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Transmitting Values about Education: A Comparison of Black Teen Mothers and Their Nonparent Peers

Naomi B. Farber
Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research
Bryn Mawr College

Roberta R. Iversen
Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research
Bryn Mawr College

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Abstract

Central to the debate about why some poor people remain poor is the enduring question of what role values play in behavior patterns as observed in chronically impoverished families and communities. Young black women who grow up in impoverished families in urban ghettos face some similar challenges to becoming competent adults who function independently in the wider society. Not all young women who fit this demographic category become young or single mothers who depend on AFDC; some who do also complete levels of education that lead to economic self-sufficiency. In order to explore the question about values and their significance among the urban poor, we examine the life histories of 50 young black women from inner-city Milwaukee, looking in particular at values and behaviors as they relate to educational competence. We analyze the perceived family values about education, the ways in which the young women's families acted on those stated values with the intention of influencing their daughters' educational outcomes, and how these values and transmission processes are related to the young women's educational attainment.

Transmitting Values about Education:
A Comparison of Black Teen Mothers and Their Nonparent Peers

In a poor, mostly black neighborhood in inner-city Milwaukee, the Millers live in a small, dilapidated but clean house subsidized by "the system," the public housing authority. The Miller household—Mr. William Miller, Mrs. Dorothy Miller, their three daughters, one son, eight grandchildren, and Mrs. Miller's youngest child (by another man)—are part of a three-generation black "welfare family."[1]

In some respects, the Millers' history is similar to that of many other poor urban black families. In 1963, when the recently married Millers moved to Milwaukee from rural Mississippi, they both worked. Mr. Miller was steadily employed in manufacturing, and his wife worked sporadically to supplement their income; they had a "nice" life. By the mid-1970s, when they had four children to support, Mr. Miller was drinking heavily and being unfaithful and abusive to his wife. A few months after their eldest child, 14-year-old Barbara, had her first child, Mr. Miller left his family and returned to the South.

Mrs. Miller applied for AFDC for her first grandchild while continuing to work at two jobs. After a year, however, meager wages and the onset of chronic illness forced her to decide between going to a shelter and applying for aid for her family. When AFDC provided sufficient resources to pay for rent, utilities, and "proper food and proper clothing" for the children, it was "like someone opened the door and you could see outside."

By the time Mr. Miller returned fifteen year later, his family had experienced the range of circumstances of what has been defined as the black urban "underclass" or the persistently poor. Mrs. Miller supported her family primarily with public assistance and all of her daughters have at some time relied on some form of public aid. Barbara, now in her late twenties, began childbearing at 14 and then

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[1]"Miller" is a pseudonym, as are all other names in this paper.

dropped out of school. Tamisha, in her mid-twenties, dropped out of high school, has a history of "running the streets," and has ongoing problems with drugs and alcohol. She believes that she has not become pregnant because of infertility. The Millers' third daughter, Doreen, had her first child at 15. Now in her early twenties, she too dropped out of high school and the arrival of each of her three subsequent children has made it increasingly difficult to return to school. The Millers' son, Robert, lives in Louisiana with his wife, Jewell, and their five children. Robert was heavily involved with drugs and gangs as a teenager and served time in prison. He fathered two or three children by other women in Milwaukee. One of these women is a drug addict and their 7-year-old son, Charles, often calls Mrs. Miller to pick him up when he has not eaten for a while. Mrs. Miller had a fifth child, Tony, by another man after her husband left.

Mrs. Miller is "disappointed" in what has happened to her children. She wanted them to live better, to move beyond "merely existing, just running." She had hoped they would all achieve "education [a high school diploma], for one thing. Marriage, for another. A decent home. . . . Some of the finer things in life. Some of the comforts." She hoped they would complete high school, "if nothing else. And maybe get a chance at college." She associates her children's circumstances with her own competence as a parent, believing that "I worked a lot and that's where I see a lot of mistakes I made with Barbara and Robert," her eldest children. She also associates family communication patterns, particularly about sexual issues, with her daughters' early pregnancies, believing "that's a place I failed too. I didn't talk about it." She characterizes her children, except Barbara, as being part of a "lost generation" of black youth in the inner city.

Why do the Millers live as they do? What accounts for their choices, their hardships? Over the past fifty years or so, scholars have debated about why, in the aggregate, families like the Millers have higher rates than most other groups of Americans of teenage and out-of-wedlock childbearing, drug and alcohol use, school dropout, public assistance receipt, unemployment, and incarceration. They have

debated about why these families do not function competently as economically self-sufficient members of society.

Central to the debate about why some poor people remain poor is the enduring question of what role values play in behavior patterns as observed in chronically impoverished families and communities. Insofar as some groups of poor people are disproportionately likely to behave in ways that are considered by most citizens to be negatively nonnormative, we are led to question whether there is something characteristic and different about their definitions of desirable conduct and positively valued ways of living.

Values represent some collective definition of human ideals, the ends toward which its members strive; values define what a good life is. A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn assert that values are "of the essence of the organization of culture. It is true that human endeavor is directed toward ends; but those ends are shaped by the values of culture; and the values are felt as intrinsic, not as means. . . . Finally, values and significance are 'intangibles' which are 'subjective' in that they can be internally experienced, but are also 'objective' in their expressions, embodiments, or results" (1962, p. 60). Research about poverty has tended to fall on one end or another of a theoretical dichotomy, each "side" positing different views about values and their significance among the urban poor.

On the one hand, within our society in general, including the long-term poor, it has been difficult to explain the wide variations in different groups' patterns in such basic arenas as sexuality, family formation, education, and work. To some, this fact suggests the existence, somewhat like a Venn diagram, of multiple subcultures within a complex society.

Oscar Lewis's formulation of the "culture of poverty," though not the first, most strongly influenced a tradition of research that analyzed life among the poor as the expression of a distinct set of norms and values that guide behavior and possess internal logic and integrity that are both adaptive to the present and self-reproducing across generations. Though there are many variations on the theme of

poverty culture, there is a basic assumption that poverty begets poverty primarily because, “By the time slum children are six or seven, they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of the changing conditions or increased opportunities that may occur in their lifetimes” (1987, p. 30). In cultural studies of poverty, the substance of what members “value” as desirable is generally inferred from their behavior, as values and behavior are assumed to be fairly consonant.

On the other hand, if most members of our society *do* share a central core of values, what accounts for the many discrepancies between “ideal” and “real” culture? What is the relationship between stated values (ideal) and observable behavior (real)? Responding, however implicitly, to this question, many scholars today assume that while the poor share the central values of the larger society, social and economic “structures” offer people differential access to resources, and thus to legitimate means for acting on their values (Wilson 1987). According to some influential versions of this “structural” view, each person in each generation somewhat independently devises strategies for survival, but these strategies are not based on any distinct cultural imperatives per se that deviate from mainstream society. This perspective, influenced by recent economic theory, has been elaborated to specify the rational calculations motivating, for example, a teenage girl to have a baby out of wedlock, or to drop out of school (Hopkins 1987). Scholars in this tradition have variously tried to explain through such concepts as “value stretch” (Rodman 1971) or “shadow values” (Liebow 1967) how poor individuals essentially rationalize behaving in ways that deviate so clearly from their ideal—that is, conventional—values.

Although each general perspective contains some truth about people who experience long-term poverty, both positions suffer from weaknesses. First, each set of ideas tends to be elaborated at high levels of abstraction with little posited in the way of mechanisms of influence to provide deep insight into the complex behavior of individual people. For example, how do some individuals manage to rise

beyond culturally determined “scripts” and change their ways of living so as to achieve upward mobility? Or, how do “structures” lead to particular decisions?

Second, neither perspective accounts well theoretically for the heterogeneity that exists among people facing ostensibly similar objective circumstances of material hardship. Young black women who grow up in impoverished families in urban ghettos face some similar challenges to becoming competent adults who function independently in the wider society. However, not all young women who fit into this demographic category become young or single mothers who depend on AFDC; some who do also complete levels of education that lead to economic self-sufficiency. In the educational domain, the Millers exemplify diversity within one nuclear family.

Despite her early motherhood and withdrawal from school, Barbara completed her GED, works full time at a pink-collar job that allows her to support her family without public aid, and recently got married. Tamisha has not completed high school, but recently began a job that she likes and hopes will lead her to economic self-sufficiency. In contrast to Barbara, Doreen has not returned to school nor has she worked; however, after the birth of her fourth child, she had a tubal ligation and she does plan to return for her GED. Tony is a sixth-grade student at a local elementary school carefully selected by Mrs. Miller.

The Millers’ own evaluations of their decisions suggest caution in inferring their valued ideals from their actions. Although Mrs. Miller says it was “degrading” to apply for AFDC, she now wonders if the years that she worked in order to avoid depending on “aid” deprived especially Barbara and Robert of important maternal attention; whether if she had been home more Barbara would have delayed motherhood and Robert could have resisted the lure of “the streets.” Barbara herself decided to stay home with her two older daughters while they were very young rather than continue her education or work, because she was worried that her absence would hurt them as perhaps her own mother’s

affected her. Now that she works, something she enjoys and intends to continue, she worries that her youngest daughter, age 4, suffers from her absence.

Mrs. Miller was “a little hurt. And disappointed. Aggravated” by Doreen’s early pregnancy but she would not condone an abortion because of her religious beliefs. Although she believes Doreen should return to school part-time, a decision she would support tangibly by caring for the children, Mrs. Miller and her daughter believe that good mothering dictates that Doreen will not work until her youngest child is 4 or 5.

The Millers feel regret over some of their decisions, but they also feel conflicts in their values about such basic matters as motherhood, education, and work; moreover, none of their values themselves are at variance with those of conventional U.S. society. At the same time, Mrs. Miller blames herself, as she observes all parents do, for her children’s troubles. Wherein lies the great distance between her dreams for all of her children and their actions?

As with many questions about complex behavior, the answers are best sought in the concrete details of individuals’ lives. In order to explore the larger question about the values and their significance among the urban poor, we examine the life histories of 50 young black women from inner-city Milwaukee—former schoolmates, neighbors, friends, and relatives of the Millers. We examine in particular values and behaviors as they relate to educational competence. We know that education is not the only factor necessary for economic mobility, but we know also that it is a critical foundation. Furthermore, we do know that families’ values, their communication processes, and children’s outcomes are related; we know less about how they are related, which is our focus here. We analyze the perceived family values about education, the ways in which the young women’s families acted on those stated values with the intention of influencing their daughters’ educational outcomes, and how these values and transmission processes are related to the young women’s educational attainment.

THE STUDY

Sample Description

The data reported are part of a set of focused life histories based on intensive interviews with 75 young black women, ages 15–23 at the time of the interviews, who resided in the inner city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Half of the respondents had a child as an adolescent; the remainder were nonparent peers from the same impoverished community. This paper reports on data from a subset of 50 randomly selected participants: 24 teen mothers and 26 nonparent peers.

From a core of teenage mothers who had participated in an earlier study of AFDC (Danziger and Radin 1990), snowball sampling was used to get referrals of other potential participants. We recruited the majority of participants through personal referrals rather than through formal organizations such as social service agencies in order to avoid any systematic bias introduced by professional intervention and to enhance the comparability of experience in the neighborhood and community-level environment. Thus, although there are problems with including younger teens in the nonparent peer category because they were still potentially teen mothers, that concern was weighed against an interest in environmental similarity and focus on individual differences.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted between 1987 and 1989 by the first author and two graduate research assistants from the University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Social Work. Nearly all respondents participated in two intensive interviews in their homes. There has been some follow-up with 10 of the young women, through direct contact and reports about friends or relatives. In the case of the Millers, who participated in the original interviews, both authors recently also spent a week observing them and having formal and informal discussions.

The original guiding research question in this study was how some young women managed to avoid single motherhood and to attain higher levels of education and employment while others from

similarly disadvantaged social environments became adolescent single mothers at higher risk of abridged education, poverty, and welfare dependence. From the perspective of the young women themselves, what, if anything, about their family characteristics and environment, ideals, sense of self, and attitudes contributed to the critical choices they made? The intensive interviews focused on the women's ideals and actual experiences in relation to their family, educational, vocational, peer, and community environments.

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were checked against the audiotape and corrected accordingly. The data for this report were analyzed through a process of coding the interviews in terms of the following categories: the participant's current and historical educational, vocational, and welfare experience; those of her parents; her perceptions of her parents' values about these subjects; the direct and indirect activities geared to reinforce those values; and a general category of "parent-child relations" that included several indications of the affective environment in the family.

Framework and Organization

We focus our analysis here on the intrafamilial transmission of values about formal education. This concept is defined as a process over time by which children learn from family members—particularly adults who have responsibility for and authority over them—what is important in their lives, and toward what ends they should set goals and direct their activities. James Coleman's use of theory about social capital offers a useful way to conceptualize both the nature and significance of intrafamilial transmission processes as it relates to children's educational attainment. Specifically, "social capital is a set of resources that inhere in family relations . . . that are useful for cognitive or social development of a child or young person" (1990, p. 304). Coleman's observation that "social capital is an important resource for individuals and can greatly affect their ability to act" suggests further the links between family, personal relationships within the family, the transfer of relevant knowledge and skills within the family, and individuals' outcomes.

In the present analysis, processes of transmission refer to valuative verbal communication about education, such as “it is good to get an education,” and actions (both physical and verbal communication) that support the stated value by influencing children’s behavior. For example, nightly supervision of school homework is both a physical action and also a communication that going to school is an activity valued by the parent and one that should be valued by the child.

We regard the transmission of the values as being competently achieved if the young woman acted in accordance with the values she perceived her parents to hold. We examined objective criteria, such as the young women’s educational attainment, and subjective indicators, such as intentions, hopes, and attitudes toward education. We recognize that many factors—strong peer influence, for example—militate against a family successfully inculcating its values in children. However, our interest is not in weighing the relative influence of these various factors but rather in examining in detail the nature of parents’ efforts toward transmission, as their children view it, in relation to the young women’s educational activity and attainment.

The analysis is organized to highlight comparison between adolescent parents and their nonparent peers. Becoming a teen parent is widely regarded as being a critical, if not determining, event in the life trajectory of a young woman, especially if she is poor and black. Therefore, the comparison of families’ values and the competence of their transmission processes in relation to competence in educational achievement by parent status contributes to our understanding of how adolescents who do have children might differ from other teens and from one another in these dimensions.

EDUCATION: FAMILY VALUES AND THEIR TRANSMISSION

Nonparent Peers

One of the most striking findings about the nonparent peers was their high degree of similarity on a number of dimensions: their educational attainment, perceived family values, and the specific ways in which those values were successfully transmitted by parents.

Educational status. All 26 of the peers could be considered to be on course in their educational careers. All had either graduated from high school or were attending high school full time and could project when they expected to graduate. Three young women were older than is usual at their grade level. For example, one peer who had been in special education classes in grade school was 19 years old and just finishing 12th grade. However, none then in school considered herself at risk of not graduating. Eight of the young women had already completed a postsecondary degree or certificate program, or were attending a postsecondary program ranging from law school to secretarial training.

Two peers said that they had experienced serious performance problems in high school and three others reported behavior or academic problems in elementary school, but none of them experienced problems so daunting that they left before graduating from high school.

Family values about education. The nonparent peers uniformly reported that their parents communicated strong positive messages about education, suggesting that the parents held a variety of motivations but were similar in sharing the value.

A few of the parents' messages about education could be considered implicit: "Tops, it was tops. They never really had to say anything. It was just more like, you know, school was a part of life. . . . You're supposed to go to school."

Many parents used more instrumental terms to describe the importance of going to school: getting "that piece of paper" to be qualified for a "nice" or a "good" job, one that would permit the young woman to achieve economic stability and independence. To these parents, education was primarily a means to having choices in the future:

> Finish school, go to college, and get my education. And then I can become anything that I want to be. [Mother] told me there's nothing that I can't be.

> [Mother] wants us to graduate and to find decent jobs. . . . She doesn't want any one of her kids working like in McDonald's on $3.25 if we're what, 25 years old.

Some young women's parents viewed high school graduation as a symbolic movement away from their own hard youths of poverty, many from the world of sharecropping in the South, into a more comfortable life. This was suggested by a number of peers' parents who hoped to see at least one of their children "walk across the stage" to receive a high school diploma, in many cases as the first family member ever to do so.

The majority of the peers' families had been dependent on AFDC as their primary source of income for a period of time. Many parents seemed to feel haunted by the threat of long-term welfare dependence for their children. These parents hoped that education would help their daughters fend off an early pregnancy and thus long-term welfare use. One peer who was attending law school said of her mother and grandmother, both of whom had been single teen mothers:

> There's this, this fear [in them] that it was going to be a continuous cycle. And in all likelihood, but it could have been, had it not been for, you know, my mother letting me know how important education was, always being there for me.

Another peer's mother told her children "about school": "How, when she was young, it was a privilege to go to school. And if you didn't go [to school], you'll wind up just out there pregnant, on welfare, and not able to do anything."

Most peers reported that their parents wanted them to go as far in school as they could. However, two peers whose parents were Jehovah's Witnesses said that higher education was not explicitly valued: "They don't pressure their kids to go to college. Well, they feel that—this world wouldn't stay that long for us to get involved with a career or anything." Although this represented the view of a small minority of families in this study, the finding raises questions about the relationship between religious and educational values, at least in this sect, that bear further study.

Transmission of educational values. "My grandmother taught my mother and my aunt values about their education and she had them instilled into their kids—that's me." Few peers' parents left to

chance their children's educational performance or level of achievement. They tended to be active and direct in their efforts to monitor, supervise, and guide their daughters' education. Their actions occurred both in home and school domains.

There was a range in the intensity of parental involvement among the 21 peers who reported active family support of their education. The least actively involved parents, a clear minority, regularly checked their daughters' report cards and inquired about homework, assuming that all was well at school unless they saw grades drop. In each instance, if they observed a decline in their daughters' grades, they took swift action to correct the situation, such as asking for "daily reports" from teachers or increasing their own participation in doing homework.

The most common level of parental involvement was expressed by some combination of a variety of supervisory actions, usually on a daily basis. Some parents helped with or checked homework. "[Mom] would just sit down and help me with my homework almost every night. And tell me to study more. . . . And it helped, too."

All parents required their daughters to maintain regular daily routines, especially on school days, that included strictly enforced curfews and centered on completing homework: "Well, if I have homework, the first thing I do, my mama likes me to come home. If you have homework, get it out of the way. Usually I don't go anywhere on school days." These "rules" contributed to a home environment that was conducive to doing schoolwork, getting enough rest to function well at school, and generally to carrying out the tasks necessary to being a student.

In all instances of active involvement, parents attended parent-teacher conferences, "parents' nights," and other regular school events. In a few instances, parents visited school unexpectedly to ensure all was as it should be with their daughters:

> It's [family involvement] so strong, you know, . . . all kinds of support . . . whatever you needed or thought would help you or whatever they thought would help, you know, they did the best they could do to have it like that for you. . . . Mom's at this school one day, at this school another, Dad's at one school.

Other common forms of direct involvement in education included parents paying children for good grades and taking them to school if they were late or were not comfortable traveling alone.

At the most intense level of involvement were the parents who, in addition to the above kinds of actions, also chose the schools their daughters attended. Several parents whose daughters did attend inner-city schools selected the one in the school district that they thought was best academically and safest. The parents of five young women took the initiative to enroll their daughters in suburban schools when they entered high school or to move their families out of the inner-city school district in time for high school. These parents explicitly sought to avoid the myriad problems of inner-city education, such as "hanging around with the wrong kind of people" (like "gang members and drug users"), and wanted their daughters to have the advantages of attending a high school in an affluent community. Young women who did go to predominantly "white" schools described racial tensions, the shock of higher academic expectations, and complex issues of racial identity that cannot be examined here; however, each agreed with her parents that the better education received away from their home neighborhood made up for any personal discomfort.

Not all of the parents' actions designed to encourage education were in the form of rewards. Many peers reported that no matter what grades they brought home, their parents insisted they try to do better. One young woman's parents gave her "whippings" for poor grades because "[My parents] knew that I could do better than that. But I just didn't try. But then I started trying hard. Set my grades always to be on the honor roll." About half of the peers reported that their parents used various forms of punishment to reinforce their expectations about school attendance and performance: "First [mother] will talk to us and then give us a whooping." In addition to being "whooped," typical punishments for unacceptable grades or behavior included being grounded and not being permitted to watch television or talk on the telephone:

> You did not bring home bad grades. You did not cause problems with the teachers. You went to school to learn, period. [Because] After you dealt with my mother, you had to deal with my father!

The peers who described active parental involvement and who received physical punishment did not appear to resent the strict discipline. Several young women believed that their parents were motivated by a desire to protect them from dangers outside of the home, such as violence and unwholesome peers, and from making the same "mistakes" they had made:

> Well, when I first got in high school, it was something new. So I kind of let my hair down. But then I realized this was, you know, as time progresses, that I'd have to change. I cut classes a couple of times. But I was never really, you know, wow, wow, 'cause my Mom, she knows how I sneak. And she basically wanted you to go to school and get your education and everything. Got in trouble for it. . . . She always says she wants us to be better. She wants us to have more [than she had].

Some young women even expressed gratitude for the discipline they received. "I think we got the best raising and discipline anybody could have. Kids who drop out need parents like mine."

In addition to receiving explicit messages about education, peers learned from their parents general lessons about life that provided them with a base for making decisions in the often-difficult circumstances they faced. The ways parents structured family life to enhance their influence over their daughters' behavior was appreciated by those peers who valued being able to talk openly with their parents. Some peers explicitly asserted that the quality of their communication with their parents motivated them to "listen" to their parents' advice and to try to please them:

> [The most important thing is] having a relationship with your parents. Being able to talk with them. If you haven't any communication, or your parents act like they don't care what you do, then, you know, you're going to do things to try to get attention.

Other examples suggested how even young women who did not feel "close" to their parents looked to them for guidance and granted them legitimate authority:

> You know, my mother she said education and go to school and all that. And it make sense to me. I think if I was a child that didn't listen to my mother, probably would be pregnant. But you have to listen because they're telling you stuff for your own good. They wouldn't tell you nothing bad, give you bad advice.

> I had to listen to them, you know. They had their hold on me. . . . I couldn't get away with a lot of things, you know, like some parents would probably look over, my mother and father looked at me step for step; they'd make sure I didn't do, you know, anything that was out of line.

Many peers believed that their parents provided them with important beliefs, attitudes, and skills that contributed to their success. The most commonly mentioned of these beliefs was the value of being an active agent in accomplishing personal goals—education, for example. One peer whose mother intervened when her grades fell appreciated the help, but she was motivated to improve because "I wasn't brought up to be sitting in class when you could be doing something else. Just sitting there doing nothing."

Another peer was one of the few black students in a predominantly white school who avoided the "troubles" of racial antagonism:

> My mother didn't bring me up like that. . . . She say you better get the best out of it because ain't nobody going to help you unless you want to learn. You just can't sit back and expect for everything to come [to] you. You got to go out there and you got to work hard for it. And that's what I tried to do.

In one tragic case, the young woman's mother had been murdered trying to protect her daughter from a rapist:

> [Mother] always told me, you know, sometime life may not be the things you want it but you got to make life what you want it. She taught us we should be nice people, how to take care of ourself, not to be dependent on other people.

Another peer said she was different from teenagers who get pregnant and drop out of school because:

> My background, just that's the most important . . . and it's just that it—wanting something for yourself. . . . If you don't care nothing, or you don't care about your future, then you are going to do what you please. But just look in the future, and say "Well, a couple of years from now, I'm almost grown. I'm gonna have to have, to go to college, or do something. I don't want to be on welfare. I want to make something of myself."

The patterns of family involvement described above did not vary perceptibly by any family characteristics such as marital status of parents (the vast majority of whom were not married), educational attainment of parents, or history of welfare receipt. It was noteworthy, however, that most

of the 12 young women who reported having a strong positive relationship with their fathers, whether or not he lived with them, believed that his presence had a significant impact on their education. For some young women, their fathers represented an independently strong source of support for their education:

> [Dad] wants us to go to college. As far as high school and my morals and the respect that I have for myself that I want others to have for me, I'd say my mother [has greatest influence]. But as far as going to college and looking toward the future, I'll say my father.

A few young women perceived that their fathers consistently reinforced expectations and discipline. One young woman, whose parents separated when she was 8, noticed that she and her sister had a lot more "freedom" at home after their father left: "When I was living with my daddy and my mother, they used to make us go in to the room and just study. Study for tests and stuff. . . . We had to be in be like at 8:00." Those 12 peers generally agreed that, "If you're living with both parents, you growing up the right way."

In contrast to the peers described above, each of the five peers who reported *no* active parental involvement in their education also described a home life characterized by some combination of family members using drugs and/or alcohol, physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and a generally high level of chaos. Two young women, both of whom had physical disabilities, were in foster care for some time. How had these five young women managed to remain in school despite a severe lack of family care and support? They all reported having a significant relationship with a caring teacher and/or possessing a special talent; plus, they all may have had strong inner resources contributing to "resilience" (Brooks 1994).

The absence of parental support did not mean that young women were not motivated by their parents to fulfill their educational expectations. Four of the five peers whose family environments were deeply unhappy characterized their motivation to achieve in school as wanting to "show" their parents they can "do something," or even to "prove wrong" parents' grim prophesies for their daughters. Like

several peers who experienced active parental involvement, three of these young women wanted to be different from people, in this case their families, who “got all these babies and they on welfare.” They also saw their parents as reference points, however negative, for their educational and vocational aspirations. Unfortunately, the data do not permit meaningful analysis of these complicated emotional dynamics but do reinforce our belief that one cannot underestimate the complex and profound impact parents have on their children’s behavior even in the most troubled of homes.

TEEN MOTHERS

The teen parents described family values about education and means of transmission that were substantively similar to those described by nonparent peers. However, proportionately fewer teen mothers than peers—11 of the 24 vs. 21 of 26—reported that their parents were actively involved in their schooling. There were also significant differences in the levels of educational attainment among teen mothers.

Educational Status

In contrast to the nonparent peers, many teen parents were not on track with their education: 9 of the 24 teen mothers dropped out before finishing high school. Two of the 9 were enrolled in a GED program but had not finished. Of the other 15 teen mothers, 10 remained in school after giving birth (3 of them were in postsecondary educational programs), while 5 had their first child as teenagers but after graduating from high school.

Consistent with other research which finds that many teen mothers experience difficulties in school before conceiving, there were significant group differences in the academic performance histories of the dropouts and other teen mothers (see Upchurch and McCarthy 1990). All but one of the

dropouts reported having serious academic problems in school independent of, and usually predating, becoming pregnant; the majority had failed at least one grade earlier in their educational careers.

In a few instances the young women who dropped out attributed their problems to school friends who encouraged them to "skip" school, use drugs, and engage in other problematic behaviors. In general, this occurred after they entered high school: "They was the wrong crowd. That's why I dropped out. I was with them." Even if their own behavior was not affected, other young women found the transition to high school difficult because of the new—and often rougher—environment.

> The [school] change because the people change—being around different people and the way they act. That's probably why I didn't go to high school 'cause after I got out of [junior high] I didn't, you know, I don't know the school here they really don't teach you much or something, you know, and then people come to school and they play and you try to learn, they stop you from all that.

A few young women believed that they were "slow" because of the great academic difficulties they encountered, although none reported being officially diagnosed as learning disabled: "I was always a grade or two behind . . . I didn't want to go any more."

In sharp contrast to those who dropped out, only two teen mothers who remained in school reported having academic problems and in this way were similar to the nonparent peers.

Family Values about Education

Three of the teen mothers who had dropped out described family lives so full of violence and neglect that they reported having virtually no communication about education at all, whereas the parents of all the other teen mothers told them, both before and after their daughters' pregnancies, that education is important.

Several parents wanted their daughters to get the "piece of paper" so that they could "get somewhere in life."

> [The guardian aunt] always encouraged us to go to school and so when we get out of school when we graduate and stuff, we can get a good job and be something in life.

> Oh, they just tell me that I'm going to need my education one day. . . and it's something I should want to do. 'Cause I'm going to regret it [dropping out] when I get older.

Like some peers' parents, many of the teen mothers' parents were motivated by a desire for their daughters to do what they themselves had not achieved. "[Mother] didn't finish her education, so she wanted to see all of us finish our education." This parental motivation was reported most often by school dropouts, 8 of whose own mothers did not graduate from high school.

Several teen mothers' parents emphasized the importance to their grandchildren's lives of having mothers with enough education to be able to support them and also to be a "model" for them. "[Mother] says, you better get an education, you got to take care of these kids, they your kids now, and you got to provide for them."

Transmission of Family Values

Though nearly all of the teen mothers perceived their parents as having positive values about education, they varied widely in the degree to which their families' actions consistently supported those values. This dimension had dramatic differences by school status.

Among teen mothers who dropped out of school, only one, who dropped out in 8th grade long before conceiving, reported any consistent actions by her parents designed to keep her in school. Several common themes emerged in the accounts of the other 8 teen mothers.

The young women who dropped out perceived little positive encouragement from their parents to attend school. Most of their interactions concerning school were solely in the form of punishment and humiliation for failure. Several parents warned that they would be "dummies" if they did not go to school.

Although these young mothers tended to have continuing problems in school, they received little help at home. Keisha, who dropped out in 8th grade after her first pregnancy, typified this group.

Keisha's mother had dropped out of school, pregnant, at age 15. She "pushed" her daughter to go to school, mostly by "yelling" and physical punishment. "She always saying, 'Go to school, or else.'" But school was generally an adverse experience for Keisha: "Most everything, the work, and the kids, and the teachers, and I just didn't get along with people or anything." When Keisha's teachers called to report these problems, her mother's usual response was to ground her from the television for a week. Sometimes when a teacher called,

> She'd come to school and I would get yelled at in the school. She used to say, um, if you don't behave I am going to pull your pants down right here in the classroom and spank you in front of all these people. But thank God she never did.

Poor performance resulted in Keisha being held back for two years. Though she did want to fulfill her mother's expectations, she needed more help to do so than was available:

> I didn't have no help at all. Well, I asked [mother], but she just didn't have the time. . . . I did the best I could, but I didn't pass in school. . . With all the problems, I couldn't do it.

Keisha's description suggested that while her mother's intention was to enhance her daughter's education, her actions were ineffective and perhaps even contributed to Keisha's problems.

Even among those families that were less harsh, the young women believed that they were discouraged by the lack of active support. Some women wished that their parents had "pushed" them harder. A young mother who had been "kicked out" of school and soon after attempted suicide felt she would have been able to return and perform better had someone paid more attention to her: "Somebody sit down and talk to me about something. Ain't nobody really never did that with me."

Although the particulars of family life among the school dropouts varied, their families all lacked the structures and routines that would have supported the daughters' educational activities. That is, many of the young mothers' parents imposed rules on them, but not rules that supported educational activity. For example, one young woman who dropped out after she had her child believed she had a baby in part to gain freedom from her mother's overwhelming demands at home:

> I felt like if I had a baby of my own I wouldn't have to worry about doing this, you know, the house chores and cooking because I had my own responsibility to look after. I had my baby to look after and therefore I wouldn't have time to clean up or cook.

In a clear contrast to these unsupportive families were the families of young women who had children *after* graduating from high school. Four of these 5 young mothers reported active parental involvement in their education similar to that described by nonparent peers. One young woman's proud mother showed her daughter's report cards to colleagues at work.

All parents in this group provided consistent supervision at home. One young woman who had been wheelchair-bound since childhood said that her mother treated her with "no pity" and disciplined her as she did her other children:

> And I'm glad she did it like that, otherwise don't know where I would be right now. Probably somewhere helpless. . . . Well, [mother] did [go to parent-teacher conferences], and then she had to go to work too. . . . She made sure we went to school every day. She helped with the homework. Made sure everybody got it done.

These young women typically regarded their parents as crucial and positive sources of motivation to do well in school: "[Mother] pushed school hard and it stayed in my head." One young woman's father died while she was in high school. Her performance suffered, but she recovered her commitment: "That's when I stopped going to school. And then I went back. 'Cause I, made me feel like, he looking down on me, see I'm failing. So I went back."

The teen mothers who had a child before graduating and remained in school presented a more varied picture of kinds of family support for education. Six of the 10 in this group reported active family involvement in their schooling.

Most of these young women had been good students and reported enjoying school before becoming pregnant. Many were involved in extracurricular activities and most had firm attachments to school:

> Basically, I just did my work, and you know, paid attention in class, and never really got into any, you know, groups that's misbehaving. . . . Like, we emphasized getting good grades, and we make bets and everything on getting good grades.

Despite the multiple and constant demands of motherhood, these young women maintained adequate levels of performance and even attendance at school (one young woman won an attendance award upon graduation). Although having a baby radically changed their lives, the young mothers in this group retained their primary identity as a student and struggled not to let the demands of motherhood simply replace the demands of school.

> The baby, it was like, her periods of sleeping was off and stuff. So, I would have to try to get my housework done, and things washed when she was asleep. 'Cause if she wasn't asleep, I would have to take care of her, and watch every move she makes. But I believe that it's not her fault that my grades slipped. . . . I feel that I let other things come before my schoolwork, which I shouldn't have. . . . I really feel that, you know, I should have a better GPA [grade point average]. But, I'm going to have to work harder at getting it. But, I feel that next year, I should be able to do better.

That these teen mothers were so successful in school appeared to be in part because their families provided much time and effort toward that end. The types of actions taken by parents of teen mothers both before and after their pregnancies were virtually identical to those reported by nonparent peers. These included choosing which schools daughters attended, monitoring homework, strictly supervising their time and activities, attending school functions, and having frequent contact with teachers.

Most of their home environments were highly structured, closely supervised, and emotionally close. The range of common elements was described by one young woman who missed no school during her pregnancy and gave custody of her son to his father so that she could pursue her education.

> My mother trained us. . . . We were children that were brought up to know right from wrong and you were punished when you did the things that were wrong. . . . We were not allowed to leave the house and stay out until dark and then come back. You had a certain time that you had to be in and there was only so far from the house you could go. Discipline, you discipline your child, you don't let them run wild. . . .You get a grateful spirit after, once you get old enough to see what's going on.

These elements seemed to help the family absorb some of the tumult that came with a new baby and to help their daughters continue working toward completing the adolescent task of finishing secondary school.

Three young mothers' own mothers provided full-time care for the baby so that their daughters could finish school. The mother of one young woman took temporary legal custody of her grandchild so her daughter could participate in a military program in high school leading to ROTC at college.

Those teen mothers who remained in school and who reported little active parental involvement commonly described a kind of parental "benign neglect" or lack of close supervisory oversight. One young woman, whose mother "tried to make me stay home sometimes" to help care for younger siblings, believed she might have avoided the difficulties of early motherhood and done better in school with more guidance: "[Mother] didn't talk to me. I more or less grew up myself. . . . I learned a lot of things from her, but not as much as a kid should learn from their parent."

Another young mother graduated from high school, but barely. Her thoughts on her mother's role in her education reveal features shared by the other teen mothers in this group:

> . . . [Mother] wasn't a real pusher about grades, you know, as long as you went. And my grades were bad, she never fussed at me about that. . . Maybe if she had I would have did a little extra. . . .You know, I think my mother because she didn't graduate, it was enough for her just for me to go. . . . I was not motivated to learn. And I think that comes from your parents. My parents, my mother, she, she told me to go to school, she wanted me to go to school, but she was never like, "Well, if you don't get this grade, you don't go outside." It was never an enforcement on having good grades.

DISCUSSION

Barbara Miller's daughters, Charese, age 14, and Annette, age 12, are not yet heading in the direction of their mother's difficult youth. Charese is artistically gifted and attends a special art academy; Annette attends a public school for the academically gifted. Their mother carefully considers what she should do differently with her girls than what her own mother did with her. She tries hard to be "truthful" with them, to listen to them, to encourage them to be responsible while avoiding premature adulthood. Barbara also acknowledges that she and her daughters have access to more community resources and family support than her own mother had.

Barbara confesses to worrying about getting each daughter "one year closer to high school graduation" without either becoming pregnant, but she tries to remain optimistic about their futures:

> Teenagers have so many opportunities now. I mean, there's no reason for not one of them to graduate high school. No reason for them to have strings of babies . . . I understand there's the money problem, and there's this and there's that. . . .But I'm so glad that my girls realize that, that they want more. . . . You might hear a year from now that one of my girls was pregnant. I'm not saying they won't ever get caught up in it, but you know, it's just that right now they do realize that they do have a lot of opportunities and I keep telling them to go for it, you know, every time you find an opportunity, that's good for you, take it. I know they're not goody-two-shoes. I know anything can happen. But I'm still hoping, I'm still hoping. . . . There's a lot against them, but then there's a lot of things for them.

One of the important "things" that a young woman like Mrs. Miller's granddaughters Charese and Annette, can have "for" her in becoming a competent and independent adult is a parent like Barbara who is actively involved in her daughters' educational experiences. Barbara, the other teenage mothers, and their nonparent peers in this study suggest that not only what but *how* one learns about the importance of education in the family can significantly help or hinder a poor young woman's ability to achieve in school.

Our study found that nearly all of the 50 poor young black women from the same inner-city community were told by their parents that formal education was important and that they should attend school; no participant reported receiving any direct messages at home implying otherwise. This suggests that their parents share the mainstream American value of the importance of education, rather than any "alternative" or deviant view.

But holding positive values about education is not sufficient for children to develop educational competence: the values must be transmitted to children and reinforced concretely and repeatedly in a way that substantively influences their actual behavior. We found great variation in the effectiveness with which parents transmitted the value of education to their daughters such that it positively influenced their educational careers. Young women who did not have children had higher levels of educational attainment than did teen mothers, and significantly more peers than teen mothers also

reported that their parents were actively involved in their schooling. Yet nearly all teen mothers who delayed childbearing beyond high school and the majority of those who remained in school after having a child reported levels and types of parental involvement similar to those of nonparent peers. Conversely, nearly all of the teen mothers who dropped out of school reported no parental activities supporting their stated value of education. Thus, the educational experiences of the teen mothers, who are at such high risk for poor educational outcomes, were probably mediated by their parents' actions on behalf of their education.

That so many poor parents in our study were able to teach their children the skills necessary to work toward upward mobility argues against a "cultural" position about the continuation of poverty across generations as it is usually understood. Poor parents can be competent transmitters of mainstream values and skills that are important for their children's educational competence. Also, those who imply that economic and social institutional structures prevent groups of poor Americans from advancing would also deny families the power to change, to fight against the sometimes disabling circumstances of impoverished inner-city neighborhoods and their usually inferior schools. Families can even mitigate the tremendous difficulties of being simultaneously a young mother and high school student by providing concrete assistance and emotional support, day by day.

Findings of this study suggest that even though parents may have few material resources, they can create family environments that provide sufficient social capital for children to achieve the educational competence that is so important for later economic achievement. This raises a central question about what conditions enhance or detract from a parent's ability to provide meaningful assistance to a child in school. Some research finds that a parent's own level of education is an important factor in children's educational attainment (see, for example, Blau and Duncan 1967). Although this is implied in our study by the observation that the mothers of all teen mothers who dropped out were themselves dropouts (one got a GED), clearly its influence is not independent: insofar

as the educational levels of mothers of both nonparent peers and teen parents here is quite mixed, it cannot be a determinant of educational outcomes. Nonetheless, the ways in which parents' education, in combination with other individual and social characteristics, affects family dynamics and individual outcomes deserves careful attention.

A notable aspect of the 50 young women's histories was their heterogeneity. This points to limitations in any deterministic theories about persistently poor urban black families which assume that all people in similar economic circumstances behave similarly. While it may be true that some poor people suffer from "learned helplessness" that dampens effective action (Kane 1987), or that the psychodynamic processes common to some poor black teenage mothers inhibit their abilities to take advantage of educational or vocational opportunities (Musick 1993), only *some* people respond to being poor in those ways. Others, for reasons we do not yet fully understand, are able to provide competent parenting in at least selected domains; to garner and direct their internal and external resources, however limited, to the benefit of their own and their children's futures.

This small-scale comparative study cannot explain the sources of such diversity in parental competence and in the young women's educational attainment. Nevertheless, the experiences of the young women in this study do suggest that the parent who provides close, step-by-step supervision of a young woman's daily life as a student can help her develop the competence to set and reach educational goals that can potentially lead her out of a "lost generation" and into a safer and brighter life.

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