

Book Reviews

Pregnant with Meaning: Teen Mothers and the Politics of Inclusive Schooling. Deirdre M. Kelly. New York: Peter Lang, 2000, ISBN 0-8204-4536-3, 258 pages. Volume 13 in the series *Adolescent Cultures, School and Society*, J.L. DeVitis & L. Irwin-DeVitis (General Editors). Web site: www.peterlang.com (look under "series" and search for the series name).

Reviewed by: Gretchen C. Hess and Xiangming Qiu
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In the scholarly book *Pregnant with Meaning*, Deirdre Kelly tells the story of teen pregnancy. She opens with the story of a Xenia, Ohio student who is denied entry to the National Honor Society not because of her marks in school, but because as a teen mother the girl bears visible proof of having had premarital sex. This meant she was lacking in "character," one of the requirements for induction into the coveted society. What is the solution to similar situations happening all over North America? Kelly looks to the inclusive schooling policies at two high schools in British Columbia. Both City School and Town School offer arrangements for teen mothers to remain in school; both include educators trying to change the stigmas and address the problems. Throughout the book Kelly continues to weave facts and stories from both the United States and Canada to present her views from a critical feminist perspective. Her knowledge of both countries is reflected in her credentials. Currently she is an associate professor in education studies at the University of British Columbia; she completed her doctorate at Stanford University.

Throughout, the book is thoroughly referenced and researched, offers broad coverage, and is informative, with a good mix of qualitative research and quantitative facts to support the arguments. It consists of 10 self-contained chapters, with some repetition of information in related chapters. About half of the chapters are focused on specific programs and examples from City School and Town School.

Kelly's view is decidedly political. Through an ethnographer's lens she discusses the issues around teen pregnancy and motherhood in order to "challenge and transform unequal relations of power" (p. 185). In a clear and articulate style she examines in detail the complex issue of teenage mothering from the angles of public discourse, educational policies, and teen mothers. She

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considers the influences of gender, class, race, age, community, and other dimensions associated with the lived experiences of teen mothers.

Kelly attempts to give the work a multicultural perspective although most examples are from BC or the US. She includes many stories and opinions from middle-class white society, the poor of many races, and Aboriginal people from both countries. She includes a few comments from researchers of East Indian or Chinese backgrounds.

She shows compassion for the teen mothers of all backgrounds and situations. For Kelly, the problem is society and particularly the portion of society that is influenced by the white middle class. For example, in several chapters the author portrays the white middle class as selfish, arrogant, and similar in terms of their opinions, reactions, and ways of thinking. Kelly weakens her argument by attacking this one group and oversimplifying the explanation of the roots of the issues.

In other parts of the book Kelly gives more balanced explanations. For example, there is an excellent discourse on the roots and assumptions of groups of people who have a voice in the issues surrounding teen pregnancy. She labels the conservatives as those who see teenage sex and pregnancy as a moral problem. In contrast are the liberals who view the decision to have premarital sex or to have a child as decisions along a continuum of making responsible choices. Both groups fail to see all the issues, according to Kelly, in the "good choices versus bad choices" debate (Chapter 3). They fail to take into account the societal forces that act as material and cultural barriers to adolescents' making healthy choices. This is why she promotes the feminist perspective where the concern for women is foremost. In the lively discussion Kelly manages, we think, to offer insightful critiques of all groups, and thus she forces readers to examine their own assumptions and perspectives.

We are both psychologists. Our shared point of view, which is admittedly biased toward a psychological perspective, would probably be labeled by Kelly as liberal. However, we believe that Kelly's political perspective does not take into account all the issues in the responsibility debate. Kelly places judgment on the notion of individual responsibility. She claims that adolescents are not totally responsible because of the societal barriers to free choice. For example, she examines the choice to have premarital sex and argues that doing so is within the "dominant system of sexual meaning in North America" (p. 52), citing the fact that roughly half of all high schools students have sexual intercourse before graduation. We argue that accepting responsibility for one's behavior does not imply being praised for having behaved in an exemplary way or being blamed for having behaved in an unhealthy manner, as Kelly believes. We argue that, as humans, all people are ultimately responsible for every aspect of their lives no matter how free they are to choose. It is this sense of responsibility that gives us a sense of self and identity, thus empowering us to act in the context of the world in which we live.

Teenage pregnancy and childbearing is a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon that has significant ramifications at personal, societal, and cultural levels. From Kelly's book, readers can appreciate the complexity of the phenomenon. For example, by exploring some teen mothers' personal perspectives on their experiences of being a teen mother, Kelly helps us to realize that

despite the obvious disadvantages of teen childbearing, there may be some learning experiences that impel the teenage mother to develop cognitively and holistically as she may not have done without the experience of being a teen mother. For researchers, teachers, and policymakers, this fresh perspective is worthy of attention.

One important factor in human development is time. It is important for research on teenage pregnancy and childbearing to look at the interacting nature of the life events of teen mothers and the changing environment as a result of time. For many teen mothers it might be too late to inform them about the negative affects of teenage pregnancy and childbearing, but it is not too late to help and to encourage them to face the challenges of life and make a positive change in order to overcome the adversities resulting from past events. In this sense, Kelly's book is timely. Although her book focuses mainly on the political aspect of inclusive school programs, educators and other practitioners can look at inclusive programs from a different angle and provide some insights regarding the cognitive development, moral development, psychosocial development, and identity developmental aspects of teen mothers and the inclusive school programs.

Overall, despite some limitations, this is a well-written, thought-provoking, and well-researched book. It is certainly worth reading, especially for people who are interested in social justice for adolescents or in inclusive schooling programs. While researching *Pregnant with Meaning*, we also investigated other books in this series published by Peter Lang. We purchased four after reading the descriptions on the Web site and highly recommend them all: Mazzarella and Pecora's *Growing Up Girls: Popular Culture and the Construction of Identity*, Cottle's *Mind Fields: Adolescent Consciousness in a Culture of Distraction*, Oliver and Lailik's *Bodily Knowledge: Learning about Equity and Justice with Adolescent Girls*, and Green's *Learning about School Violence: Lessons for Educators, Parents, Students, and Communities*. Like Kelly's book, they are all well-written academic books on current topics.

Removing the Margins: The Challenges and Possibilities of Inclusive Schooling. George J. Sefa Dei, Irma Marcia James, Leeno Luke Karumanchery, Sonia James-Wilson, and Jasmin Zine. Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2000, 299 pages.

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Removing the Margins is a product of years of research and critical inquiry into the best practices in anti-racist inclusive education. The authors have chosen to use a critical integrative approach to research, and in doing so have managed to connect educational issues with questions of social difference. The book

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