in the context of a socially constructed world that celebrates the young woman who is re-engaged in education and demonises a welfare-dependent 'teenage mum'.

A majority of the participants interviewed for this thesis described lives prior to their pregnancies that did not match dominant or traditional definitions of 'success'. However, when interviewed (during pregnancy and/or parenting), almost all vociferously aligned themselves with what they considered (and named) to be 'normal' concepts of a successful adolescence and early adulthood – specifically, education, employment and community connectedness. They described their pregnancies and motherhood status as positive catalysts for change, using terms and expressions such as '*saved me*' and '*got my life back on track*'. They positioned themselves as having had troubled or problematic childhoods but spoke of their own agency and the decisions they were making to avoid repeating these stories.

By recognising that social participation (specifically in education) has associated value-laden judgments, this thesis illuminates the inequalities underpinning the 'choices' of participants. However, these young mothers are repeatedly and firmly asking for access and connectedness to an education system that aligns with their aspirational pathways and the complexity of their daily lives. The thesis aims to explore and better understand the mechanisms that can support the educational connectedness they are seeking. Many of these participants are overcoming barriers to attend school regularly to try to achieve these socially endorsed educational goals. Importantly, they are saying that their lives are 'better' for this.

These participants describe their understanding of a positive and successful life as being entwined with engagement and success in education and I recognise this as both an emancipating and a constraining factor.

Research questions

The thesis includes data on the educational aspirations of, and opportunities for, young mothers (15–19 years old) and analyses current social and educational discourses. It explores representations of the 'problem' (Bacchi, 1999) of younger motherhood and how these representations affect policy

decisions, stigmatised identities and, ultimately, educational opportunity and experience.

With these aims in mind, this thesis focuses on the following questions:

How do adolescent mothers identify themselves in the educational and social spaces and discourses?

What meanings and importance do adolescent mothers give to staying connected to education?

What do young mothers say would best support their educational connectedness?

Thesis structure

Following this introduction (Chapter 1), the literature review (Chapter 2) examines existing research regarding pregnant and parenting students, constructions of motherhood, and educational constructs and connectedness, both locally and from other western countries. Chapter 2 critically engages with existing quantitative research that positions younger motherhood as a pathway to long-term, intergenerational disadvantage and truncated education, and also reviews the small, but increasing, body of research that privileges more positive lived experiences and personal stories.

Chapter 3, 'Hearing student mothers,' outlines the methodology. It explains the epistemological perspective adopted and the process of data collection, analysis (using an interpretative, thematic approach grounded in a feminist standpoint) and evaluation. Chapter 3 provides information about how I gained access to participants and how they gave informed consent for their participation. Within this chapter, I illuminate my personal standpoint and capacity for reflexivity to ensure as much transparency as possible in ethical considerations of positioning, power and influence.

Chapter 4, titled 'Living adolescent motherhood and education: backgrounds and theorists', has a dual purpose. First, it outlines the crux of the thesis through three dominant themes: 'judgment and stigma', 'fear and loss' and 'hope and aspirations'. It explains these themes as a key framework for understanding the data. The chapter integrates the ideas from Michel Foucault (1980, 1984), Erving Goffman (1963) and feminist theorists Oakley (1981), Pillow (2013) and Harris (1994), who collectively provide key concepts framing this thesis with specific regard to stigma, power, social constructs and embodiment or 'bodies'. The thesis then has four data chapters.

Chapter 5, "I don't care what they say. I might be young but I'm not stupid": experiences and perceptions of judgment,' explores how participants see their relationships with family, friends, institutions (including school) and society. It focuses on their experiences and perceptions of judgment and stigma. As found in other research, the data revealed stories of judgment, and feelings of disconnection, shame, inadequacy (including with regard to education) and exclusion. This chapter found that stigma and judgment was embedded in the participants' daily experiences and created barriers to engaging in a wide variety of activities and opportunities.

Chapter 6 is titled, "I tell them, I'm her Mum": identity construction/transition' and locates participants' stories in terms of identity construction. The chapter investigates the complications and strengths for younger mothers of simultaneously developing identities of student, adolescent and mother. The chapter found a complex and personal pathway to the identity of student and mother and revealed the workload participants were undertaking to negotiate structural inequalities and negative judgments.

Chapter 7, "My baby saved me": planning for a 'better' life,' reveals the recurrent theme of participants seeking a 'better' life for themselves and their children. This is articulated primarily in comparison to their own childhoods,

and how they make decisions differently once they are mothers. This chapter explores the post-birth period, about which participants tell stories of finding hope, learning to express their changing needs and discovering new motivations and longer term goals. The chapter found that participants used their motherhood status to inspire and motivate them towards building positive futures rather than restricting possibilities.

Chapter 8, the final data chapter, investigates school connectedness. It is titled 'I can go to school like a normal teenager' and it examines the desires younger mothers express about returns to education and to 'do something with my life' (Silva) and 'show my kid how important it [education/school] is' (Jannah). The chapter found that school connectedness was a continuum rather than a dualistic notion and it was highly dependent on the other life complexities facing participants. School connectedness did not exist in isolation.

Chapter 9 concludes the thesis and summarises the main findings in relation to the aims and research questions. It discusses the implications and possible applications of the findings and acknowledges possible limitations of the research.

The appendices detail how I approached schools and participants, as well as offering more detailed, de-identified pen portraits of individual student mothers.

Acronyms used in the following chapters.

VCE – Victorian Certificate of Education

VCAL – Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning

VET – Vocational Education Training

ATAR – Australian Tertiary Admission Rank

Chapter 2: Situating the research

This chapter examines existing research about younger motherhood seeking to situate the stories of my participants. It will provide details about who is represented in this grouping in Victoria, where they are likely to come from and how this has altered over the past four decades. It synthesises the relevant published research in Western countries to illustrate changing social perspectives regarding younger motherhood, with a particular emphasis on education and the influence of gender and class. This chapter outlines the particular gendered norms of the two institutions of motherhood and schooling (Okwany, 2016) that shape the experiences of student mothers.

Although there is a significant body of literature regarding adolescent motherhood and a separate body of literature regarding non-parenting adolescents' connection to and engagement with educational services, there is limited research on the juncture between the two. This research has primarily been conducted in the US, with smaller sets in the UK, Canada and Australia. It is important to acknowledge that there are significant social, cultural and political differences between these other countries and Australia that impacts the research designs and outcomes. I position the Australian research on younger motherhood in a global context and review the literature regarding our understanding of Western motherhood and schooling and the constructions attached to these institutions. I will conclude by examining the small but increasing body of research that privileges the lived experiences and personal stories of younger mothers.

Understanding the numbers: Fertility and contraception

The teenage fertility rate refers to the number of births per year per 1000 to females aged 15–19 years. Rates in girls under the age of 15 years have been inconsistent because of low numbers and, in Australia, they are not routinely measured (Marino, Lewis, Bateson, Hickey, & Skinner, 2016). Worldwide, there has been a noticeable (although irregular) decline in the

number of adolescent births since 1990. In 2014, the fertility rate among Australian teenagers was at an all-time low of 12.9/1000. This rate sits approximately in the middle of comparable OECD countries. Australia has a lower rate than the US and New Zealand but a higher rate than most Scandinavian countries and Canada.

Teenage fertility rates are inconsistent across Australia. In the most rural and remote areas, the teenage fertility rate in 2014 was 57/1000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Those living in the most socially disadvantaged areas of Australia have teenage birth rates almost eight times higher than those in the most advantaged areas: 30/1000 compared to 4/1000 (Marino et al., 2016). One in four teenage mothers in Australia identify as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent (Australian Institute Health Welfare, 2018). According to data from the United Nations Population Division (2005), adolescent motherhood occurs most often in Australian populations where poverty, Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander status and rural/remote locations intersect.

In Australia, the legalisation of the contraceptive pill occurred in 1961 (although it was not equally accessible to all) and amendments to the abortion act (by state) from 1971 that made (and continue to make) abortion accessible to some sections of the population (Sedgh, Finer, Bankole, Eilers, & Singh, 2015).

Nationally, just over 90% per cent of adolescents report using contraception at first intercourse but according to Marino et al. (2016) their knowledge regarding the effective use and the contraceptive options is poor. Young Australians report a variety of barriers to contraception access including familial belief systems, discomfort in disclosing sexual activity for fear of judgment, confidentiality concerns (particularly in rural locations), waiting periods (to see medical practitioners) and expense (Skinner et al., 2015).

Prior to 2008, abortion law in Victoria was based on the Victorian Crimes Act (The Parliament of Victoria, 2008). Under this ruling, abortions were legal if 'necessary' (as deemed by two separate doctors) or if it was deemed to be in

the interests of preserving the woman from 'a serious danger to her life' (Keogh et al., 2017). Following law reform in 2008, abortions have been allowed on request up to 24 weeks of gestation. Despite this, abortions remain inaccessible to many. The financial costs are significant (with long wait lists for the small number of publicly accessible services) (Keogh et al., 2017), rural access is often negligible or non-existent (Skinner et al., 2015), fear and stigma are significant barriers for pregnant adolescents (Marino et al., 2016) and young Australian women report feelings of confusion, guilt and uncertainty, citing conflicting counselling services amongst other challenges (Boulden, 2010). Some young women have reported pressure from partners, parents, doctors, school counsellors with regard to abortions that has added complexity to their pregnancies, their self-perception and decision making (Ellis-Sloan, 2014).

The average age of women having their first baby rose steadily in the 1960s, from 20–24 years in 1960 to 25–29 by 1970 (Botting & Dunnell, 2000); in 2019, the average age at which a woman has her first child is 31.3 years (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017).

Whilst the average age of women having children has risen, the average age of young women have their first experience of sexual intercourse has lowered slightly to 17 years (Rissel et al., 2014). The earlier a teenager experiences sexual intercourse, the more likely she is to experience earlier motherhood: this pattern has also been associated with other factors including; early puberty, childhood adversity, low socioeconomic status, dysfunctional family relationships, childhood sexual abuse, challenging school adjustment, depression, low self-esteem and single-parent or blended family structure (Kotchick, Shaffer, Miller, & Forehand, 2001; Skinner et al., 2015; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008).

Understanding the numbers: School connectedness

In this thesis, school connectedness is defined as the 'belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals' (American Psychological Association, 2019).

Understanding school connectedness for all young people in Australia requires attention to social class, which is inextricably linked to school connectedness and youth research (Gonski et al., 2011).

France and Roberts (2017) commented that there are no reliable measures of class in Australia and criticised the interchangeability of class and socioeconomic status (SES). They claimed that this minimises the chance for a more nuanced understanding of the interplay of multiple factors of disadvantage or marginalisation in Australia (such as gender, race, ethnicity and geographic location) and creates a problematic single dimension. Class in Australia is clearly aligned to school completion rates (Donovan, 2018; Gonski et al., 2011; Woodman & Wyn, 2014).

Traditionally, Australian society has taken pride in expressing a belief of being relatively egalitarian (Lancaster Jones, 1974), in comparison to the well-documented hierarchies of the class system in the UK. However, increasing evidence of socio-economic stratification is being acknowledged and investigated (Cameron & McAllister, 2016; Donovan, 2018); there is now documentation of the existence and significance of social class in Australian society. Sheppard and Biddle (2017) recently identified six class divides within Australia. They are, 'precariat', 'ageing workers', 'new workers', 'established middle', 'emerging affluent', and 'established affluent'. The breakdown of these Australian class concepts bears strong resemblance to the foundational work by Savage et al. (2014) in the UK as acknowledged by Sheppard and Biddle (2017).

New Australian studies have described factors such as intergenerational mobility, social cohesion, social capital, and entrenched disadvantage (Cuervo & Wyn, 2016; Furlong, Woodman, & Wyn, 2011; Woodman & Wyn, 2014) as relevant in understanding class distinctions. Sheppard and Biddle (2017) assert that Australians are acutely aware of their class identity, with "self-assessed class membership reflecting the relative capital and mobility of the objectively measured classes" (p.2). They explain that objective measures incorporate six class divides but Australians are most likely to self-identify in

just three: working class, middle class and upper class (although under 2% of Australians identify as being 'upper class' (Lunn, 2019). Precariat, ageing worker, and established middle classes (as defined in the Sheppard and Biddle [2017] study) are the most likely to self-assess as working class. The 'upwardly mobile new worker' and 'emerging affluent classes', as well as those in the 'established affluent class', are more likely to identify as middle class. A small number (unspecified) of the established affluent class identified as upper class. This work of self assessment and consequent divisions indicates that whilst Australians perceive their society as being relatively 'classless', at the individual and family level, Australians report an acute sense of their own relative class position.

This class model and individual perception indicates that Australian society is stratified with more complexity than occupation or socio-economic status (SES) suggests. Despite this, most class measures in Australia are heavily reliant on these two variables including the data collected by both State and Federal education departments (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015; Victorian State Government, 2016). This thesis has been written with the understanding that the simplistic notion classifying SES with class divides is insufficiently nuanced but is, at times, the most relevant data available. As there is no current data on the numbers of students connected or disconnected from school along class lines, the following data uses SES.

While high-school completion rates and SES do not tell the whole story of school connectedness, class and (dis)advantage, they remain important in educational outcomes. Across Australia in 2015, the high-school completion rate was 89% among the highest socioeconomic decile and 61% among the lowest decile (Lamb et al., 2015). It has been suggested that this last number is likely to be even lower due to misreporting where disengaged children are registered to a school but not attending or being completely disengaged from classroom curriculum or social connection (Kotiw, 2010). According to the 'Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth' report (LSAY, 2013) disparity goes beyond the classroom walls into post-compulsory education. At tertiary level, 69% of young people who come from the highest socioeconomic quartile

complete a university qualification, compared with 27% from the lowest quartile (LSAY, 2013).

Are adolescent mothers connected to school?

There is currently limited data in Australia on the school retention rates of pregnant and parenting adolescents, although anecdotal evidence suggests that retention is extremely low. Boulden (2000, 2010) claimed the chances of adolescent parents in Australia completing school are ‘almost nil’ (p.16), and Loxton, Williams, and Adamson (2007) stated that the barriers to service delivery in the educational domain render the likelihood of school completion ‘extremely low’ (p. 43). The most recent data is from 2008, in which the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Year Book Australia, 2008) reported that 14% of mothers under 19 years of age were ‘fully engaged’ in education or the labour market (whereas 61% of fathers under 19 reported being ‘fully engaged’). According to Barling (2007), of the students who became mothers and remained engaged in education, most were directed by school personnel into alternative programs that did not necessarily offer equity of access to the whole curriculum (Barling, 2007).

In Victoria, there is no formal data about adolescent parents completing school. Young women from backgrounds of socioeconomic disadvantage are more likely to leave school early and more likely to continue with a pregnancy than their more privileged counterparts (Loxton, Williams, et al., 2007), thereby having a potential multiplier effect on the challenges of school connection (Boulden, 2016). Historically, adolescent parents were more likely to adopt out or foster their children (Family Planning Victoria, 2017) but today, younger mothers are more likely to parent. This increases the number of younger mothers of school age, exacerbating the complication of an increased school-leaving age (Lall, 2007). Therefore, despite there being fewer adolescent women having babies (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011a) a higher number of student exclusions occur as a result of the rise in compulsory school-leaving age and the higher percentage of young mothers being primary carers (Family Planning Victoria, 2017).

Review of relevant international literature

The largest body of research connecting adolescent pregnancy and limited or inequitable educational opportunity and inclusion has come from the US and the UK (including Hudgins, Erickson, and Walker (2014); Kelly (2000); Kulkarni, Kennedy, and Lewis (2010); Pillow (2004, 2006). Although there are commonalities, the US literature tends to focus on the economics of welfare while the UK literature focuses on the social and economic costs of health outcomes (for the baby and the mother).

Almost all of the international literature adopts a deficit model. Deficit modeling suggests that there is something wrong or inferior with a student who has 'difference' and places the focus on fixing this. In the US, Valencia (2012) argued deficit thinking is a 'pseudo-science founded on racial and class bias' (p. x), while feminist scholars such as Pillow (2002) have identified gender bias in this model. According to Bogenschneider and Olson (1998) in the US, youth interventions based on deficit modeling or research have not created sustainable change.

Most of this US deficit research emerged between the early 1990s and 2005. It is mostly in the form of reviews on the effect of 'Title 1X', an educational policy written in 1972 that mandated equal education for all. This policy made specific mention of adolescent mothers, although evidence suggests that support for this cohort has been largely unsuccessful (Hausenfluck, 2006; Pillow, 2004). In 1976, shortly after this policy was released, and despite data suggesting a slight decline in adolescent pregnancies, the Guttmacher Institute (1976) published a prominent and much cited report, *Eleven million teenagers: What can be done about the epidemic of adolescent pregnancies in the United States?*. Guttmacher's description of this 'epidemic' then began to appear commonly in the US across both media and research.

These early reviews of Title 1X focused on the first young mothers to have been educated within this system and conclusions varied regarding the exact levels of inequality that remained. School retention, academic

outcomes/grades, post-school pathways and long-term educational opportunity, earning capacity and potential, health and wellbeing were all recognized as factors contributing to these levels of inequality. Among these reviews of Title 1X were several studies particularly relevant to this project.

Brindis and Philliber (1998) reviewed 16 US studies focusing on the associations between adolescent pregnancy and poverty. In this review, education was framed as a pathway away from poverty. Of the programs reviewed (all of which aspired to educational outcomes), only four incorporated academic outcomes or supports into their findings. Kennedy and Bennett (2006) focused their Chicago-based study on the intersection between pregnant and parenting adolescents' exposure to violence and school disconnectedness and found a strong correlation between the two. Devito (2007) interviewed 13–19-year-old first-time mothers in New Jersey and examined factors that contributed to self-perceptions of parenting (identity work) in the early weeks postpartum. This study framed adolescent parents as lacking the maturity, cognitive and emotional capabilities of older parents. Other US studies that have common outcomes of disadvantage and/or multiple deficiencies, investigated young mothers with poor perceptions of the treatment from medical staff (Cartwright et al., 1993; Kinsman & Slap, 1992), the experience of sexual victimization (Rhodes, Fischer, Ebert, & Meyers, 1993), a background of non-custodial care (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010), a lack of service literacy, and a fear of judgment from others and their intimate partner (Kulkarni, Lewis, & Rhodes, 2011). It can be argued that all of these studies used the deficit model of research.

These findings and foci have been echoed in the UK, where research has similarly framed adolescent pregnancy and parenting through deficit modeling, with some notable exceptions including Bonell (2004); Coard, Nitz, and Felice (2000); Lall (2007); Wenham (2016). Instructive here is Bonell (2004) in her review of qualitative studies from the UK and the US that focused on school exclusion for pregnant and parenting adolescents and the reintegration of excluded students into alternative settings. She found that while research generally focused on the barriers to education for young

parents, a shift in focus to what young mothers could do (enablers) fostered a more positive attitude to school. She recognised this shift did not always equate to stronger academic outcomes, although it increased the social and emotional health of adolescent mothers. This finding was echoed in a follow-up study a decade later (Rudoe, 2014). Bonell's (2004) literature review concluded that social scientists frame adolescent motherhood as a social 'problem' (pp. 256, 257 and 264). She cited consistently used terms and phrases such as 'crisis', 'at-risk', 'welfare dependent', 'children raising children', 'financial cost to society', 'fatherless children', 'drain on resources' and 'national emergency' (in the US) and definitions of success as 'no subsequent pregnancies'. Vincent (2007) critiqued several UK papers at this time, arguing the in-school curricula named Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) had 'failed' to reduce the number of adolescent mothers, because it framed adolescent parenting as a social, health and economic problem.

Two qualitative UK papers challenging the deficit model have been instructive in this thesis. In the first, Lall (2007) recognises the narrow outcomes of negative positioning and advocates for more strength-based approaches. Lall (2007) claims that high but largely unrecognised numbers of adolescent mothers are being excluded from school as a result of the focus on their 'deficit' or difference. Lall illuminated the limitations of statistics in understanding young women's unofficial disengagement from school.

Later, Wenham (2016) claims that younger mothers are often perceived as 'failing' because most research is a 'snapshot of time' (p. 127). She locates stigma as a central force in younger mothers' experiences and outlines a more nuanced account of 'becoming' a mother over time, where younger mothers shift into their own versions of 'motherhood' within the context of stigma and stigma resistance. Wenham implores those who conduct research into and/or work with younger mothers to work over an extended period and to value the resilience shown by these women. She writes about the importance of allowing younger mothers to be recognised for 'who they are and what they can do' (p. 141) at varying points in their life trajectories.

Australian research on younger motherhood

The most influential papers in Australia regarding younger motherhood come from Barling (2007); Boulden (2010); Loxton, Stewart Williams, and Adamson (2007); Morehead and Soriano (2005); Shea et al. (2016); Zanarini et al. (2000). These papers, with the work of Kirkman, Harrison, Hillier, and Pyett (2001) and Kulkarni et al. (2010), effectively contextualise younger motherhood in Australia.

First, Boulden (2000) produced a 'how to' guide for educational practitioners titled *Present, Pregnant and Proud*. The document arises from a symposium that included significant input from those who had lived experience of adolescent parenting. The document outlines what schools can do to encourage pregnant students and provides examples of schools in Australia with 'successful' educational outcomes for student mothers. Notably, over half of the programs for young parents no longer function for a variety of reasons, with a lack of funding and leadership change being the predominant reasons cited.

Boulden's study was followed by Kirkman et al. (2001). This study found that many adolescent mothers considered themselves as competent and capable mothers who felt 'judged and condemned' unfairly, contrary to public opinion and older research. Rather than a deficit or disadvantage in their lives, many teenage mothers believed that motherhood had increased their maturity and confidence as well as giving greater meaning in their lives (this included closer relationships with family and the ceasing of substance misuse; (Seamark & Lings, 2004). This is relevant to frameworks of risk and resilience and the creation of educational opportunity for young parents who may not necessarily see themselves in need of services.

Another Australian ethnographic study by Hanna (2001) included the stories of five adolescent mothers. These young women consistently suggested that early parenting is a motivating factor to re-engage with education for a variety of reasons. Their most common reason was to avoid intergenerational poverty, rejecting the assumption of intergenerational poverty that is regularly made. Morehead and Soriano (2005) 'Teenage Mothers Study', conducted

over five months in 2005, highlighted the discrepancies in work and family life between adolescent mothers and 'older' mothers. They concluded that to make empowered and active decisions about work and family life, the mother needs to have a strong enough identity to embrace the concepts of choice and preference that come from a balance of supports and pressures.

Loxton, Stewart Williams, et al. (2007) reported on barriers to health service delivery for adolescent parents. This government-commissioned report conducted a literature review as well as interviewing service providers and young mothers (over the phone and face-to-face). The paper concluded with suggestions for best practice regarding the service delivery for the most desirable 'health and social outcomes for [young] mothers and their babies' (p. 94) which are also relevant for the institutions of school and education.

In the same year, Barling (2007), in conjunction with the Healthy Young Parents in Education (HYPE) program, examined current discourses about pregnant and parenting adolescents in South Australia and provided a critique of some educational models. The researcher's use of narrative inquiry and the acknowledgment of the expertise of those who were living through the experience were very valuable. Barling acknowledges that it is rare for pregnant and/or parenting adolescent mothers to complete secondary school and notes the consequent negative impacts on long-term employment, social connectedness and mental health.

In 2010, Kulkarni et al. (2010) conducted an in-depth analysis in Melbourne with 24 young mothers who had previously experienced homelessness. Many asserted that their parenting status gave them an opportunity to create positive change in their lives (with a focus on not using drugs and alcohol, family reconnection and less self-harm) but acknowledged their limited connections to services. A contemporary study by McArthur, Winkworth, and Butler (2010), found that young Australian mothers aspire to higher levels of education than their non-parenting peers, claiming education is important for employment and providing opportunities for their child/ren. McArthur et al. (2010) found that many of these mothers lacked knowledge about access to appropriate support services to help them achieve these aspirations. Together

this research indicates younger mothers have ambitions that are not being facilitated.

How do we understand younger motherhood? Discourse and risk factors

Younger pregnancy and motherhood is consistently represented as inherently problematic across research literature, media and government policy (Duncan, 2007). In her book *Unfit Subjects*, Pillow (2004) provided an extensive discourse analysis of teenage parenting from the US and concluded that, 'the provision of education to school-age mothers occurs within a social, political, economic and moral climate' (p. 57).

Younger motherhood is regularly connected to a plethora of negative outcomes for mother, child and society. UNICEF typifies this when it asserts younger mothers are:

...more likely to drop out of school, to have no or low qualifications, to be unemployed or low-paid, to live in poor housing conditions, to suffer from depression, and to live on welfare. Similarly, the child of a teenage mother is more likely to live in poverty, grow up without a father, to become a victim of neglect or abuse, to do less well at school, to become involved in crime, to abuse drugs and alcohol, and eventually become a teenage parent and begin the cycle all over again (UNICEF, 2001: 3).

In addition to these assumptions, much of the research connects young motherhood and a decline in moral and family values, and cites a supposed deficit of capabilities of single mothers and likely negative outcomes for their children (Gillies, 2007). A central theme is a lack of engagement in education, further training or employment. These young women are understood as having made 'choices' to disengage from education and the labour market locating them in this literature as 'at risk'. Furthering this perception of 'choice' to disengage from education is the perceived 'choice', commonly discussed in the literature, to remain welfare-dependent.

Several Australian studies identified specific barriers that prevent young or pregnant women from completing their secondary education, both up to and beyond the compulsory school age of 17 years (Barling, 2007; Boulden, 2010; Combes & Hinton, 2005; Slowinski, 2002). These barriers, which were all represented by one or many of the participants in this project, are now explored in turn.

Socioeconomic disadvantage

In Australia, low SES has been found to be both influential in school disconnectedness and a result of school disconnection. Mahuteau and Mavromaras (2014) used longitudinal youth data along with results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) to distinguish between personal and school factors when assessing risk of school exclusion. They found PISA scores consistently predicted early school leaving, particularly for the lowest academic achievers. The authors found individual and social disadvantage is instrumental in school engagement, both directly and indirectly.

There exists a neo-liberal social welfare discourse (which could also be referred to as a discourse of intervention) that is particularly strong in Australia connected to the discourse of socio-economic status and disadvantage. Lister (2003) discussed the devaluing and demonising of the 'choices' that adolescent mothers could make to be 'not in education, employment or training' (Yates and Payne, 2006), ignoring the choice to 'devoting time to caring for children' (Kelly, 2008) or the concept of 'choice' as a construction in itself (Morehead & Soriano, 2005). This is detailed below.

State care

In Australia, one of the highest risk factors for adolescent school disconnectedness is for adolescents in state care (Mendes, 2009). This has been evidenced in several studies, including one with 41 care leavers in NSW, which found that 12 months after leaving care, just over one-third of

participants had completed Year 12 (across the NSW general population, this figure was 74%; (Lamb, 2011), and one-fifth had not completed Year 10 (Mendes, Johnson, & Moslehuddin, 2011).

There is a significant and disproportionate number of young women leaving state care who become pregnant within the first 18 months post-care (Boulden, 2010; Mendes, 2009). In a report commissioned by the Australian National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, Maunders, Liddell, Liddell, and Green (1999) concluded young people leaving state care are more likely to experience homelessness, unemployment, poverty and early parenthood. A recent Victorian government report concluded that children in out-of-home care are more likely than their peers to be disconnected from school, and less likely to engage with education or attain a Year 12 or equivalent qualification ("Australia : Improving Education For Children In Out-Of-Home Care," 2015). The complication and likelihood of pregnancy and parenting for these young women places them at the intersection of these factors of disadvantage, leaving them at heightened risk of school disconnectedness.

Housing

Australian research conducted by Morehead and Soriano (2005) suggests that housing/accommodation is the single most powerful factor influencing young parents' adjustment to and experiences of parenting. Housing insecurity clearly affects an adolescent mother's connectedness to education and educational opportunity as a result of dislocation (geographical), transience and perceived priorities (Boulden, 2010; Phillips, 2003). In a literature review, Slowinski (2002) found that the most 'likely' groups in young Australian women to experience unplanned pregnancy are those in post-care (referring to state care) and homeless adolescents who are characterised as experiencing a transient lifestyle and high-risk sexual practices (Slowinski, 2002).

Ethnicity

Chandola, Coleman, and Hiorns (2002) found that specific Australian migrant communities exhibited different fertility patterns. It was more common, and at times 'expected', that motherhood would occur earlier among particular migrant populations within Australia as compared to non-migrants.

Interestingly, this did not always translate to the same experiences of social marginalisation as non-migrant young mothers but these young mothers did experience similar outcomes of school disconnection.

Indigeneity

There is a significant amount of research that connects Indigeneity to a higher likelihood of low SES, being in non-parental care and adolescent parenting (Kelly, 2000).

Rural/Remote locations

Research conducted in Tasmania (Combes & Hinton, 2005) suggested higher rates of adolescent pregnancy in non-metropolitan areas are linked to educational, social, health and economic disadvantages and also to the nature and culture of smaller country towns. Country towns often offer less privacy and anonymity as well as a shortage of female doctors, from whom adolescent women are more likely to seek support (Combes & Hinton, 2005; Hippisley-Cox et al., 2000; Pearson, Owen, Phillips, Gray, & Marshall, 1995). This combination of risk factors increases the likelihood of poor outcomes for adolescent parents (including educational outcomes) more than any single individual factor (NSW Government, 2002). This concept has been supported internationally by Chandola et al. (2002), in which patterns of fertility across English-speaking nations were investigated.

Medical exclusion

The 'pathologising' (Pillow, 2004) of adolescent pregnancy continues to permeate current discourse regarding younger mothers (Kelly, 2000; Pillow,

2004; Vinovskis, 2003). Pregnant and parenting young women are still being overtly or covertly directed to alternative school settings or excluded on (pseudo) medical grounds (Kelly, 2000). Pillow (2004) used the metaphor 'pregnancy as a disability or disease' (p.83) to describe the approaches taken to the education of young mothers. Luttrell (2003, 2011) described the 'showing' of the pregnancy to cause the most conflict within a school.

It is at the intersection of the se barriers, risk factors and experience of younger motherhood that current research suggests school disconnectedness within Australia is exacerbated and complicated (Loxton, Stewart Williams, et al., 2007). This constellation of risk factors represents increased social challenge, as was the case for many of the participants. In Boulden's research (2007), as the complexity of risk factors increased, so too did the likelihood of long term service disengagement including schooling. As noted, the stories of lived experiences from pregnant and parenting adolescents are not well represented in the literature.

Parker (1992) stated that 'discourse constructs "representations" of the world which have a reality almost as coercive as gravity' (in Gillies, 2006, p. 35). Understanding how these representations and discourses impact upon younger motherhood and their connectedness to education requires an understanding of the school system and the changes and development in educational opportunity.

The history of educational opportunity in Victoria

This section will overview the context of social and financial (dis)advantage in relation to class and younger motherhood as well as the concepts of 'choice', agency and schooling in Australia in order to understand the multiple layers of disadvantage apparent for those who do not experience high-school completion. There is not an opportunity here to fully encompass the history of Indigenous relationships with the structure of the British-based education system in Australia but this relationship has created and continues to create

significant disadvantage in Australia's Indigenous populations (Gillan, Mellor, & Krakouer, 2017; Hunter & Biddle, 2012).

In Australia, there are competing understandings of the purpose of schooling (Bacchi, 1999). Some policymakers represent school as the 'equaliser' – allowing social mobility and equality (Bacchi, 1999; Gonzalez, 2009). Schooling has also been represented as continued socialisation into existing norms – the elite educating for the elite with the (dubious) assumption that they will then take power and 'do good' in decision-making positions (Bacchi, 1999, p. 113). School is also seen as an institution to maintain patriarchal power through the 'giving' of particular knowledges (Ball, 2012; Foucault, 1980). At times, schooling has been represented as socially and academically problematic with students understood as the sole 'receivers of knowledge'. According to some post-structuralist analysis (Summers, 2010), this means that no 'school' education (as is traditionally constructed in the mainstream English-speaking western world) can truly liberate.

Historically, 1960s Victoria saw relatively stable and uniform transitions from youth to adulthood, which generally coincided with the move from school to labour (Abello, Cassells, Daly, D'Souza, & Miranti, 2016). A majority of young people transitioned from school to work in their late teenage years and, shortly after, to marriage and parenthood (Woodman & Wyn, 2014). At this time, approximately two-thirds of young people left school at the minimum leaving age and began employment (Bynner, 1999). During the 1970s, the labour market changed course and the types of full-time work commonly undertaken by women (such as clerical work) diminished as these sectors became less viable (Bynner, Elias, McNight, Pan, & Pierre, 2002). With the establishment of the Schools Commission by the Whitlam Labor Government in 1972, there was recognition that schools with a large population of 'disadvantaged' children needed a more equitable funding divide (Reid, 2016). 'Disadvantaged' in this context was seen as working class, unemployed, recently migrated or living in Aboriginal families. The commission increased funding to geographic districts of disadvantage that included (for the first time) funding allocation to non-government schools such as Catholic schools and

provided recurrent grants for targeted programs, enabling greater security for schools in disadvantaged communities.

At this time, girls still had a different curriculum, experienced subtle institutional exclusions different from those of their male peers and left school earlier (Committee on Social Change and the Education of Women, 1975). Early school leaving for girls was exacerbated along class and socioeconomic lines.

During the early 1970s, there was significant government intervention in youth training (Harrington, 2011; Reid, 2016). This included the highly influential *Report of the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission* (Karmel, 1973, p. 41), which challenged the inequitable nature of educational provisions across the Australian states and further changed funding for disadvantaged communities (Meadmore, 2001). The expansion of post-school education in the form of increasing enrolments at tertiary level created delays in terms of entry into full-time work. In an attempt to manage this widening gap between the 'fast and slow' lanes to adulthood, the Victorian government raised the minimum school-leaving age from 16 to 17 years old ("Education and training reform amendment (School age) Act ", 2009).

In 2011, the Gonski Review was released, with significant academic, media, political and public profile. The review largely condemned the funding system for the Australian education sector and claimed significant changes were needed to 'ensure that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions' (Gonski et al., 2011, p. xi). 'Demography must not equal destiny' (Gonski et al., 2011, p. 105). Since the 2011 release of the report, much has been written on class, demographics, socioeconomic (dis)advantage, youth pathways and (in)equality in the educational domain. Subsequently, the Mitchell Institute (2015) conducted a review of evidence of the most reliable predictor of educational opportunity in Australia. They found that socioeconomic factors were the strongest negative determinant of educational outcome for those from backgrounds or geographic areas of economic disadvantage. France and Roberts (2017) asserted that, 'the compulsory education system gives

significant advantage to the middle class', citing enforced 'zoning' systems, the public/private school access divide, the 'invisibility of privilege' and the congruence between the cultural institution of schooling and middle-class students and families that other classes do not necessarily experience.

It is clear there is a powerful link between educational connectedness, educational opportunity, SES and class (Putnam, Frederick, & Snellman, 2012).

Educational opportunity

In the UK, Skeggs (1997) defined class as something that is, 'lived as a structure of feeling' (p.95). France and Roberts (2017) have argued that in Australia despite a lack of attention social class is not only still relevant but must be considered to understand how inequalities and class structure are continually being reproduced for young people. They claimed class needs to be a 'key component of analyses of young people's experiences' for our understanding of the 'process of exclusion and broader inequalities' (France and Roberts, 2017, p. 3). In 2018, Donovan (2018) worked with young Australians asking how class shaped their thinking and decision-making about their post-school futures. He argued it is unrealistic and impractical to understand 'choice and agency' as independent of considerations of class in Australia.

Donovan (2018) suggested Australian young people of school age and just beyond (across the class divides) continue to believe in the existence of a meritocracy and the power of self-agency (Bulbeck, 2012; Donovan, 2018). Bulbeck (2012) recognises that on one hand, there appears to be a predetermined 'limit' in educational opportunity along class lines and yet on the other hand, young people across different classes are claiming that their futures are open to choice and self-agency – that they are authoring their own 'life biographies' (Bulbeck, 2012; Woodman & Wyn, 2014). It is clear that class shapes agency in young people's decision-making about their educational presence and aspirational futures (Down, Smyth, & Robinson,

2018; Putnam et al., 2012). According to Donovan (2018), while both middle- and working-class young people in Australia believe that there is a 'meritocratic' world around them, there are significant differences in how this manifests. Donovan (2018) found middle-class young people are confident in their ability to 'succeed' or thrive in the context of choice and extended pathways to adulthood whereas working-class young people described futures in which risk, insecurity, finite advancement and likely failure featured heavily. Donovan's middle-class students were more confident in their ability to thrive in the context of expanded choice than their working- or lower-class peers, to which the young mothers in this thesis predominantly belong.

Reay et al. (2009) undertook a similar study in the UK about class and educational aspirations. The study was based in an elite university and they found that working-class young people did reflexively adapt effectively in the (traditionally middle-class) university domain moving in and out of the multiple identity positions between university and family life. However, there were differences in the reflexive processes of working- and middle-class students as a result of the innate 'dispositions' learnt in a middle-class home that are inextricably linked to institutions such as schools and university (Reay et al. 2009). These dispositions facilitated connections unavailable to those from the working-class homes. In Australia, Donovan (2018) calls this a 'feel for the game' (p. 399). While this seems to be a contradiction to the meritocratic beliefs held by young people, Donovan claimed that working-class young people undertake this reflexive work as an extra workload as they approach the end of their secondary schooling. It reveals a confidence disparity between these two classes as they transition.

This confidence disparity is mirrored in longitudinal Australian research from McLeod and Yates (2006), who researched 26 students over six years, beginning when the participants were 12 years old. They were concerned about inequality in education and its impacts on dispositions and identities during the adolescent years, with a focus on schooling. They found the disparity in confidence was not aligned simply to class but was also gendered.

The most likely young people to understand their futures as limited or constrained were working-class young women.

Gender and exclusion in schools

In recent years, there has been an educational policy focus on ‘engaging boys’ or ‘failing boys’ in Australia (Mitchell, 2016). In official exclusion or early school leaving statistics, it appears that boys are over-represented while girls are outperforming boys at the final academic hurdle of state-based Year 12 ranking systems. In 2012, girls represented just 29% of ‘official’ and permanent exclusions (Mitchell, 2016). However, these figures may be misrepresentative. If notions of school exclusion are broadened from simply expulsions to include exclusion by disaffection, isolation, bullying, complex family issues, health and wellbeing and/or truancy, then the gender divide in truncated education shifts (Lall, 2007). While there is no official data in Australia, research by Kotiw (2010), conducted in Bendigo, Victoria supported the likelihood of this shift. In the UK, reports from Osler et al. (2002) and Lall (2007) found that defining ‘exclusion’ as both official and unofficial, produces a differently gendered picture with young women ‘more likely’ to be excluded than young men (Osler et al., 2002, p. 2). This work highlights the significant impact of gender differences on how school exclusions are reported. The primary findings from Osler (2006); Osler et al. (2002) include:

- that girls are not a priority. Overtly challenging behaviours involving boys are a focus, so covert displays of disaffection or disconnection (more commonly associated with girls) resulting in a silent exclusion are understood as ‘not a problem’ (Osler et al., 2002).
- that girls’ difficulties are more likely to be ‘invisible’. The perception of smaller number of girls’ exclusions has resulted in less resources being targeted at them (Smith, 1998). Lall (2007) found that poverty was a significant factor in girls’ silent disconnection from schools and services.

- that services offered to minimise exclusionary practices are dominated by boys. As a consequence, girls are less willing to take up these offers of support for fear of offending social 'norms' (Osler et al., 2002). Additionally, teachers may respond differently to similar behaviours on a gendered basis (Lloyd, 2000), leniency for some 'offences' perpetrated by girls in class but harsh when behaviours are considered 'not feminine', such as physical fighting (Lloyd, 2000).
- that truancy, self-exclusion and internal exclusion have been self-reported by girls in significantly larger numbers than boys and these factors are understood to be significant in affecting longer term disengagement (Lall, 2007).
- that bullying is a significant factor in girls disconnecting from school. Bullying among girls appears less likely to be recognised by staff than bullying among boys. Additionally, verbal and psychological bullying is reported in higher frequencies by girls and is less likely to result in expulsions or suspensions than physical bullying, reported in higher numbers by boys (Moffat, Redmond, & Raghavendra, 2019).
- that service provision is compartmentalised through separate agencies. Osler et al. (2002) suggested younger mothers are particularly at risk of invisible exclusion via this pathway because their needs go unrecognised.

In summary, there are a plethora of ways in which girls are likely to be unofficially excluded from schooling. These operate in concert with gendered self-exclusionary practices. Recognising the different pressures and exclusionary practices on young women in schooling, the next section will further detail the gendered pressures by explaining constructions of motherhood and ideology and the supportive and constraining factors that contemporary mothers and student mothers face.

Motherhood and ideology in the Western world

The following section examines how motherhood has been constructed in Western culture and processes of idealisation or vilification, depending on the mother's identity. Guided by the work of Pillow (2002, 2004 and 2006), Bonell (2004) and Hays (1998), the following section will also address the concept of the 'perfect mum' (Boulden, 2010) and how this impacts younger mothers.

Historically, mothers who deviated from normative expectations have been vilified and considered as 'problem' mothers (Arendell, 2000; Pillow, 2004; Wilson & Huntington, 2006). Although adolescent pregnancy and childbearing caused 'problems' in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Harari and Vinovskis (1993) explained that teens were not viewed as a separate group and 'solutions' were found in quick marriages that were generally organised and accepted by the families of young parents-to-be.

In the twentieth century, the 'ideal mother' was constructed in Western countries as having clear and defined roles (Coontz, 1992). The traditional mother ideology throughout much of this century defined a 'good mother' as being 'full-time, at-home, white, middle-class, and entirely fulfilled through domestic aspirations' (Boris, 1994, p. 509). In the early to mid-1900s, adolescence was conceptualised as an important developmental period between childhood and adulthood (Harari & Vinovskis, 1993) and adolescent motherhood emerged as 'problematic'. In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, teenage pregnancy was perceived as a major social problem, although the reasons had less to do with pregnancy itself than with 'a cluster of volatile issues involving sexuality, abortion, family values, and welfare policy' (Rhode, 1993, p. 311) as well as religion.

Blake and Beard (1999) claimed that unmarried mothers (of all ages) used to receive negative moral judgment but that the rise of the women's movement in the 1960s–1970s made this condemnation politically and sometimes socially unacceptable. The focus then shifted to the less empowered and more easily targeted adolescent mothers, who were often unmarried, single and financially 'poor' (Phoenix, 1991). Bonell (2004) claimed that adolescent mothers in the US and the UK consistently reported experiencing moral

judgment. Bonell (2004) suggested negative public discourse and language became normalised in the 1990s and early 2000s and underpinned paternalistic responses to adolescent parenting in policy, media and public dialogue.

There has been consistent critique of the 'good mother' construct as restricting mothers' identities (Glenn, 1994), perpetuating the financial dependence of women (Chang, 1994), and as unavailable to many if not most women (Collins, 1994, p. 54). This definition excludes women of colour, of non-heteronormative sexuality and of 'normal' age for motherhood and others. This ideology in particular scrutinizes and marginalizes younger mothers (and other minorities) heavily.

These competing and contested ideologies of motherhood affect individual experiences of motherhood. Individual perceptions are influenced by the myriad of experiences over each individual's life span (Boulden, 2010; Bourdieu, 1977; Gennaro, 2005; Logsdon & Koniak - Griffin, 2005). A mother's confidence and attitude toward her mothering is constructed through 'biological and environmental variables in her life' (Evans & Stoddart, 1990).

In *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, Sharon Hays (1998) argued that, 'the contemporary cultural model of socially appropriate mothering takes the form of an ideology of intensive mothering' (Golden, 2001). In her US-based book, Hays explains that the ideology of intensive mothering is the dominant cultural framework impacting women's experiences of motherhood (regardless of age). The ideology of intensive mothering appears to have become entrenched as mothers expect themselves to be solely focused on the 'workload' of childrearing as an 'indication of the depths of their maternal love' (Hays, 1998, p. 197). Also, according to Walters (2008) and Hays (1998), the ideology of intensive motherhood has significant implications for a mother's sense of self, her sense of self-agency (in the private and public domain) and her sense of fulfillment in her role as mother and participant in the wider world.

The pressure of 'intensive mothering' has been widely documented. Boulden found Australian adolescent mothers consistently reported feeling pressure to demonstrate to the world that they could be 'the perfect mum' (Boulden, 2010, p. 13). The mothers spoke of this need to demonstrate perfection as a defense against existing social stereotypes of young mothers. In Boulden's report (2010), some of the adolescent mothers laughed about the effort to achieve perfection but others reported feeling persecuted, exposed and judged. Some adolescent mothers in the study expressed exhaustion and frustration at the impossibility of the task.

Constraining factors

While it is important not to generalize about adolescent mothers' experiences or perspectives, there are some consistent factors identified as constraining. Gillies (2006) found the marginalized London mothers in her longitudinal study all felt constrained (although in different life facets) by their experiences of powerlessness and lack of control as a result of limited resources and 'economic dependence' (p. 68). Adolescent mothers are just one category of these mothers but Gillies' conclusions have been supported in Australian research (Letherby, Wilson, Bailey, & Brown, 2001), in which many adolescent mothers consistently recognised the pressure of economic disadvantage. However, they also found assumptions of poverty made by others unjust and unhelpful (Letherby et al., 2001) and they did not self-identify with this. There was recognition by these adolescent mothers that they were often excluded from mainstream government policy aiming to provide young adults with avenues out of poverty (through education and employment) because of their state of motherhood. In Boulden's (2010) study, adolescent mothers discussed the critical assumption of older parents that the adolescent parents were not working or at school, but then discussed the judgment they experienced for leaving their baby/child in outside care to go to work or training.

Resilient mothering practices

According to Morehead and Soriano (2005), Australian adolescent mothers are more likely to commit to a positive maternal identity when they self-identify as fulfilling their child's needs differently to 'others'. The connectedness to this positive maternal construction can operate in contrast with the concept of a 'bad mother' (Graham & McDermott, 2006) and can provide a 'buffer against the potential threats to self-esteem' that adolescent mothers experience (Kirkman et al., 2001). Kirkman et al. (2001) discuss the use of the 'consoling plot' amongst their adolescent mothers. Many were enthusiastic in discussing the multiple enrichments that having a baby had brought to their life while denying the representations made by others of 'poor decision-making and hardship' (Kirkman et al., 2001, p. 282)

Developing concurrent identities: Mother and student

A significant challenge for pregnant and parenting adolescent mothers in relation to education is developing an adult identity as a mother (Ashford & LeCroy, 2009) while maintaining a 'student' identity. In Luttrell's (2003) ethnographic US study she noted that;

'...the girls perceived their student lives as having been compromised - that school had split their student self from their pregnant self – [this] limited their sense of possibility...' (p.176).

Post-structural accounts of identities within theories argue for recognition of multiple dimensions (Allard, 2004): dynamic and constantly changing with sometimes contradictory 'assemblages' (Rose, 1998, p. 106). Recognising how the connecting systems of gender, power, sexuality, ethnicity, class and race impact the construction of identity and self (Brabeck, 1996; Brabeck, 1989; Gergen & Gergen, 1997; Luttrell, 2011; Lykes, 1994) has been part of an on-going critical feminist project, is vitally important in understanding the experiences of younger motherhood.

Brand, Morrison, and Down (2015) conducted a narrative study in Australia (following Goodson and Gill, 2011) and concluded their adolescent mother

participants were living out 'life scripts' that were a result of 'narrow identity descriptions' (p. 364). Adolescents who are also mothers were less likely to broaden the description and 'rescript' a different identity than other adolescents.

In some communities, motherhood offers a pathway and a 'valued identity' for adolescent girls. In the UK, Cater and Coleman (2006) found adolescent women saw motherhood as an 'attainable goal' and a 'valued identity'. Also in the UK, Mitchell and Green (2002) found that some adolescent women perceive motherhood as a 'rite of passage' to the status of adulthood. This was particularly true for adolescent women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These 'pre-established [life] plots' occurred where structural factors created limited opportunity and an increased acceptance of adolescent motherhood (Arai, 2003; Koniak - Griffin, Logsdon, Hines - Martin, & Turner, 2006).

Those who fit dominant parent paradigms (in terms of age, ethnicity, sexuality, family structure and financial capacity) are well represented in policy, debate and attention. There is regular attention to family supports and pressures, preferences and choices in terms of workplaces, households and governments (Goodwin and Huppatz, 2010). Older mothers may have established workplaces, experience and/or careers before becoming a mother (Morehead and Soriano 2005). They may have their partners providing financial as well as parenting support (Koniak-Griffin, 2006). For single mothers who become parents after the prior establishment of a work history, there is usually an understanding of entitlement to a stable living environment and self-agency (Goodwin and Huppatz, 2010). However, for many adolescent mothers, there is less likely to be a workplace in which they are employed (or have a relationship with) and their households are more likely to be inconsistent and unstable (Combes & Hinton, 2005; Slowinski, 2002).

In Australia, governments offer some practical support to adolescent mothers who are low-income earners through taxation benefits, family payments, school subsidisation, childcare, pharmaceutical and medical subsidies and rental assistance (Centrelink, 2016). However, there are pressures associated

with this government support, including regular face-to-face interviews and continuous reporting on attempts to gain employment or training after the recipient's baby is six months old (Centrelink, 2016). This close scrutiny and supervision of the lives of recipients creates less choice regarding their time, parenting and decisions, and results in a heightened sense of vigilance. In some cases, adolescent parents have had to contribute unpaid labour towards employment opportunities (for potential employees and/or continued welfare payments) after a set period that is shorter than that required of non-teenage mothers (Centrelink, 2016).

According to Mulherin and Johnstone (2015), compulsory services such as Centrelink can create pressure through resentment and perceptions of judgment. In this Australian study, adolescent mothers reported negative experiences and emotions when accessing compulsory services linked to welfare payments (Mulherin and Johnstone, 2015). However similar, optional (choice-based) services have been embraced by adolescent mothers. On-site childcare within educational institutions has been consistently 'chosen' and utilised by some adolescent mothers and this has been heavily subsidised in specific schools (Harrison, Shacklock, Angwin, & Kamp, 2004).

According to a report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2015), babies born to teenage mothers carry a higher risk of medical complications than those born to non-teenage mothers. This is relevant in discourse about school connectedness as it inevitably affects the complexity of pressures (and supports) on the lives of these mothers. Having a baby with medical complications requires additional time, money and emotional workload and are also more likely to experience school absences as a result of medical appointments and/or visiting a baby under long-term hospital admission (SmithBattle, 2007).

Morehead and Soriano (2005) conducted a qualitative study of teenage mothers in Victoria and Canberra, with 41 adolescent mother participants and eight service providers. They found adolescent mothers complete 'additional labour' in the construction of maternal identity. As well as negotiating their relationships with their own mothers ([which will be discussed in Chapter 6](#))

they are often required to construct and reconstruct living arrangements, build and maintain a new set of friendships, and connect to and understand service provision.

Morehead and Soriano (2005) suggested that young mothers often define themselves in relation to 'other' mothers; older mothers, working mothers, mothers at school (student mothers), mothers with more than one child, mothers who were perceived to focus on social activities and mothers with drug and/or alcohol dependencies. [This finding of relative definition has also been found in Australian studies](#) (Kirkman et al. 2001; Loxton, Williams, et al. 2007). Young mothers often defined themselves in relation to what other mothers did and did not do (Kirkman et al. 2001).

Ennis (2014) found that young mothers could have their mothering identities 'disassembled very easily as they went about their everyday lives in their communities' (p. 29) and in this context, the stories from adolescent mothers themselves become central. In Australia, such stories reveal that motherhood identity in adolescents begins in pregnancy and increases dramatically at the time of their babies birth. Most adolescents experience the birth process in hospital where young mothers have recounted feelings of despair, devaluation and a significant undermining of their emerging motherhood identities by professional medical and social service staff. (Loxton, Williams, et al., 2007; Morehead & Soriano, 2005; Mulherin & Johnstone, 2015). This may be reinforced later by 'professionals' in schools.

Living the experience and identity of 'adolescent mother' is dramatically affected by family context (Morehead and Soriano, 2005). Where family support has been available to adolescent mothers, they reported a higher reliance on their own mothers (the babies' grandmothers) in place of the support offered by partners to older mothers (see also Boulden, 2010). However, many adolescent mothers also reported feeling increased pressure on their own mothering from this relationship in which their role as a daughter affected their identity development (Morehead and Soriano, 2005). Adolescent mothers have reported gratitude for the financial and child-minding support provided by their own parents (mothers) but also spoke of the

negatives of being 'constantly told what to do' (Morehead, 2005, p. 70). The most common Australian construct of household for an adolescent mother includes her own mother (Morehead & Soriano, 2005)

Chapter conclusion

This chapter has provided a synthesis of local and international research to describe the social contexts in which student mothers live in Western countries. It has shown younger motherhood is conceptualized as inherently problematic, and the associations between younger motherhood and assumed negative outcomes for both mother and child.

In more recent literature, there has been a move towards challenging this widely held view about the inherent disadvantage of younger motherhood. This research has focused on poverty and disadvantage rather than younger motherhood itself. In some of these studies, younger motherhood has been positioned as the possible instigator of positive change in young women's lives. Some academic literature has positioned younger pregnancy and motherhood as a transformative process creating positive changes in challenging lives. It seems there are two predominant and conflicting representations of younger motherhood: as a deterministic and wholly negative event or as a transformative event in which younger mothers find a pathway safely to adulthood. The latter of these representations positions these young women as in need of transformation and creates a narrative of redemption.

Despite legislation in Australia, the UK and the US protecting equitable outcomes for all young people, the literature suggests that the experience of pregnancy limits this protection as a result of structural inadequacies within the current education system. The lack of data following the educational experiences and connectedness of, and outcomes for, school-aged mothers allows the hidden nature of school exclusion to go unnoticed and unchallenged. Pillow (2006) called for a 'repolitisization' of the issue, with a focus on educational opportunity rather than on the young parents

themselves. In this study, my focus is on the voices of young women living out the dual identities of mother and student, but the structural limits of schools are critical in understanding these voices.

Chapter 3: Hearing student mothers

Methodology and approach

This chapter will explain the theoretical framework underpinning this thesis and how it is operationalised. It begins with a description of the feminist and participant-centered qualitative framework used and the consequent choice of methods and research process. The chapter will cover my own positioning and reflexivity in conjunction with attention to the ethics process. It will explain the recruitment processes for participants and provide a brief pen portrait of each (detailed pen portraits can be found as Appendix 1) as well as data collection and analysis.

Theoretical framework

The intention of this research is to understand how pregnant and/or parenting young women make sense of their educational experiences and connectedness in relation to the social constructs of motherhood and schooling. The project is underpinned by a qualitative framework that sought data in and from the accounts of student mothers and the meanings they ascribe to these experiences. It attends to individual human experiences as critical data. Qualitative methods encourage participants to reflect on and explain (as best they can) why they think, act and plan in the way they do. These reflections expose personally constructed understandings that are otherwise unknowable. In privileging the voices of the participants, I hoped to better understand their daily existences in relation to schooling and mothering as well as to learn about their hopes and aspirations as individuals. This project does not aim to generate representative data, but instead to gain a deeper understanding of these young women's experiences.

According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research is most appropriate when:

‘...we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people... and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature. We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices and minimise power relations that often exist...’ (Creswell, 2007, p. 40)

McClellan and Pasupathi (2009) discussed the importance of storytelling or narrative in making meaning of past experiences. They suggested that the construction of coherent stories describing significant events in the participants’ lives can create a framework for reflecting upon and making sense of experiences. They described how reflecting on these self-stories and constructing new, ‘preferable’ life narratives (see also Maruna, 2001) can inspire new behaviors and actions in participants. The active construction of these newly formed, coherent life narratives may therefore be a ‘critical means by which individuals can construct their own resilience’ (Hauser et al., 2006). The potential for ‘preferable’ life narratives to be told and/or realised needs to be understood in the context of choice and agency, [which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.](#)

By privileging the stories and experiences of the participants in this project, I hope to add to the research knowledge in Australia of professionals working in the field with younger mothers, particularly in the field of education.

Embedding a feminist standpoint

I have adopted a feminist framework and ethic that is in alignment with my personal beliefs about the importance of promoting equality and deconstructing dominant gendered belief systems. Principles of feminist research emphasise the diverse experiences and understandings of each participant and the centrality of gender. This is vital for this thesis, which is focused on two institutions that create and sustain particular gendered norms: motherhood and schooling (Okwany, 2016). While there are not generic or simple feminist ‘ways of knowing’, a feminist standpoint uses the everyday

living of gendered knowledge and experience as a critical framework (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002).

Fundamentally, feminist research constitutes a commitment to change for women (Pillow, 2002). It places women at the centre of the research, with analyses exposing gender, race, class and sexuality. Feminist research is concerned with recognising, unmasking, challenging and, ultimately, deconstructing patriarchal ways of knowing. It furthers our understanding of women's experiences or 'herstories' (Miller & Swift, 1977). By incorporating a feminist approach, the researcher intends to build a collaborative relationship with participants that positions both researcher and participant within the study and the building of data to avoid objectification and to 'conduct research that is transformative' (Creswell, 2007 p. 26).

In adopting this particular research framework, there is an implicit agenda:

'Very simply, to do feminist research is to put the social construction of gender at the center of one's inquiry...The overt ideological goal of feminist research in the human sciences is to correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position.' (Lather, 1992, p. 71)

There has been an ongoing concern when conducting feminist research regarding how the voices of participants are accounted for (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), particularly when researching with those who have been traditionally marginalised. Dorothy Smith (1990), a standpoint theorist, is concerned with how and why particular voices are heard and the researcher's process of interpreting them. Her aim is to ensure that the emerging 'account' does not simply affirm current hierarchical structures. She is also aware of the challenge of translating personal and private communications into the 'distorting frames of social science' (cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 252) and is clear that this needs careful analyses. Smith (1992) suggests that the researcher must work reflexively and recognise that feminist researchers 'participate as subjects in the relations of ruling' (Smith, 1992, p. 96). Inevitably, the researcher is the one writing up the account and responsible

for the final production. This leaves the voices of the participants at risk of researcher distortion or bias. The approach taken in this project is outlined below. In discussions with participants and other related parties, I attempted to reveal and interrogate my own role and position, as well as using continuous reflexive techniques to better understand impacts on my interpretations of the lives and stories of 'other' women. Regardless of these measures, I am aware that my interpretation, from my own 'standpoint', is always present. My aim has been to analyse these narrated stories using a feminist approach allowing the participants' voices to be valued as expert, in contexts they define.

The research process

Fundamental to this thesis was a feminist framework and therefore a commitment to the in-depth exploration of young mothers' personal experiences of student motherhood. My intention in this research was to offer young women the opportunity to tell me their stories and to give them a platform from which they could decide what to discuss regarding their educational experiences and concerns, without judgment. As I explained to participants, hearing their stories was one aspect of the research; another was situating their narratives and experiences within a broader theoretical framework in order to deconstruct and critique the dominant paradigms associated with younger motherhood. The initial methods used centered around qualitative, unstructured interviews of indeterminate time as well as time spent in their schools with student mothers.

Reflexivity

As a teacher, reflexivity is part and parcel of my job, the work I do in the classroom and the relationships I build with the young people that I teach. This reflexivity is grounded in improving my teaching, learning and professional relationships. However, throughout this research process, it became clear to me that researching required a different kind of reflexivity. I

needed to constantly be aware of the power differentials between researcher and participant. I found that in the first recorded interview with each participant, many provided the insights that they thought I wanted to hear. I know this because I asked about it in more casual moments later (such as during cooking together or on the excursion I attended) and it was at least partially confirmed. I also heard different stories while not in an interview situation; these are discussed in the 'Limitations' section. I am also very comfortable in alternative educational settings and I was concerned that I would overlook things that are familiar and common to me. Beyond the insider/outsider dichotomy often discussed (Geer, 1964; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), familiarity can become a challenge to a researcher conducting fieldwork on a site with which they are well acquainted. 'Making the familiar strange' is a term commonly used to describe the actions taken to prevent a researcher's prior experience clouding their interpretations. It involves the use of extensive field notes, reflexivity, awareness of positioning and a commitment to taking nothing for granted and questioning everything, including the things they thought they knew (Rosaldo, 1993).

I came to this project wanting to create more opportunities, connectedness and broader choices for parenting students. However, I had to consider the possibility that greater educational connectedness may not be what was needed or wanted by these student mothers, or even be feasible (pragmatically) in the social contexts in which they live. I was challenged by the insight that emerged that student disconnection was often present prior to the pregnancy; this insight sent my research and interviews in a different direction. I was confronted when students appeared to ask me to act as a teacher or educational guidance counselor and I had to eliminate that 'hat' (which I have worn professionally for many years) in order to preserve the relationship between researcher and participant.

One of the issues I faced while spending time within the school and conducting confidential interviews was the regular contradiction between teacher accounts of student stories and the narratives of the students themselves. I turned to one of the predominant writers in standpoint theory,

Dorothy Smith (1990), who told a story about a train ride to illustrate a similar conundrum of privilege and point of view (Smith, 1990 p. 25). Smith recalled that, upon looking out the window during a train ride, she saw an Indian family watching her train. She commented that she could tell the story of the train as she witnessed it but recognised that the Indian family was likely to have an extremely different story of the same event. Contemplating which version of this story is most likely to be listened to, she concluded that, as a prominent and respected academic, her own account of the story would more likely be valued and deemed legitimate 'knowledge'. Her capacity to speak in a particular language and context would be likely to exclude the knowledge of the Indian family. The teachers in the school spoke with me (a fellow teacher) and their 'truth' matched the regular dialogue I am used to experiencing in my own professional capacity. After many years of staffroom conversations, I am well versed in discussing students and making decisions about their futures without their input. In the case of the interviews with student mothers for this research, and the 'stories' I have been honoured to hear, I have tried to be clear and honest in relaying these directly. Where I have included contradictory stories from staff or my own witnessing of an event, I have made that contradiction clear in the analysis to reveal the subjective nature of privileged knowledge.

Ethical approval and implementation

I undertook the process of ethical approval through both the Department of Education and Training (DET) and Monash University prior to commencing any contact with schools or students. Ethics was granted by Monash University on 26 April 2017 and by DET on 3 May 2017 (2017-003330). After approval was granted, I contacted schools via the principal; in some cases, I was referred to the staff member/s in charge of the programs for young mothers. I sent the principals and staff copies of my explanatory statements. I then met with the program directors at their respective schools and established some details about the schools and programs as well as potential dates to visit. I gave the staff flyers and pamphlets to display (if they were

comfortable to do so – all did) around their school. I then visited the schools without intending to conduct interviews, although I took everything appropriate just in case (consent forms, recorders, and so on). In two schools, some students seemed keen to be interviewed so I conducted some initial interviews at this stage. In each case, I asked the student's teacher about literacy, as this may have affected the student's ability to give informed consent.

While literacy rates enabled all participants to access the information given, commitment to reading the explanatory statements tended to be low! To manage this, I chose to read the explanatory statement to each participant (summarised), to ensure that they understood the process. I explained the purpose of the study, how the data would be used and secured, and how the participants would be de-identified. Several students stated (some emphatically) that they did not want to be de-identified and I had to explain that this was a necessity. I established that I would not be asking direct questions and that the participant was in control of the interview – able to talk and answer as she chose. I also ensured that each participant understood that if she disclosed sensitive information, I would follow up the interview by seeking her consent to link her to an appropriate support agency, where needed; I explained that I was bound by the same mandatory reporting procedures as their teachers. I was explicit about my intentions and what I would do if issues arose, in the hope that students would make informed decisions about what they chose to share with me. Ultimately, no issues of safety or distress emerged of which school staff were not already aware. During many interviews, participants cried (from a variety of emotions); I followed up the participants after these interviews and, in four cases, gained consent to let the staff know after the interview.

To de-identify participants and ensure anonymity, I assigned each student mother a pseudonym. I changed the place names that they referred to and attempted to acknowledge ethnicity without compromising anonymity. I randomly assigned the genders of their children and changed or modified their children's ages (unless their age was particularly relevant). I undertook all my

own transcribing (of 46 interviews), which kept me in touch with the data as well as ensuring I controlled access to it (as explained below).

I acknowledge that despite all these efforts, the population of student mothers is not large and many of the staff from the schools I was involved with have expressed an interest in reading my thesis. Therefore, I am aware – and I made the participants aware – that if they told stories that were particularly recognisable, it was possible that staff would be able to identify them. None of the students seemed concerned by this and no student has withdrawn consent.

Pen portraits – abbreviated

Full pen portraits can be found as Appendix 1 and are central to understanding the diversity, difference and individual histories and needs of participants. I have included a brief summary table and summary portrait of each participant at this point. Each of these portraits has been focused on the time each participant assigned to various topics both within the interviews and from field notes and noting which topics were emphasized. The following table is for quick reference.