“YOU DON’T KNOW HALF THE STORY”: DEEPENING THE DIALOGUE WITH YOUNG MOTHERS

By

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Signature…………………………………………..

Date……………………………………………….
ABSTRACT

Pregnant and young mothers’ stories often go untold, neglected or misrepresented within the dominant community health and social care discourses. Consequently, narratives of young mothers are largely absent from social and health care literature, especially in relation to young women’s experiences of pregnancy and motherhood and the role community services play in supporting young women as they transition to motherhood. This research study was undertaken in response to a paucity of observational and contextually rich research that explores young women’s experiences of pregnancy and motherhood in the community. Fundamental to this study’s purpose was the premise that to improve planning and delivery of more appropriate health and social services for this group, we need to listen, consult, and consider what life is really like for young mothers in the community.

Using a narrative approach, this study explored through story how young women understand, experience and make sense of pregnancy and motherhood in the community. A period of seven months of participant observation fieldwork at a community service for young mothers was undertaken. In that time contextual observations of thirty-one informants and eleven in-depth, face-to-face interviews were completed with young women at differing points of pregnancy and motherhood. The central story behind the young women’s narrative accounts of becoming pregnant and becoming a mother was that it was a significant turning point in their lives, describing motherhood as opening doors to meaningful and positive experiences as they negotiated and creatively adapted to their changing circumstances and new motherhood roles.

The findings were captured in both short narrative portraits and six major metaphorical themes including: Picking up the Pieces; Walking a Narrow and Familiar Path; Jumping over Puddles; Riding the Rapids to Motherhood; Living with Dirty Looks; and Asking for Directions. The integral role a community service played in scaffolding the young
women’s experiences as they transitioned to motherhood was captured in a further three themes: *Finding a Circle of Friends; Weaving a Tapestry; and Turning the Page.*

The alternative understandings that emerged from the young women’s storied experiences of motherhood present a strong argument for the radical re-visioning of young motherhood including re-framing community and social health policy, practice and service delivery for young mothers. This alternative vision is grounded in a narrative approach that values young mothers as the experts of their own lives and provides a model for a truly collaborative practice. Community services that provide judgment-free space where young mothers feel a sense of belonging and social support are vital in promoting a positive sense of self, identity and autonomy in young mothers. The findings revealed the power of narrative and social learning when working with young mothers, suggesting that social models of health that foster a relational approach are fundamental to young mothers finding their own voices and solutions and becoming active agents in re-authoring future narratives of hope, autonomy and agency.
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Keynote Address

Conference Presentations
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Prologue

One night a young woman dreams.
She is banging on solid wooden doors, silently begging for someone to let her in. Her head sinks forward onto the unyielding doors, her mouth dry, her breath shallow, legs weakened by the hollowness of her spirit. In the distance she hears voices of women humming a song from her childhood:

‘This is the way we sow our seed…
    gather our grain…
    bake our bread…
This is the way we tend our lives
    so early in the morning’

As she stands there, listening; a woman appears at the door and says:
“Don’t be afraid of your darkness”

The woman takes out a pouch of yeast from her pocket and offers it to the young woman. She follows, walking into a room where an older woman stands gathering together other women from adjoining rooms. A sack of flour, a bag of salt and a jug of water are simply laid on a round wooden table in the centre of the room.

“What are you doing?” the young woman asks the older woman:

“I am baking bread” she warmly replies.

The older woman guides the young woman to an empty space at her table, beckoning her to start blending the ingredients into a large porcelain bowl. The young woman adds the small pouch of yeast and begins to fold and knead the dough with patience and tenderness. She caresses the dough, presses, sculpts and folds it through her diligent fingers.

After a while, the dough is rested in a warm, dark, moist place in the corner of the room. She sits quietly and waits. Sometime later, after the dough has risen and is brought out of the dark, the women carefully mould the dough before placing it into a large wood fired oven for transformation.

In this moment, the young woman opens to a new way of seeing and sustaining herself; seated around the table, she hears the harmony of the women’s voices as they share truths and stories of their lives. The sound infuses vibrancy into the air as the comforting aroma of the baking bread fills the room.

She carves the bread, shares her story and initiates her becoming.