



Janice Airhart

WHAT TEACHING
TEEN MOMS
TAUGHT ME

Lessons From a
High School Classroom

Education Studies

Collection Editor
JANISE HURTIG

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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School Classroom

Illustrations by

Tim Airhart

The Education Studies
Collection

Collection Editor

Janise Hurtig



Dedicated to those of any age faced with sudden life changes:
You're capable of more than you think you are.

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Abstract

This book describes the experiences of a high school science teacher in a program dedicated to educating pregnant and parenting teens while supporting them with onsite childcare, nursing services, social services, and academic counseling. The teacher began teaching at age 55, without an education degree or certificate. She obtained an alternative secondary teaching certificate in science, based on her previous career as a medical laboratory scientist. During her eight years of teaching this special population, the author was surprised to find that her students taught her as much about life as she taught them about science. The book illustrates the many lessons she learned through stories and descriptions of situations unique to teen moms and their children on a high school campus designed to meet their needs. While these stories are provided in the context of science principles, each lesson is applicable to any teacher and any student population.

Keywords

Teen pregnancy; educating teen moms; alternative education; alternative teaching certificate; high school classroom; lesson planning; teaching strategies; educational philosophy; teacher-student relationship

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Preface

Between 2007 and 2015, I had the privilege of interacting with hundreds of teen moms on a small campus where I began a third career as a high school science teacher at the age of 55. Many students were never enrolled in my classes but frequented my classroom almost daily. I also interacted often with my students' children, some of whom played on swings, slides, and tricycles just across the playground outside my classroom window. My days were full of brief, inconsequential exchanges. Though many of those conversations are etched clearly in my memory, it's impossible to recall exactly which student or child said or did what in every situation. For that reason, I've changed the names of students and babies throughout the book.

My years of teaching high school science were intense, and some details have escaped my memory. While I've done my best to describe events and conversations as completely and accurately as possible, there are likely incidents that others will remember differently. I encourage them to put their stories in writing as well. Mine is not the only story worth telling about the challenges of teen pregnancy or learning to become a teacher.



Learning objectives

1. Identify significant educational challenges faced by pregnant and parenting students.
2. Describe the elements of a support system that could assist teen moms in simultaneously overcoming educational challenges and becoming responsible parents.
3. Compare and contrast the effectiveness of standard curriculum requirements with uniquely designed teaching strategies in meeting the needs of special populations.
4. Assess the value of establishing trust in forming beneficial teacher-student relationships.
5. Describe how teachers and students learn from each other.

Part I

2007

Change

The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity.

– Amelia Earhart

Part I Introduction: My entry into the teaching profession

Between 2007 and 2015, I taught science to teen moms at the Margaret Hudson Program (MHP), a small high school campus in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, a suburb of Tulsa. My time, energy, and emotions were dedicated to the MHP mission of helping students succeed. The program served pregnant and parenting teens from area school districts, who could enroll as soon as they learned they were pregnant and stay for up to two years or until they graduated. In addition to extra academic support, onsite child care, parenting programs, and counseling supported students in becoming responsible mothers. I was just the science teacher, but my colleagues and I learned to become advocates for teenagers whose lives were upended by unexpected changes and the challenges of an unplanned pregnancy before completing high school.

I did not have a degree in education when I began teaching in 2007, at the age of 55. Instead, I had degrees in biology and journalism, with decades of experience in medical laboratory science and writing or editing. It didn't occur to me at the time that an education degree or teaching certificate could offer a better foundation than expertise in the subjects I taught. Within

weeks, I realized how misguided my optimism was. While I had spent months taking credentialing exams to become provisionally certified and studying textbooks to plan lessons, I had not studied any texts on educational theory or classroom management. When most of the students in one class failed their first major exam, I knew I had failed to teach them well. Recognizing my failure, I consulted my teaching mentor, who provided much needed wisdom and encouragement. This was the beginning of my education as a teacher.

1

The stakes: Challenges facing teen moms

In the 1950s and 1960s, families often dealt with teen pregnancy by shipping the girl off to a relative in another city or state until her baby was born. There were also homes for “unwed mothers” if a relative could not be located or convinced to take the girl in. My own sister spent the latter months of her first pregnancy in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, several hours from our home in Lake Charles. My stepmother offered me this option when I became pregnant in 1971, but I declined. By that time, I was a working college student and chose to marry instead. Becoming parents at 19 was not easy for my husband and me, to say the least. On the other hand, it taught me a lot about perseverance and seeing the possibilities in unexpected situations. It was this lesson that I hoped to pass on to the girls in my classes, but I soon realized I had a lot to learn about who these teen girls were and how they ended up in my classroom. They weren’t just statistics, they weren’t just like me, and they weren’t all the same.

Several factors affect birth rates and the ages at which pregnancy occurs. Living in poverty, the educational level of the mother,

and the availability of birth control are the factors most relevant to global birth rates. As young women began attending college in the United States in higher numbers in the 1970s and 1980s, they found they had choices about employment versus home-making. Childbearing was deliberately delayed. For teens at risk of unplanned pregnancy, other factors played a role. The advent of reliable birth control in the 1960s, and the availability of safe and legal abortion procedures beginning in 1973 decreased the teen birth rate as well. Fifty years later, the effects of the Supreme Court's action eliminating the universal right to abortion for US women are yet to be seen, but teen pregnancy rates may again rise.

A lot of dedicated energy by many people and organizations has been expended to promote wise choices about sex among teens in recent years, at least in those states willing to confront the issues directly. Those efforts are paying off and deserve celebration. Sex education in public schools is still not universal, however. Leaders in some states and many of their constituents are convinced that teaching about sex encourages sexual behavior, despite data proving the opposite. Instead, in states like Oklahoma, where I taught, teaching abstinence is the only requirement of the scattered and optional sex education classes. Consequently, teen pregnancy rates remain high. The support of programs like MHP, dedicated to educating teen moms, provided a vital role in helping young families succeed. Unfortunately, with the number of teen moms in decline, those programs have been shuttered. MHP closed permanently in 2017 because of dwindling financial support from the community.

Today in Oklahoma, a relatively small state, there are nearly 7,000 pregnant girls between the ages of 15 and 19. Will they complete their education? Many won't. This puts them at risk of a host of disadvantages. Nationally, the high school graduation rate was 87 percent in 2022. For teen moms, the average is around 50 percent. The disparity in these statistics suggests that traditional education and classrooms greatly shortchange teen moms. Because of the support MHP provided, the graduation rate for our students was greater than 90 percent.

High school dropouts are more likely than graduates to face long-term poverty and a long list of other disadvantages. If those dropouts are also parents, their children pay a steep price as well. We all pay a price when children, including children who become parents, don't reach their potential. I taught parenting students as young as 13.

Children of teen moms, half of whom are school dropouts, are at greater risk of many disadvantages. They risk low birth weight and infant mortality. They're less likely to be adequately educated and more likely to continue living in poverty and perpetuate that condition as they have families of their own, often as adolescents as well. They're more likely to be incarcerated during adolescence. A high percentage of my students were born to teen mothers.

The promise of making a difference in the lives of these young women and their babies was compelling. I was not, and still am not, confident that their best interests would be served by current educational and political systems. Instead, the issues of teen pregnancy, sex education, abortion, and birth control access

become more fraught each year, ebbing and flowing with election cycles. Whether I had the resources necessary to significantly affect their futures was a question I barely considered in 2007, but I felt drawn to their circumstances. With the best of intentions, I stepped into the fray, eager to improve the lives of these girls.

MHP offered state-accredited childcare to 20 infants and toddlers onsite that consistently rated in the top tier. The teachers in the childcare department did more than care for children, though. They mentored and taught students how to care for their babies by demonstrating healthy mothering behaviors. Our nursing services provided well-baby checks, and counselors did much more than academic counseling. All these social services operated under the nonprofit arm of MHP, a United Way Agency, separate from the education services the local school district provided. They existed in a wing of the building just beyond the cafeteria. A Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) office was housed there as well to ensure moms' and babies' nutritional needs were met. Just down the block was a Head Start, early childhood learning site for children who aged out of our childcare, and a Planned Parenthood office. We invited community organizations like the Tulsa Public Library, Parents as Teachers, Junior Achievement, the Chamber of Commerce, and others to provide programs for our students. All our services were essential in helping the girls graduate and take their first steps into the adult world as responsible parents.

2

Teen pregnancy by the numbers*

- US teen birth rate steadily declined between 1991 and 2021 by 78 percent but is still higher than most high-income nations.
- In 2021, the US teen pregnancy rate on average was 1.44 percent.
- Rates vary considerably among racial and ethnic disparities, with the highest rates among non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native girls at 2.4 percent and the lowest at 0.2 percent for non-Hispanic Asians.
- Pregnancy rate in older teens (18–19) was 2.73 percent in 2021.
- Approximately 15 percent of teen moms will have at least a second child while still a teen.
- In 2017, an estimated 58–60 percent of pregnancies resulted in live births and 23–28 percent ended in abortion.
- Oklahoma, where I taught, had the fifth highest teen pregnancy rate in the United States in 2022, at 2.12 percent. Mississippi had the highest rate at 2.64 percent, and Connecticut had the lowest rate at 0.64 percent.
- Among mothers who have had a child prior to age 18, only 38 percent have a high school diploma.

- Less than 2 percent of teens who become mothers before age 18 obtain a college degree before age 30.
- Eight out of ten teen dads don't marry the mother of their child.
- Teen girls who are sexually active but don't use contraceptives have a 90 percent chance of becoming pregnant in one year.

*Unless otherwise noted, the above US statistics apply to girls aged 15–19 years.

3

Birthday girl: A new career at 55

"Here," Holly said. "Put this on." She thrust a laminated paper pin with a tag that said, "Birthday Girl" in my direction.

"What is it?" I'm not sure what look I gave her, but I hope I looked cooperative, like a respectable member of the teaching team I was joining.

"It's the birthday pin. Everyone wears it on their birthday." Holly taught Family and Consumer Science down at the end of the hall. "Perfect!" My new colleague stood back to assess the overall effect and patted me on the arm. "You'll be fine," she said.

Oh my God! I might as well have a scarlet "A" emblazoned on my chest. The pink and yellow birthday ribbon stood out like pulsing neon against my blouse.

"Thanks," I said weakly. I didn't protest; I *am* a team player, after all. *Everyone* wears the pin on their birthday. But I was hardly a girl.

It was 2007, my 55th birthday, and my first day as a high school science teacher at the Margaret Hudson Program. I dragged a wheeled cart behind me filled with everything I thought I'd need



for my teaching debut: four science textbooks and a spiral-bound lesson plan book complete with four class lists neatly printed in pencil (I was warned to expect frequent changes), worksheet masters, my purse, and a frozen entrée for lunch. Wedged among it all was a sense of optimism for this unlikely career change. The cart was so heavy that I worried I'd pull my shoulder out of joint hoisting it from the back seat of my car to the ground. What there wasn't room for was self-confidence in what I was about to do; it was too dodgy to pin down. There also was no eight-by-ten framed education degree certificate with my name on it. I was relying on my degree in biology, which the state of Oklahoma deemed sufficient, along with several satisfactory certificate test scores to teach science.

I'd been preparing for this day for weeks: reading science textbooks, studying flow diagrams, planning detailed lessons, and setting up my new classroom. As the half-time science teacher, I'd share the room with the half-time math teacher, Gerald. Each of us represented one-fifth of the entire teaching staff on a campus with four classrooms. For days, I'd been stapling colorful posters and pictures on the single classroom bulletin board at the front of the room. Gerald wasn't so keen on decorating.

"Go ahead and put up whatever you like," Gerald said with a shrug from his end of the classroom.

Meanwhile, at my own desk, I carefully hung file folders with color-coded stickers, inserted a black mesh organizer in the long shallow drawer, and labeled and organized office supplies. Trying to take advantage of my cohort's vast experience, I showered him with questions. "How do you keep track of absences?"

I asked, “How do you know when to back up and cover a concept again?” He was patient with my questions and answered as calmly as I imagined he did with students. “I know girls are allowed to breastfeed in class. How does that work?” Not all my questions had to do with classroom procedure or with science, though that was the subject I was hired to teach. I was nervous about how I’d be perceived as a middle-aged, first-year, inexperienced teacher by my teenage students. I was older than their mothers, maybe as old as their grandmothers.

When I was first introduced to the Margaret Hudson Program (MHP) in 1989, it was housed in the basement of a Baptist church in a large suburb of Tulsa, where we’d recently moved. I signed up as a substitute teacher for Broken Arrow Public Schools while I looked for permanent work as a medical laboratory or research scientist, my profession for more than 20 years. The only substitute job I accepted before I found full-time work was subbing for the half-time math teacher at MHP.

I was impressed that Broken Arrow had a program dedicated to educating pregnant teens and caring for their children, the only one of its kind I’d ever encountered. I’d been pregnant myself at 18 as a college freshman. I never needed this kind of support, but I had great empathy for the girls who did. The school was jointly operated by the Margaret Hudson Program nonprofit agency, which was funded primarily by the United Way of Tulsa, and the Broken Arrow Public School District. The nonprofit organization provided nursing, counseling, and childcare staff—all of whom had degrees in their respective fields. The school district