

**‘Every Girl was Different’: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Staff Experiences
Supporting Pregnant Teenagers and Young Mothers**

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Overview

This thesis explores the topic of teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education in England, and comprises of three distinct chapters: a literature review chapter; an empirical paper; and a reflective account on the research process. Although each chapter is distinct, they are still closely linked and each build upon and inform each other.

The first chapter presents a narrative literature review on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood, and education in England. This chapter begins by outlining the methodology used to complete the literature review. Then, this chapter considers the psychological theories and frameworks that are useful for synthesising and interpreting the literature on teenage pregnancy and education. Following this, this chapter examines the national context surrounding teenage pregnancy in England and discusses the factors typically associated with teenage pregnancy. Finally, this chapter culminates by reviewing studies that explore the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers.

The second chapter consists of an empirical paper, which presents a qualitative study that investigates the topic of teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education from the perspective of secondary and further education staff. This chapter begins by providing a more focused summary of the literature discussed in the first chapter to establish the rationale for the study. After outlining the rationale, the study's methodology and findings are discussed. In summary, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with secondary and further education staff who all had experience supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers in their professional roles. The data generated from these interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis to address three distinct research questions. The chapter culminates by highlighting the study's distinctive contributions to the literature, implications for practice and directions for future research.

The third and final chapter comprises of a personally reflective and reflexive account of the research process. In this chapter, I reflect in chronological order on the key steps and decisions I made whilst designing and conducting this research project. At the end of this chapter, I set out my plans for disseminating the study's findings.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Term
A-Level	Advanced Level
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BPS	British Psychological Society
DfE	Department for Education
EBSCO	Elton B. Stephens Company
EP	Educational Psychologist
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HCPC	Health and Care Professions Council
KCSIE	Keeping Children Safe in Education
LAC	Looked After Child
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
Reflexive TA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
RSE	Relationships and Sex Education
RQ	Research Question
SEN	Special Educational Needs
UEA	University of East Anglia
UK	United Kingdom
Q	Questions

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Chapter One: Literature Review

This chapter presents a narrative literature review on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood, and education in England. While this literature review can be read as a standalone chapter, it also provides the foundation for the empirical study presented in Chapter Two, where the findings from the literature review are revisited to develop the rationale for the study.

1.1 Introduction and Overview

Contextually, between 1999 and 2010 teenage pregnancy was a national policy priority through the teenage pregnancy strategy (Hadley et al., 2024). Since the conclusion of the strategy in 2010, national monitoring, leadership, and support in this area have gradually declined (Hadley et al., 2024). However, prominent contributors to the literature on teenage pregnancy and education, like Hadley and colleagues (2024), have argued that the reduced national prioritisation of teenage pregnancy is unjustified and suggest renewed attention on this topic is warranted for several reasons. For example, Hadley and colleagues point out that there is no evidence to suggest the vulnerability of pregnant teenagers and young mothers as a group has diminished. Additionally, national data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2023; 2025) indicates that teenage conception rates have risen for two consecutive years. This marks the first time teenage conceptions have risen since 2007 (ONS, 2025). Considering this, a focus on this topic is timely and highly relevant.

1.1.1 Definitions and Terminology

Within the literature, there is no ‘universally accepted’ terminology to describe young people who become pregnant during their teenage years (Holgate, 2012, p.1). For the purpose of this literature review, teenage pregnancy is defined as pregnancy occurring between the ages of 13 and 19. It is acknowledged, however, that pregnancies can occur below this age range; and where literature is related to this it will be explicitly stated (Carter, 2018). When discussing young people who are both pregnant and aged between 13 and 19, this literature review uses the term ‘pregnant teenager’, as this is considered to be a gender-inclusive term to describe young people who become pregnant in their teenage years (Rioux et al., 2021). However, when discussing the post-birth experiences of pregnant teenagers, the gendered

language of 'young mother' and 'motherhood' will be used. This is because, this literature review focuses on exploring the specifically gendered element to the educational experiences of teenagers who identify as mothers. This choice of terminology aligns with the existing Educational Psychology literature on teenage pregnancy, where the language 'pregnant teenager' and 'young mother' are frequently used (e.g. Berryman, 2021; Carter, 2017, McLeod, 2013).

1.1.2 Young Fathers

When discussing teenage pregnancy, it is important to acknowledge the role of young fathers as well as mothers. Doing so helps to avoid reinforcing narratives that place responsibility or stigma for teenage pregnancy exclusively on young women (Clayton, 2016; Whiteway, 2019). Furthermore, research has acknowledged that, similar to young mothers, young fathers often experience various forms of social and educational adversity prior to becoming parents (Clayton, 2016; Donald et al., 2022; Whiteway, 2019). However, the literature also emphasises that the barriers to education arising from teenage pregnancy, often affects young mothers and fathers in different ways (Berryman, 2021; Clayton, 2016; Donald et al., 2022; Russell, 2016). For example, young mothers describe being excluded from school for pregnancy-related reasons and remain more likely than young fathers to assume primary caregiving responsibilities (Carter, 2017; Clayton, 2016; Donald et al., 2022; Lall, 2007; Russell, 2016). In recognition of this, this literature review focuses specifically on exploring the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers, rather than young parents more generally.

1.1.3 Relevance to Educational Psychology

Squires and Farrell (2007) define educational psychologists as being 'applied psychologists' whose work is 'diverse and based on the application of psychological knowledge, skills and principles to promote inclusion of children with special educational needs, raise school standards and carry out statutory duties' (p.87). While this definition is useful, it is not exhaustive. For example, evidence indicates that the educational psychologist role extends beyond supporting children with special educational needs to include work with a range of other vulnerable groups, such as care-experienced children (Norwich et al., 2010). In addition, an emerging body of research is beginning to recognise the relevance of educational psychology

in relation to supporting young parents (Berryman, 2021; Carter, 2017; McLeod, 2013; Sheldrake, 2010; Thompson, 2018; Whiteway, 2016, 2019). To date, this research appears to originate exclusively from trainee educational psychologist doctoral theses (e.g. Berryman, 2021; Carter, 2017; McLeod, 2013; Sheldrake, 2010; Thompson, 2018; Whiteway, 2016).

In their theses, trainee educational psychologists have been clear that there is a role for educational psychologists in supporting pregnant teenagers and young parents (Berryman, 2021; Carter, 2017; McLeod, 2013; Sheldrake, 2010; Thompson, 2018; Whiteway, 2016). Though, they acknowledge that this role remains largely underdeveloped. Thompson (2018) suggests this may 'reflect a difference between educational psychology's ideological stance and the reality of its practice' (p.29). For example, although educational psychologists may recognise that they should have a role in supporting pregnant teenagers and young parents, in practice they may not have the capacity to develop their role in this area. Similarly, Berryman (2021) reflected that schools and colleges may be unaware of the potential contribution educational psychologists can make in supporting pregnant teenagers and young parents. Consequently, schools and colleges may not refer these young people for educational psychology involvement. To address these barriers, both Thomson and Berryman argue that educational psychologists need to be more explicit amongst themselves, and with service users, about how they can support pregnant teenagers and young parents.

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1 Aims and Questions

This literature review focuses on exploring the topic of teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education in England. Specifically, it aims to: identify the barriers pregnant teenagers and young mothers might encounter within education; explore how pregnant teenagers and young mothers perceive and interpret their educational experiences; and identify what psychological theories and frameworks, if any, have been used in the existing literature to explore the educational experiences of this group. To ensure a comprehensive investigation into this topic, this literature

review also aims to examine the wider context of, and factors associated with, teenage pregnancy and early motherhood in England.

Consistent with these aims, the following questions (Q) guided this literature review:

1. What does the literature tell us about teenage pregnancy and early motherhood in England?
2. What does the literature tell us about who becomes pregnant as a teenager in England?
3. What does the literature tell us about the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers in England?
4. What psychological theories and frameworks, if any, have been utilised when exploring the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers?

1.2.2 Narrative Literature Review

Ferrari (2015, p.230) identifies 'two standard types' of literature reviews: a systematic review and a narrative review. A systematic review is a 'highly structured' and 'protocol driven' approach for surveying the literature on a topic (Efron & Ravid, 2018, p.25). In contrast, a narrative review involves surveying 'the state of knowledge in a specific subject area' in a flexible way to provide a 'comprehensive background for understanding that particular topic' (Efron & Ravid, 2018, p.25). To conduct this literature review, a narrative approach was chosen over a systematic review for several reasons. Firstly, an initial survey of the literature on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood, and education indicated that research in this area is predominantly qualitative and highly heterogeneous. For example, it includes a substantial amount of grey literature, such as theses and reports published by charities. Given these characteristics, a narrative review was considered more suitable than a systematic review, because this approach offered greater flexibility in selecting and incorporating different types of literature (Efron & Ravid, 2018). In contrast, a systematic review would have required the application of fixed inclusion criteria, which, given the heterogeneity of the teenage pregnancy literature, could have resulted in potentially relevant studies being overlooked (Efron & Ravid, 2018). Secondly, Efron and Ravid (p.25) suggest that narrative reviews are particularly useful when reviewers wish to develop a 'comprehensive background' to a topic and

construct a 'rationale' for future research. This aligned well with the overarching purpose of this literature review, which was to develop both a thorough understanding of the existing literature on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood, and education and to identify gaps that would help inform a doctoral research project on this topic.

1.2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

In a narrative literature review, researchers are not required to apply rigid inclusion and exclusion criteria when selecting which studies to review (Efron & Ravid, 2018). However, researchers are encouraged to apply some form of consistent criteria and rationale to ensure a 'transparent and thoughtful selection process' (Efron & Ravid, 2018, p. 77). In accordance with this, the following criteria were applied to assist with finding relevant literature:

1. Topic. Studies were included if they were considered relevant to the topic of teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education in England. To enhance comprehensiveness, this included studies where education was not the primary focus but was examined alongside other topics. Unless explicitly stated, studies that focused on young fathers or the children of teenage mothers were excluded, as these were not relevant to the topic under review.

2. Geographical Scope. Unless explicitly stated, studies were only included if the research was conducted in England. The rationale for this, was that the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers can differ between countries, due to differences in national policy, education systems and social attitudes towards teenage pregnancy and early parenthood (Brooks, 2012).

3. Time Frame. This literature review only included research published from 1999 onwards. The rationale for this was that 1999 marked the start of the ten-year teenage pregnancy strategy in England, which generated significant national attention and extensive research interest in teenage pregnancy (Hadley et al., 2024). Despite ending in 2010, the teenage pregnancy strategy is recognised as having a lasting legacy on the educational provision available for pregnant teenagers and young mothers (Hadley et al., 2024). For example, several of the initiatives introduced during the teenage pregnancy strategy, such as the Care to Learn scheme, have continued beyond 2010 (Hadley et al., 2024).

4. Research Design. This literature review did not discriminate by research design; qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods studies were all considered for review. This was to enhance the reviews' comprehensiveness and ensure that no significant evidence was overlooked.

1.2.4 Search Strategy

In July 2024, an initial broad search of the University of East Anglia (UEA) online library database was conducted. Key search terms included: 'teenage pregnancy', 'teenage mothers', 'early motherhood', 'school', and 'education'. Based on the insights generated from this search, a more targeted review of the literature was then completed, in which the inclusion criteria outlined above were applied. As part of this more targeted review, the UEA library database was searched again. Alongside this, the same search terms and criteria were applied across other platforms, including EBSCO and google scholar. In addition, journals relevant to educational psychology, such as 'Educational Psychology in Practice', were searched directly. To enhance the comprehensiveness of the review, grey literature, like theses and reports conducted by charities, were included. This literature was predominantly found through google searches and by searching the online repositories of universities that offer doctoral training courses in educational psychology. After completing these initial searches, follow-up searches were conducted every few months until April 2026 to ensure no relevant literature was overlooked.

1.3 Results

Narrative reviews are typically organised thematically, chronologically or theoretically (Efron & Ravid, 2018). Though Efron and Ravid (2018, p.154) advise that these categories are flexible and suggest several approaches can be combined to best reflect the aims and findings of a specific literature review. Consistent with this guidance, the findings from this review have been organised largely thematically to reflect consistency of patterns identified across the literature over time (Efron & Ravid, 2018). However, to present these themes clearly, the findings are organised into four distinct sections, each of which corresponds directly with one of the four questions that guided this review: Psychological Theories and Frameworks

(Question Four); Teenage Pregnancy in England (Question One); Factors Associated with Teenage Pregnancy (Question Two); and the Educational Experiences of Pregnant Teenagers and Young Mothers (Question Three). This was considered the clearest way to present the findings, given the breadth of studies that were reviewed. Within each of these sections, the findings are then organised and discussed in accordance with the key themes that were identified across the literature.

1.3.1 Psychological Theories and Frameworks

Very few studies in this literature review were published in psychological journals, and psychological theories were rarely mentioned or applied by researchers. However, trainee educational psychologists have explored the topic of teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education in their theses (Berryman, 2021; Carter, 2017; McLeod, 2013; Sheldrake, 2010; Thompson, 2018; Whiteway, 2016, 2019). In their theses, trainee educational psychologists have identified a number of psychological theories that are relevant for understanding the literature on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education including stigma (Goffman, 1963), resilience (Masten, 2001), Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969).

1.3.1.1 Stigma

One of the few psychological frameworks that has been applied by researchers in the literature, is Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma (Mantovani & Thomas, 2014; Yardley, 2008). Goffman (1963) defines stigma as an 'attribute that is deeply discrediting', which makes somebody different from everyone else and is perceived as undesirable (p.10). Within the wider psychological literature, it is acknowledged that being stigmatised can have a significant negative impact on an individual's overall social and emotional wellbeing (Link & Phelan, 2006).

A consistent theme in the literature exploring teenage pregnancy in England, is the persistence of a stigma surrounding young mothers (Anward & Stanistreet, 2015; Calver, 2020; Higginbottom et al., 2006; Mantovani & Thomas, 2014; Redwood et al., 2012; Whitehead, 2000; Yardley, 2008). One reason why the stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy is so prevalent, is likely due to the way teenage pregnancy has historically been problematised at a national level in England (Calver, 2020). For example, in the Social Exclusion Unit's (1999) report on teenage

pregnancy, the Prime Minister's foreword states, 'Britain has the worst record on teenage pregnancies in Europe. It is not a record in which we can take any pride' (p. 4). Within this report, New Labour introduced their 10-year teenage pregnancy strategy, which aimed to reduce the number of teenage conceptions. This emphasis on reduction was criticised by some authors, with Higginbottom and colleagues (2006) arguing that the government's 'unambiguous focus on the reduction of pregnancy is not a credible message', particularly when teenage pregnancy may be a social norm within some communities (p.858). Despite these critiques, teenage pregnancy continues to be problematised in policy and there remains an emphasis on reduction (Calver, 2020; Hadley et al., 2024).

The stigma associated with teenage pregnancy and early motherhood is alluded to frequently in the literature (Anwar & Stanistreet, 2015; Clarke, 2015; Dawson & Hosie, 2005). Two key studies on this topic are Yardley (2008) and Mantovani and Thomas (2014). Yardley's study involved interviews with 20 young mothers aged 16-19 who lived in the Midlands region of England. In their interviews, these participants defined the 'stereotypical teenage mother' as someone who was 'immature, irresponsible, single and benefit dependent' (p.680). All of the participants shared that they had been victims of this stereotype and could describe examples where this stereotype was used by members of the 'general public' to be 'rude to them' and criticise their decisions to become young parents (p.675). However, the extent to which these experiences impacted the participants' perceptions of teenage pregnancy and themselves varied. For instance, some participants perceived themselves as being the 'exceptions' to the young mother stereotype, while other participants suggested that this stigma was not something they found problematic, because they considered early parenthood to be a valued and intentional life choice.

Another study examining the stigma associated with teenage pregnancy, is Mantovani and Thomas (2014). Similar to Yardley's research, this study also used a qualitative design and involved in-depth interviews with 15 young mothers. However, a key difference between these two studies, was that all the participants in Mantovani and Thomas's study were black and had been in local authority care. This was an intentional inclusion criterion, as Mantovani and Thomas wanted to examine the stigma associated with teenage pregnancy using an intersectionality framework.

The concept of intersectionality originates from the work of Crenshaw (1991), who originally used this term to demonstrate how black women's experiences of

discrimination were dually influenced by the intersections between race and gender. Since then, the concept of intersectionality has been widely applied within research to highlight how multiple aspects of an individual's identity, such as race and gender, interact to influence experiences of discrimination and oppression (Mantovani & Thomas, 2014). Mantovani and Thomas, for instance, applied an intersectional lens to examine how the interactions between being black, care-experienced and a young mother can influence a young person's experiences of stigma.

Through their research, Mantovani and Thomas highlighted that all of their participants placed high value on education and were described as trying to embody the 'idea of the educated, working mother' (p.58). Despite this, the participants shared how they had experienced discrimination whilst trying to access and engage with education. Based on their accounts, it was clear this discrimination was partly related to their pregnancy itself. However, the findings also indicated that these participants were subjected to a distinctive stigma associated specifically with being black, single and a young mother. According to Mantovani and Thomas, every participant was 'acutely aware' of this stereotype and expressed concerns that this stereotype could affect how others interact with and perceive their child (p.56). Due to this, the participants described feeling a heightened sense of pressure to ensure their behaviours did not reinforce the stereotypes surrounding them. These findings are important for highlighting that, while there may be a generic stigma associated with teenage pregnancy in England, the way this stigma is experienced by young mothers will not be uniform and is likely to interact with the other aspects of a young mother's identity.

1.3.1.2 Resilience

Another psychological theory that has been directly applied within the literature is resilience, which is a term used to conceptualise an individual's ability to 'bounce-back or rebound' from adversity (Carter, 2017, p.22; Mantovani & Thomas, 2015). According to Masten (2001) an individual does not need to have any rare or exceptional qualities to demonstrate resilience. Instead, Masten (p.235) suggests that resilience originates from the 'everyday magic' of 'normative human resources' found within children, their families, relationships, and communities.

Mantovani and Thomas (2015) applied resilience as a conceptual framework in their study, which used the same sample as Mantovani and Thomas (2014). This

sample consisted of 15 black women who were all young mothers. In addition to this, all the participants had experienced various forms of adversity and trauma. For instance, all participants were either currently in, or had previously been in, local authority care; nine participants were asylum seekers; and eight participants were survivors of sexual violence. Through in-depth interviews with participants, the researchers highlighted how these women had 'fashioned resilience, despite, and out of, the experiences which threatened to undermine it' (p.307). Based on the study findings, it appears the resilience of this group was supported by both individual characteristics, such as their outlook on life and ambitions, and more systemic factors, such as their relationships with caregivers and the support they received from professionals.

Notably, aside from Mantovani and Thomas (2015), there appears to be a lack of studies explicitly applying resilience to examine teenage pregnancy. However, resilience is mentioned briefly in Carter's (2017) thesis, which explored young mothers' experiences in further education. In their literature review, Carter identifies resilience as a relevant framework for understanding existing research on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education. Within this section, Carter tentatively suggests that 'continued education may help to increase resilience amongst adolescent parents, protecting them from some of the negative life outcomes research has previously found' (p.23). However, Carter supported this claim with limited empirical evidence, referring only to two studies: Sullivan and colleagues (2010) and McMunn and colleagues (2001).

Of these studies, only McMunn's study was conducted with an English sample, and relevant to the English educational context. However, this study did not explore teenage motherhood, education and resilience. Instead, the research focused more generally on how factors such as parental socio-economic status and psychological wellbeing, can impact their children's psychological health and wellbeing. As a result, this study provides limited insight into how education might function as a protective factor for young mothers' own wellbeing or adjustment to parenthood. This highlights a gap in the literature and indicates a need for further research that applies resilience frameworks directly to the experiences of teenage mothers.

1.3.1.3 Ecological Systems Theory

Another psychological theory that has been applied within the literature is Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994, 2006) Ecological Systems Theory (e.g. Amod et al., 2019; Whiteway 2016). This theory proposes that individuals are influenced by a range of interconnected systems. These systems include: the chronosystem, which accounts for the changes within and across systems overtime; the macrosystem, which refers to the broader societal and cultural factors that may impact an individual, such as societal attitudes and political systems; the exosystem, which consists of settings that individuals are not actively involved with but indirectly influence them; the mesosystem, which considers the relationship between an individual's most immediate environments; and the microsystem, which includes an individual's most immediate environments.

Bronfenbrenner's theory has been applied in international studies exploring teenage pregnancy, early motherhood, and education (Amod et al., 2019). Amod and colleagues (2019), for example, applied Bronfenbrenner's theory in their qualitative study, which explored young mothers' educational experiences and perceptions of support. Their study involved semi-structured interviews with eight young mothers, aged 16-19, and the findings predominantly focused on the microsystemic level of Bronfenbrenner's theory. For example, participants described teenage pregnancy as being normative within their peer groups, which meant they experienced acceptance and support from friends. Participants also reported varying initial reactions from parents but described relying on them for emotional and financial support. In contrast, experiences within school settings were often negative, with participants describing feelings of stigma and judgement, which made re-engagement with education more difficult.

To date, it seems no research has explicitly applied Bronfenbrenner's theory to examine the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers or young mothers within an English context. However, Whiteway (2016) referred to Bronfenbrenner's theory throughout their thesis, which explored the educational experiences of young fathers in England. Their study involved narrative interviews with six men, who had become fathers during their teenage years. Whiteway used Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model to help examine their findings.

Similar to Amod and colleagues (2019), Whiteway highlighted the influence of microsystemic factors. For example, participants reflected on how interactions within

their home and school environments contributed to experiences of social exclusion and a lack of belonging. However, unlike Amod and colleagues (2019), Whiteway also considered the impact of broader systemic influences. At the macrosystemic level, Whiteway suggested that dominant ideologies surrounding masculinity influenced how young fathers engaged with school and adjusted to parenthood. For instance, Whiteway found that the young fathers in their study were motivated to take on traditional 'provider' role for their children. Overall, Whiteway's thesis is helpful for demonstrating the potential value of Bronfenbrenner's theory as a lens for conceptualising teenage pregnancy in England.

1.3.1.4 Attachment Theory

In their theses, trainee educational psychologists have highlighted the relevance of Attachment Theory for understanding the literature on teenage pregnancy, early parenthood and education (Carter, 2017; McLeod, 2013; Thompson, 2018; Whiteway, 2016). Attachment Theory originates from the work of Bowlby (1969), who proposed that all infants are born with an innate, biological drive to form attachments with their caregivers. Bowlby originally suggested that there is a critical period of up to 30 months for this attachment to develop. During this time, Bowlby explained that an infant will develop an 'internal working model' which will influence their expectations about relationships.

Attachment Theory, and Bowlby's work in particular, has been highly influential within the field of developmental psychology and western discourse on parenting and child development (Mercer, 2011; Thompson et al., 2022). For example, in England, national policy and guidance documents have explicitly recognised the importance of the early attachment period (Carter, 2017; Department for Health & Social Care, 2021). This is evident in the Department of Health and Social Care (2021) publication on the '1001 critical days' post-birth. Although this publication does not explicitly reference Bowlby, it is clear the guidance has been informed by the principles of Attachment Theory. For example, the document emphasises the importance of the first two years of an infant's life, and states that later development is 'heavily influenced' by the attachments babies form with their parents during this period (pg.14).

Despite this, the importance of the early attachment period has not consistently been reflected in policy expectations for young mothers (Carer, 2018a;

McLeod, 2013). This is something both Carter (2017) and McLeod (2013) highlighted in their doctoral theses. For example, McLeod pointed out how the policy frameworks at the time meant young mothers were expected to return to education, training, or employment within four months of giving birth. McLeod suggested this policy decision contrasted with the government's wider endorsement of Attachment Theory and 'vilified' young mothers who wanted to take additional time out to bond with their child (p.40).

Since the publication of Carter and McLeod's theses, the policy context has shifted. Currently, there are no statutory guidelines specifying the length of maternity leave available to young mothers (Public Health England, 2019). However, Public Health England's (2019) 'Framework for Supporting Teenage Mothers and Young Fathers', advises local authorities to 'tailor maternity leave to the individual parent considering attachment and breastfeeding' (p.37). Positively, this represents a more flexible approach than earlier policy frameworks, which placed greater emphasis on young mothers' early return to education (McLeod, 2013). Though, the absence of statutory guidelines means that there is considerable variability in the amount of maternity leave young mothers take (Ellis-Sloan, 2024; Rolfe, 2008; Russell, 2016).

1.3.1.5 Summary

In summary, various psychological theories have been referenced within the literature on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education in England, including stigma (Goffman, 1963), resilience (Masten, 2001), Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969). However, only a very small number of studies have actually used these theories to explicitly guide their research on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education (e.g. Mantovani & Thomas, 2014, 2015; Yardley, 2008). Instead, these theories have more commonly been applied by researchers as conceptual frameworks for interpreting and understanding the existing literature on this topic (e.g. Carter, 2017; McLeod, 2013; Whiteway, 2016). This indicates a clear gap for future research to explore the topic of teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education in England from a more explicit psychological perspective.

1.3.2 Teenage Pregnancy in England

Another pertinent topic within the literature on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education, is the significance of the national context in shaping the support available for pregnant teenagers and young mothers (Hadley et al., 2024). This literature can be grouped into the following overarching themes: the teenage pregnancy strategy; the policy context post-2010; and the role of education settings.

1.3.2.1 Teenage Pregnancy Strategy

The teenage pregnancy strategy was a 10-year fully funded, 'nationally led and locally delivered' intervention that aimed to halve England's under-18 conception rate by 2010, and increase the participation of young parents in education, employment and training (Hadley et al., 2016, p.2). To date, a vast literature has examined the impact of the teenage pregnancy strategy itself (e.g. Baxter et al., 2021; Hadley et al., 2016; Hadley et al., 2024). In addition, research has been conducted to evaluate the various national and local interventions that were implemented as part of this strategy (e.g. Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Dench, 2007; Riley et al., 2010). To help organise and make sense of this literature, the following section is structured around two key subthemes: prevalence and improved support for young parents.

Prevalence. The main source of national data on teenage pregnancies comes from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), which publishes annual statistics on conceptions in England and Wales (Shaw & Lawlor, 2007). In 1999, the ONS reported that the conceptions rate for under-18-year-olds in England and Wales was 45.1 conceptions per 1000 women aged 15 to 17 years old. As part of the teenage pregnancy strategy various national and local interventions were implemented in a bid to halve this figure by 2010 (Hadley et al., 2016). These interventions focused on improving young people's access to contraception and improving sex education in schools (Hadley et al., 2016).

In 2010, the ONS reported that the government did not achieve their goal of halving the under-18 conception rate (Hadley et al., 2024). However, the under-18 conception rate had significantly declined to 34.3 conceptions per 1,000 women aged 15-17 years old (Hadley et al., 2024). In addition, the government's original target was met four years later in 2014 (Hadley et al., 2024). Due to this, the teenage pregnancy strategy is widely regarded as being a success (Baxter et al., 2021;

Hadley et al., 2016). Hadley and colleagues (2016), for example, suggested that 'governments and policy makers in other countries seeking to reduce teenage pregnancy rates' could learn from the successes of England's strategy (p.2).

It should, however, be noted that Hadley had a role in leading the government's teenage pregnancy strategy. Hence, their perspective on the teenage pregnancy strategy is likely to be biased towards its strengths. This is important to point out because some authors have been more critical of the teenage pregnancy strategy (Baxter et al., 2021). Baxter and colleagues (2021), for example, argued that the strategy itself had 'little, if any, effect on pregnancy rates' (p.1). Instead, their research found that, in the same time period, other European countries recorded a similar decline in teenage conceptions. Consequently, Baxter and colleagues argued that the downward trend of conceptions in England may have occurred irrespective of the teenage pregnancy strategy.

It is also pertinent to highlight that the downward trend in teenage conceptions has been reversing in recent years (ONS, 2025). This is significant, given that the teenage pregnancy strategy is often praised for its contribution to a sustained, long-term decline in teenage conceptions (Baxter et al., 2021; Hadley et al., 2024). In 2021, the ONS reported the first increase in teenage conceptions since 2007. This increase continued in 2022, the most recent year for which data is available (ONS, 2025). Within the 2022 dataset, the ONS estimated a conceptions rate of:

- 2.2 under-16 conceptions per 1000 women in this age group.
- 17.6 under-18 conceptions per 1000 women in this age group.
- 49.2 under-19 conceptions per 1000 women in this age group.

Although teenage conceptions have risen consecutively for two years, the ONS (2023; 2025) suggests these increases may be linked to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in 2020 the ONS recorded the largest annual decrease in teenage conceptions since 2013. However, this coincided with national restrictions on social contact (ONS, 2025). Consequently, the ONS argues that the observed increases in teenage conceptions since 2020 are likely reflecting a return to pre-pandemic conception patterns, rather than the beginning of a new upward trend. However, the lack of more recent data makes it difficult to confidently determine this.

Improved Support for Young Parents. In addition to halving the under-18 conception rate, another goal of the teenage pregnancy strategy was to increase the participation of young parents in education, employment and training (Hadley et al., 2016, p.2). In order to achieve this, the teenage pregnancy strategy advocated for the use of a coordinated, whole systems approach to supporting young parents and improving the opportunities available for this group (Hadley et al., 2024; Public Health England, 2018, 2019; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). For instance, the government introduced a number of national initiatives to address the broader social, financial and health needs of young parents (Hadley et al., 2024). In the literature the Care to Learn grant, Sure Start Plus Programme, and the Family Nurse Partnership are frequently discussed (Austerberry & Wiggins, 2007; Dench 2006a; 2006b; McLeod, 2013; Robling et al., 2016).

Care to Learn. The 'Care to Learn' scheme was created as part of the teenage pregnancy strategy to help young parents with covering the costs of childcare whilst they study (McLeod, 2013). The impact of the Care to Learn scheme was reviewed extensively by researchers at the Institute of Employment Studies between the years of 2005 and 2007 (Dench, 2006a, 2006b; Dench, 2007; Dench & Bellis, 2007). Their research involved contacting young parents, education providers and teenage pregnancy co-ordinators, primarily through telephone and postal surveys. In summary, this research indicated that childcare costs were often a barrier that prevented teenage parents, particularly young mothers, from re-engaging with education post-pregnancy (Dench, 2006a; 2006b). Despite this, the researchers found that the Care to Learn scheme was being underutilised by young parents (Dench, 2006a; Riley et al., 2010). This was due to several reasons, including young mothers not wanting to put children in childcare and the cost of childcare being higher than what the scheme offered (Dench, 2006a).

Despite these findings, the Care to Learn scheme still exists today and can be accessed by young parents who are under the age of 20 (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2024; McLeod, 2013). As of the 2024-2025 academic year, young parents could receive up to £195 per child, per week to cover their childcare costs whilst attending an education institution or study programme (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2024). However, since the culmination of the teenage pregnancy strategy in 2010, there has been a dearth of research investigating the impact of

Care to Learn scheme. Though, this scheme was mentioned briefly by one of the participants in Berryman's (2021) doctoral research, which explored the educational experiences of five young mothers.

In Berryman's study one of the participants, 'Jen', discussed how she receives Care to Learn funding. She explained that this scheme does not cover the full cost of her childcare and shared that she still needs to rely on her mother at times (p.76). These issues are similar to those raised by young parents in earlier research by Dench and colleagues (e.g. Dench, 2006a; Riley et al., 2010). Hence, this raises questions about whether the Care to Learn scheme is fit for purpose and is adequately meeting the childcare needs of young parents.

Sure Start Plus Programme. As part of the teenage pregnancy strategy, the government introduced the 'Sure Start Plus Programme', which operated within Sure Start centres (Austerberry & Wiggins, 2007). This was a national intervention that targeted deprived areas with high teenage conception rates (Austerberry & Wiggins, 2007). As part of the Sure Start Plus programme, pregnant teenagers were assigned a personal advisor to provide one-to-one support during pregnancy and after birth (Malin & Morrow, 2009; Public Health England, 2019).

Austerberry and Wiggins (2007) conducted a national evaluation of the Sure Start Plus Programme, which involved gathering the views of pregnant teenagers, young mothers and Sure Start Plus staff. The findings indicated that pregnant teenagers and young mothers felt positive about the programme and valued the holistic support they received from their advisor. Despite this, it is unclear whether the Sure Start Plus programme still operates. Public Health England's (2019) 'Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Framework', for example, mentions that only key components of this programme have continued. The decline of the Sure Start Plus programme is likely linked to the period of austerity initiated under the Coalition government (2010-2015) and subsequently continued by the Conservative government (2015-2024), during which over 1,000 Sure Start centres were closed (Smith, 2018). These closures likely reduced the availability of the Sure Start Plus programme and could explain why only key components have continued.

Family Nurse Partnership. The Family Nurse Partnership is an intensive home-visiting programme for young, first-time mothers (Office for Health

Improvements and Disparities, 2024). This strategy was introduced throughout England in 2007, during the period of the teenage pregnancy strategy (Robling et al., 2016). Through the Family Nurse Partnership, young mothers receive one-to-one support from specially trained nurses to promote healthy pregnancies, improve child development, and encourage mothers to pursue personal and educational aspirations (Office for Health Improvements and Disparities, 2024).

Like the Sure Start Plus programme and the Care to Learn scheme, the Family Nurse Partnership has continued beyond the end of the teenage pregnancy strategy and can still be accessed by young mothers in England (Harron et al., 2025; Public Health England, 2018, 2019). For example, Public Health England's (2016; 2019) 'Framework for Supporting Teenage Mothers and Young Fathers' encourages local areas to make use of the Family Nurse Partnership, and states that 'rigorous international research has shown significant benefits' of the programme (p.14). However, to support this claim, the framework cites a study by Robling and colleagues (2016), who actually found no evidence of benefit and concluded that the continuation of the Family Nurse Partnership could not be justified. More recently, Harron and colleagues (2025) conducted a large-scale quantitative analysis of 237,185 teenage mothers and similarly found no difference in outcomes between those who received support through the Family Nurse Partnership and those who did not. This highlights a tension between the current evidence base on the Family Nurse Partnership, and policy decisions.

1.3.2.2 Policy Context Post-2010

When the teenage pregnancy strategy approached its conclusion in 2010, the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Department of Health released 'Teenage Pregnancy Strategy: Beyond 2010'. This publication emphasised that while 2010 was the 'final year during which local areas can take action that will influence the achievement' of the strategy's targets, teenage pregnancy should remain a national and local priority (p.6). Despite these intentions, national interest and prioritisation of teenage pregnancy declined rapidly (Hadley et al., 2024). This shift is reflected in the literature, with significantly fewer studies being conducted and published after 2010.

In policy, teenage pregnancy continues to be mentioned but with noticeably less emphasis than before (Hadley et al., 2024). For example, teenage pregnancy

was discussed briefly in Department of Health and Social Care (2013) Framework for Sexual Health Improvement in England, which reiterated ambitions to reduce under-16 and under-18 conception rate. Then, in 2016 Public Health England published the first dedicated national framework on teenage pregnancy since the teenage pregnancy strategy: *'Framework for Supporting Teenage Mothers and Young Fathers'*. This framework was later supplemented with the *'Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Framework'* (2018). However, unlike the teenage pregnancy strategy, neither of these frameworks were accompanied by the same national investment or initiatives to support young parents (Hadley et al., 2024). In addition, even though Public Health England was abolished in 2021, these frameworks remain the most recent national guidance on teenage pregnancy (Hadley et al., 2024).

Similar to the teenage pregnancy strategy, the Public Health England frameworks emphasised the importance of maintaining a whole-systems approach to addressing teenage pregnancy and supporting young parents. To support with this, the frameworks introduced an evidence-based model of '10 Key Factors' designed to inform local approaches to prevention and support (see Figure 1). However, it remains unclear whether the '10 Key Factors' have been implemented by local areas (Hadley et al., 2024).

Figure 1

Public Health England's (2016, 2018) '10 Key Factors of Effective Local Strategies' model

Translating evidence into a 'whole systems' approach: 10 key factors of effective local strategies ¹



Note. This figure contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0 retrieved from Public Health England's (2018, p.7) 'Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Framework'.

Several factors have likely contributed to the declining national interest in teenage pregnancy (Hadley et al., 2024). Hadley and colleagues (2024), for example, note that the change of government in 2010 had a significant impact on the support available for pregnant teenagers and young mothers. A major reason for this, is that the incoming coalition government initiated a period of austerity, which directly affected funding for many of the programmes established during the teenage pregnancy strategy, such as Sure Start Plus (Hadley et al., 2024; Smith, 2018). Hadley also reflects that the national decline in teenage conceptions over the course of the strategy might have created a false sense that the 'job is done' (p. 6). Yet, Hadley reflects that despite the declining conceptions rate, the vulnerability of young parents and their children has not diminished. Due to this, Hadley suggests the reduced national attention and support for this group is unjustified.

1.3.2.3 The Role of Education Settings

In the current legislative context, education settings have statutory duties relating to pregnant pupils and young mothers. In summary, these duties involve: upholding the right that pregnant teenagers and young mothers have to an education; safeguarding pregnant teenagers, young mothers and their children; and delivering relationships, sex and health education. The following section will provide an overview of each of these statutory responsibilities, alongside a discussion of the relevant literature associated with each duty.

Education Rights. All young people in England have a legislative right to an education (Department for Education, 2026). The Education Act 1968 set compulsory schooling to age 16, while more recently the Education and Skills Act 2008 raised the participation age to 18. In accordance with this, the Public Health England (2016, 2019) frameworks make clear that all pregnant teenagers and young mothers should be accessing some form of education or training

Despite these statutory expectations, legislative frameworks have arguably provided insufficient protections to ensure that pregnant teenagers' and young mothers' right to an education is upheld (Lall, 2007; Rudoe, 2014). In 1999, the Social Exclusion Unit produced a report on teenage pregnancy. Within this report, the education of pregnant teenagers and young mothers was discussed. On page 60, it states that 'pregnancy is not grounds for exclusion'. As a standalone statement, this suggests that pregnant young people have a right to remain in education. However, this statement was immediately followed by the caveat that 'there is no reason why a pregnant pupil should not go to college or an appropriate off-site unit if that is more suitable'. The literature has been critical of this position, as it contributed to many pregnant pupils being placed in alternative provision rather than remaining in their mainstream settings (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Lall, 2007; Vincent, 2009). Lall (2007), for example, argued that this was 'not a real solution' and only resulted in the 'further alienation' of pregnant teenagers and young mothers (p.225).

To an extent, the Equality Act 2010 strengthened the educational protections available to pregnant teenagers and young mothers. The Equality Act introduced nine protected characteristics of a person, including pregnancy and maternity. To support implementation of the Act in schools, the Department for Education (2014) published guidance for school leaders, governing bodies and local authorities. This guidance makes clear that pregnant pupils and those who have recently given birth must be protected from discrimination. For example, Section 3.21 states that it is 'unlawful for schools to treat a pupil less favourably because she becomes pregnant or has recently had a baby, or because she is breastfeeding'. Furthermore, schools are directed to have regard for the Equality Act, and a pupils' protected characteristics, when deciding whether to exclude a pupil. Yet, despite these protections, research suggests that pregnant teenagers and young mothers continue to experience discrimination within, and exclusion from, educational settings (Anwar & Stanistreet, 2015; Calver, 2020; Ellis-Sloan, 2024; Russell, 2016).

Safeguarding. In addition to upholding the rights that pregnant and mothering students have to an education, education settings also have a duty to protect the safety and welfare of these young people (Department for Education, 2025). Currently, these duties are outlined in 'Keeping Children Safe in Education' (KCSIE, 2025), which is an annually updated, statutory guidance document from the

Department of Education. Historically, however, this guidance has contained very few references to teenage pregnancy, and in the 2025 edition of KCSIE, the term 'pregnancy' is only referred to four times:

- Pregnancy is mentioned once on page 13, though this reference is irrelevant to the topic of teenage pregnancy.
- Pregnancy is mentioned once on page 27. On this page, schools and colleges are reminded of their duties to uphold the Equality Act 2010, and to not act unlawfully towards students because of their pregnancy or maternity.
- Pregnancy is mentioned once on page 133 as being an indicator and outcome of sexual assault.
- Pregnancy is mentioned once on page 134 when linking an NHS resource that provides information on the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections after rape and sexual assault.

Overall, while the references to teenage pregnancy in KCSIE are limited, it is clear that teenage pregnancy is something that school and college staff are expected to be alert to. However, a key limitation of KCSIE, is that it does not outline what schools or colleges should do if a pupil becomes pregnant. Whereas, in the past, dedicated national guidance was available to help schools and colleges with navigating teenage pregnancy. For example, the Department for Education and Skills (2001) published 'Guidance on the Education of School Age Parents'. Section 14.1 of this guidance recommended that schools have a clear confidentiality policy for managing pregnancy disclosures and stated that, in the absence of such a policy, professionals had no obligation to inform a pupil's parents or other staff members about the pregnancy. This position arguably conflicts with KCSIE, which promotes information sharing between professionals.

In addition to pregnancy, KCSIE also sets out the duties of schools and colleges in relation to child sexual exploitation and abuse, referring explicitly to the Sexual Offences Act 2003. The Sexual Offences Act 2003 sets the age of consent in England and Wales to 16. In accordance with this act, children under 13 are considered legally incapable of consenting to any form of sexual activity. In addition, sexual activity with someone under 18 is illegal if it involves a familial relationship or a person in a position of trust. Notably, the Act provides limited clarity regarding mutually consensual, age-appropriate relationships between young people aged 13-

15. This is a significant omission, given that teenage pregnancies can and do occur within age-appropriate, consensual relationships (e.g. Dawson & Hosie, 2005). KCSIE acknowledges this ambiguity, and on page 114, it states: 'It is important to differentiate between consensual sexual activity between children of a similar age and that which involves any power imbalance, coercion or exploitation'. Where there is uncertainty around this, KCSIE advises that the designated safeguarding lead should be involved in leading the school or college response and that 'expert advice' should be sought if there is doubt (p.114). However, KCSIE does not specify which professionals might hold this expertise, which arguably leaves schools and colleges without clear direction (p.114).

Relationships, Sex and Health Education. The literature makes clear that there are various reasons why some young people become pregnant as teenagers (Connolly et al., 2012; Knight et al., 2006; Mantovani & Thomas, 2014). However, one reason frequently cited by young parents, is that they received insufficient guidance around sex and contraception (Connolly et al., 2012; Knight et al., 2006; Lall, 2004; Wiggins et al., 2005). Historically, schools have been identified as having a key role in addressing this by providing relationship and sex education (Hadley et al., 2024; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). As part of the teenage pregnancy strategy, for example, the government published new guidelines to help improve how relationships and sex education is taught in schools (Hadley et al., 2024; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). However, it was not until the Children and Social Work Act 2017 that Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) finally became a mandatory requirement for all secondary schools in England to deliver.

To support with the implementation of this new duty, the Department for Education (2025) published statutory guidance, 'Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education'. This guidance makes clear that secondary-aged pupils must be taught about consent, the law relating to sexual activity, and pregnancy. While this represents a positive development, parents retain the right to withdraw their child from some or all of the sex education content delivered as part of RSE (Department for Education, 2025). In addition, secondary staff report having varying levels of confidence in their abilities to deliver RSE (Stevens, 2023). Therefore, it seems that despite making RSE mandatory, it is

highly likely that young people in England are still not receiving an equitable level of education in this area.

1.3.2.4 Summary

With the exception of the last few years, the under-18 conception rate has been steadily declining in England, and political and research interest in teenage pregnancy seems to have decreased alongside this (Hadley et al., 2024). This is reflected in the present literature review, where the majority of studies included were conducted before 2010. Despite this declining attention, education settings continue to hold statutory responsibilities to prevent teenage pregnancy and to ensure that pregnant teenagers and young mothers are safeguarded and supported to access education.

1.3.3 Factors Associated with Teenage Pregnancy

This literature review will now turn to an examination of the question ‘Who becomes pregnant as a teenager in England?’. In the literature, several factors are frequently identified as being associated with teenage pregnancy. Specifically, this literature review identified themes around: the association between teenage pregnancy and deprivation (Arai, 2003; Conrad, 2012; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Ermisch & Pevalin, 2003); the links between teenage pregnancy and being looked after by the local authority (Barn & Mantovani, 2006; Knight et al., 2006; Mantovani & Thomas, 2014, 2015); and the differing circumstances surrounding conception (Coleman & Cater, 2006; Mantovani & Thomas, 2014). Each of these themes and the associated literature will be discussed in depth.

1.3.3.1 Deprivation

National data indicates that teenage conception rates can vary considerably, with more deprived areas of England typically reporting higher conception rates (Hadley et al., 2024). The association between deprivation and teenage pregnancy has been examined extensively in the literature (Arai, 2003; Conrad, 2012; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Ermisch & Pevalin, 2003). For example, numerous large-scale, quantitative research studies have explored the association between teenage conceptions and deprivation (Conrad, 2012; Crawford et al., 2013; Ermisch & Pevalin, 2003). One such study is Conrad’s (2012) correlation analysis of the

associations between deprivation, under-18 conceptions and abortions between 1998-2010 in England. To conduct this study, Conrad constructed a dataset from local authority 'Indices of Multiple Deprivation' (IMD) scores and routine data on under-18 conceptions and abortions. Conrad found a strong association between the IMD and under-18 conception rates. Furthermore, even though the under-18 conceptions rate declined between 1998 and 2010, Conrad found that the gap between the most and least deprived areas remained persistent.

While Conrad's findings highlight a strong association between teenage pregnancy and deprivation, these findings do not indicate that this relationship is causal. Qualitative research has been useful for providing a more contextualised and nuanced understanding of why under-18 conceptions are higher in areas of higher deprivation. Arai (2003), for example, conducted a small-scale qualitative study involving nine Teenage Pregnancy Local Co-ordinators and 12 young mothers who had their first child before the age of 20. In their interviews, all nine Teenage Pregnancy Co-ordinators explicitly recognised the link between deprivation and teenage pregnancy. However, Arai (p.204) explained that, despite all 12 young mothers coming from 'working class families and communities', they did not perceive themselves as 'poor' and suggested the association between deprivation and teenage pregnancy was only 'partly reflected in young mothers' accounts'. This implies that the link between deprivation and teenage pregnancy and/or motherhood may not be as significant some young mothers' own understandings of their experiences but was more significant for supporting professionals.

Another qualitative study relevant for understanding the association between teenage pregnancy and deprivation, is Coleman & Cater's (2006). Coleman and Cater interviewed 41 pregnant teenagers and young mothers regarding their decisions to plan their pregnancies. Although the association between teenage pregnancy and deprivation was not the primary focus of the study, most of the participants lived in areas of high deprivation, and in census wards where teenage pregnancy was higher than average. Hence, the study generated several insights into this relationship.

Notably, in contrast to Arai's findings, the young mothers interviewed by Coleman and Cater reflected more explicitly on how the disadvantaged circumstances in which they grew up influenced their decisions to become young mothers. For instance, some participants shared that becoming pregnant provided

them with an 'escape route' from their previous lives, since it opened up opportunities to receive benefits and housing (p.605). While for others, becoming pregnant was linked to their perception that they had no other options. For instance, some participants reflected that they had limited educational and employment opportunities and seemed to conceptualise pregnancy as something that could provide them with a 'real and worthwhile' purpose (p.604). These findings are helpful for showing that, while there may be a link between teenage pregnancy and deprivation, the underlying mechanisms linking these two factors are likely to vary between individuals, depending on their specific circumstances and motivations.

1.3.3.2 Local Authority Care

Section 22 of the Children Act 1989 defines a looked-after child (LAC) as a 0-18-year-old who is subject to a care order, an interim care order, or is accommodated by the local authority. Within the literature, researchers have identified a link between being a LAC and teenage pregnancy, and this association has been explored in numerous qualitative and mixed-method studies (Barn & Mantovani, 2006; Knight et al., 2006; Mantovani & Thomas, 2014, 2015).

A common finding within the literature is that care-experienced young parents report having limited opportunities to learn about sex and relationships (Barn & Mantovani, 2006; Connolly et al., 2012; Knight et al., 2006). As a result, the literature argues that care-experienced young people may have fewer opportunities than their peers to make informed decisions about sex and avoid unintended pregnancy (Barn & Mantovani, 2006; Connolly et al., 2012; Knight et al., 2006). Barn and Mantovani (2006), for example, used mixed-methods methods to investigate the association between being a LAC and becoming a young parent. Their findings indicated that a high proportion of their participants had experienced temporary (47%) or permanent (28%) exclusion from school. The authors suggested that a 'key implication' of this, was that the participants may have missed out on sex and relationships education (p.232). In addition, the researchers identified that foster carers did not always provide opportunities for discussion around sex and relationships. In one case, a young mother described how their foster carer had suspicions they were sexually active from age 15. Rather than speak with the young person about this, the foster carer informed their social worker, which resulted in a placement breakdown (p.236).

Similar findings were reported by Knight and colleagues (2006), who conducted interviews with 78 professionals and 63 young mothers and fathers who had been LAC. The interviews were analysed using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method to identify themes. The theme 'Influences on Early Pregnancy' outlined the factors that influenced teenage pregnancy among the participants. An important insight within this theme concerned participants' limited access to sex education. Like in Barn and Mantovani's (2006) study, many of the participants described having disrupted educational experiences. For instance, they reported missing school frequently due to illnesses, exclusions and moving placements. A consequence of this, was that participants reported missing out on a formal sex education. Furthermore, many of the participants reflected that they were unable to have open and non-judgemental discussions about sex and contraception with their foster carers.

Another notable theme identified by Knight and colleagues (p.399), was around 'emotional influences'. According to Knight and colleagues, a high frequency of participants reflected on emotional factors when describing their decisions to become pregnant. For instance, many of their participants described feeling lonely within the care system. Hence, for some of these young people, having their first child meant finally 'having someone of your own to love', which they 'never had' growing up (p.40). Similar findings were reported by Connolly and colleagues (2012), who conducted a meta-synthesis of 17 qualitative studies that explored the association between teenage pregnancy and being in care. In the theme 'Filling an Emotional Void', Connolly and colleagues summarised how care-experienced young mothers often reported a 'desire to have a baby to love and for that love to be returned' (p.622). Overall, the findings from both these studies are helpful for understanding why some LAC might choose to start a family sooner rather than later in life.

1.3.3.4 Circumstances Surrounding Conception

In the literature, studies have investigated the circumstances surrounding teenage conceptions (Coleman & Cater, 2006; Higginbottom et al., 2006; Mantovani & Thomas, 2015). The findings from these studies can be organised into two subthemes: 'planned' and 'unplanned' teenage pregnancies.

Planned Pregnancies. Within the literature, 'planned' teenage pregnancies are conceptualised as a teenager making an active choice to become pregnant (Coleman & Cater, 2006). There is a small body of literature exploring planned teenage pregnancies. Coleman and Cater (2006), for example, investigated the decisions behind planned teenage pregnancies. To select participants for this study, the researchers approached support groups for young mothers and asked all potential participants to complete the Barrett and colleagues (2004) London Measure of Unplanned Pregnancy (LMUP) questionnaire. Based on the results of this questionnaire, the researchers were able to identify a sample of young mothers who had planned their pregnancies. These young mothers were then invited to be interviewed about their experiences.

In total, the researchers completed interviews with 41 young mothers. In their interviews, the young mothers all reported various reasons for planning their pregnancies. For instance, some of the young women felt they had limited education and employment opportunities and viewed becoming pregnant as a 'normal life option' (p.602). For many of the young women, this was because they were 'surrounded by a norm of settling down early' and teenage pregnancy was not unusual (p.602). In contrast, other young women described actively pursuing motherhood as a way to escape from their previous adverse experiences and provide an 'alternative life option' (p.604). For these young women becoming a mother provided them with a new identity and means to 'escape' from their previous lives (p.604). For instance, having a child meant that some of the young women were offered new accommodation.

Arguably, one of the key limitations of Coleman & Cater's study, is that all the participants were from White British ethnic backgrounds and lived in areas of high deprivation and census wards where teenage pregnancy was higher than average. The lack of diversity among Coleman & Cater's participants, means that whilst valuable in providing insight into the experiences of a particular demographic group, their research provides limited insight into planned teenage pregnancies in other cultures and geographical contexts.

In contrast, examining the role of ethnic and cultural factors in relation to teenage pregnancy was an explicit focus of Higginbottom and colleagues (2006) study. Their research involved focus groups, interviews and surveys with 139 participants, including professionals (n=41), young parents (n=88), and

grandmothers (n=10). All the young parents identified as being from a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including African Caribbean, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Somali, Turkish and Yemeni.

However, despite using a more diverse sample of participants than Coleman & Cater's study, Higginbottom and colleagues similarly found that, within some cultural and religious contexts, teenage pregnancy was considered a social norm. Though, the reasons underpinning this norm differed. For instance, Higginbottom and colleagues identified that, among young women of Muslim faith, earlier marriage was more common and pregnancy within marriage was considered normal. In contrast, in Coleman & Cater's research marriage was not identified as a motivating factor for planning a pregnancy. Despite these differences, the findings from both these studies are important for highlighting that, within some communities in England, teenage pregnancy can be an accepted and intentional choice.

Unplanned Pregnancies. The literature also acknowledges that teenage pregnancies can be unplanned (Barn & Mantovani, 2006; Higginbottom et al., 2006; Hadley et al., 2024). The topic of unplanned pregnancies was raised by some of the participants in Higginbottom and colleagues (2006) study. As part of this study, the researchers conducted focus groups, interviews and surveys with 139 participants, including professionals (n=41), young parents (n=88), and grandmothers (n=10). In this study, participants shared a range of experiences related to having an unplanned pregnancy, which included feeling pressured into having, or not having, an abortion. For instance, some of the participants described how they experienced cultural, religious and family pressure to either continue with, or terminate, their unplanned pregnancy (p.864).

The literature also highlights that some teenage pregnancies can be the result of, or linked with, sexual trauma (Mantovani & Thomas, 2014). The terminology 'sexual trauma' is defined in a doctoral thesis by Porter (2021) as trauma occurring from any 'non-consensual sexual activity' (p.VI). The wider psychological literature exploring sexual trauma, indicates that this can have a significant impact on a survivors overall psychological wellbeing and safety (Lissmann et al., 2023; Schwerdtfeger & Wampler, 2009). However, likely due to the sensitive nature of the topic, research specifically exploring sexual trauma and teenage pregnancy in

England is limited, and the only study that appears to have explored this topic directly, is Mantovani and Thomas (2014).

In Mantovani and Thomas' research, 15 black women aged between 16-19 were interviewed about their experiences of both being teenage mothers and being in care. Within their interviews, the participants discussed the circumstances surrounding the conception of their children, and the majority of participants (n=8) indicated they were raped. Therefore, for most of the participants finding out they were pregnant was part of a broader traumatic and adverse experience. For instance, some of the participants said they did not know what pregnancy was until they became pregnant and had thought their missed periods were due to stress. These findings are important for highlighting that teenage pregnancy can, in some cases, arise from traumatic and unplanned circumstances.

Notably, Mantovani and Thomas found that their participants' traumatic pregnancy experiences, were further compounded by inadequate support from health and social care services. This aligns with findings from the wider psychological literature on sexual trauma, in which women often report not receiving sensitive maternity care from professionals (Lissmann et al., 2023; Porter, 2021). According to Lissmann and colleagues (2023, p.1), the systemic failure to recognise the 'specific maternity care needs' of sexual trauma survivors risks negatively impacting a survivors' overall psychological safety and wellbeing. The need for such tailored maternity care is, to some extent, recognised within Public Health England's (2019) 'Framework for Supporting Teenage Mothers and Young Fathers'. On Page 34, the framework recommends that pregnant teenagers who are the victims of sexual abuse or exploitation receive specialist support throughout their pregnancy. However, the responsibility for implementing this support sits with local areas, which is likely insufficient for ensuring consistent and sensitive maternity care for these young people.

1.3.3.5 Summary

Overall, the literature indicates that there are various factors associated with teenage pregnancy, including living in a more deprived area and being in local authority care (Conrad, 2012; Knight et al., 2006). In addition, the literature highlights that the circumstances surrounding teenage conceptions can vary greatly between individuals (e.g. Coleman & Cater, 2006; Mantovani & Thomas, 2014). Considering

this, it is helpful to conceptualise pregnant teenagers and young mothers as a heterogenous group, with diverse backgrounds and experiences (Hutchinson & Moore, 2012).

1.3.4 Educational Experiences of Pregnant Teenagers and Young Mothers

Within the literature, a sizeable number of studies have explored the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers in England. The literature on this topic can be organised into three main themes: educational experiences before, during and after pregnancy. Notably, similar themes have been identified by other reviewers, which reflects the consistency of these themes within the literature (Lall, 2007; Whiteway, 2016).

1.3.4.1 Educational Experiences Prior to Pregnancy

A range of quantitative, qualitative and mixed-method studies have explored the pre-pregnancy educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers (Arai, 2003; Bonnell et al., 2005; Coleman & Cater, 2006; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Wiggins et al., 2005). A consistent finding across these studies, is that pregnant teenagers and young mothers often report having negative experiences of, and attitudes towards, education prior to pregnancy (Arai, 2003; Bonnell et al., 2005; Coleman & Cater, 2006; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Wiggins et al., 2005). The findings from these studies can be organised into four subthemes: educational disengagement; bullying; lack of interest; and special educational needs.

Educational Disengagement. A common finding in research exploring the pre-pregnancy educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers, is that these young people were often disengaged with education prior to pregnancy (Arai, 2003; Bonnell et al., 2005; Coleman & Cater, 2006; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Wiggins et al., 2005). A pertinent study on this topic includes Dawon and Hosie's (2005) national, mixed-methods study exploring the education of pregnant teenagers and young mothers. A major strength of this research was that the data were collected from multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews with 93 pregnant teenagers and young mothers; a questionnaire completed by staff from 138 schools; and a questionnaire completed by 106 professionals that work with pregnant teenagers and young mothers, including 2 educational psychologists. This

strengthened the depth and credibility of their findings, as the researchers were able to explore the perspectives of different stakeholders and triangulate these viewpoints.

One of the main findings from Dawson and Hosie's study, was that for 'many of the pregnant young women and young mothers' disengagement from education occurred prior to pregnancy' (p.9). For example, of the 93 pregnant teenagers and young mothers interviewed, 31% self-reported that they had 'poor attendance' prior to pregnancy. However, the authors suggested that the true rate of poor attendance was likely higher, as only 38 of the participants said they were attending school regularly when they conceived. Participants provided several reasons for their poor attendance, including 'difficulty with work, bullying from pupils and staff as well as sense of failure' (p.9).

Although their study had several strengths, Dawson and Hosie's research was not without limitations. For example, this study was funded by the government's teenage pregnancy unit and was not originally published in a peer-reviewed journal. This increases the potential for bias, since the study may not have been subject to a rigorous, peer-review process. However, these limitations are partly mitigated by the fact that sections of the original study were later published in peer-reviewed journals (e.g. Hosie, 2007). Furthermore, the study findings broadly align with those of other studies (Arai, 2003; Bonnell et al., 2005; Coleman & Cater, 2006; Wiggins et al., 2005). Wiggins and colleagues (2005), for example, conducted a large, mixed-methods study exploring teenage pregnancy and social exclusion. Similar to Dawson and Hosie's study, the young mothers included in this research also reflected negatively on their pre-pregnancy educational experiences and reported high levels of non-attendance. These participants attributed their dislike of school to various factors, including 'boredom, bullying, and educational failure' (p. 8).

Bullying. Bullying is frequently cited by young mothers as a key reason for disliking and avoiding school prior to pregnancy (Coleman & Cater, 2006; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Evans & Slowley, 2010; Rudo, 2014; Wiggins et al., 2005). Despite this recurring theme, 'bullying' has not been defined within the literature related to teenage pregnancy and young mothers. Within the broader psychological literature, bullying is defined as 'a subtype of aggressive behaviour, in which an individual or

group of individuals repeatedly attacks, humiliates, and/or excludes a relatively powerless person' (Salmivalli, 2010, p.112).

In the teenage pregnancy literature, a notable contributor to the topic of bullying is Rudoe (2011). For their doctoral thesis, Rudoe completed an ethnographic study of young mothers attending an antenatal education programme. As part of this research, Rudoe spent seven months in the 'field' and conducted multiple interviews with 16 young mothers and five staff members. In 2014, Rudoe published selected findings from this research in a journal article. In this article, Rudoe presents the stories of two participants, 'Jade' and 'Samantha', who were both disengaged from education prior to pregnancy. However, the reasons for their disengagement differed, and Rudoe uses their accounts as contrasting narratives to demonstrate the challenges of school inclusion for the 'bad girl' and the 'bullied girl' who become pregnant as teenagers (p.67). Samantha, the 'bullied girl', described how she had experienced bullying since primary school. The bullying continued into secondary school and caused Samantha to leave school in Year 9. Hence, by the time Samantha conceived at 18, she had been disengaged from education for almost five years.

Arguably, a limitation of Rudoe's findings, is that the association between bullying, educational disengagement and pregnancy is only explored through one participant's account. However, 'Samantha's' story aligns with others reported in the teenage pregnancy literature (Coleman & Cater, 2006; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Evans & Slowley, 2010; Wiggins et al., 2005). For example, Evans and Slowley (2010) conducted research on behalf of Barnardo's, the children's charity, exploring the educational experiences of young mothers. Their research involved interviews with 38 young mothers and a range of professionals. One of their key findings, was that many young mothers had experienced bullying throughout their school life, and this was frequently cited as a reason for their 'poor attendance' prior to pregnancy (p.13). Similarly, in Coleman & Cater's (2006) qualitative exploration into teenage pregnancy, one young mother described how bullying led her to stop attending school and to self-harm. These findings align with the broader psychological literature on bullying, which consistently identifies victims of bullying as being at increased risk of poorer mental health and reduced school attendance (Gastic, 2008; Lereya et al., 2015).

Lack of interest. Another reason young mothers frequently provide when explaining their pre-pregnancy educational disengagement, is that they lacked interest in education and found school boring (Coleman & Cater, 2006; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Evans & Slowley, 2010; Wiggins et al., 2005). In Dawson and Hosie's (2005, p.184) study 'a few' of the young mothers explicitly described secondary school as being 'negative and un-engaging from the start' and felt the work was 'boring'. Similarly, in Coleman & Cater's (2006) study, 41 young mothers were interviewed about their reasons for becoming pregnant. While education was not the primary focus of this research, pre-pregnancy educational experiences featured prominently in the participants' reflections. When discussing this, most participants described finding school 'boring' and 'pointless' (p.602).

Special Educational Needs. In the current legislative context, a young person is considered to have SEN if they have a 'learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her' (Department for Education, 2015; p.15). The literature suggests there is a possible association between teenage pregnancy and SEN (Crawford et al., 2013; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Dench & Bellis, 2007; Dench et al., 2007). For example, Crawford and colleagues (2013) analysed a dataset that linked maternity and abortion records to the education records of state-educated girls in England. This research identified an association between teenage pregnancy and having SEN. However, the authors emphasised that these findings were not causal and concluded that teenage pregnancy is likely to be associated with a range of interrelated factors. For example, the authors also found associations between teenage pregnancy and being persistently absent from school.

However, the association between teenage pregnancy and SEN has also been acknowledged within qualitative and mixed-methods studies (e.g. Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Dench et al., 2007). Dench and colleagues (2007), for example, conducted interviews with 51 young mothers, two young fathers and 15 professionals that worked with this group. Most of the participants were NEET. While the primary purpose of the study was to evaluate the Care to Learn scheme, the researchers also explored barriers to re-engagement with education, employment, and training. A notable insight was that some young mothers identified SEN, such as dyslexia, as being a barrier to re-engaging with education (p. 43). Similarly, in

Dawson and Hosie's (p.79) mixed-methods study, it was reported that a 'number of' young mothers described struggling with schoolwork, with some attributing these difficulties specifically to SEN such as dyslexia.

In both these studies, the support participants received to address their SEN varied. For example, in Dawson and Hosie's study, a small number of participants reported accessing specialist provision pre-pregnancy. These participants described resenting this provision, which likely contributed to their dislike of, and disengagement from, education (p.79). Other participants reflected that their SEN went overlooked or unsupported, which also seemed to negatively impact their engagement with education (p.79). These findings suggest that it may not be SEN itself that is associated with educational disengagement and teenage pregnancy, but rather the ineffectiveness of the support young people receive to address these needs.

1.3.4.2 Educational Experiences During Pregnancy

The literature exploring educational experiences during pregnancy predominantly qualitative (Russell, 2016; Vincent, 2009; Vincent, 2016). Much of this research involves semi-structured interviews with young mothers, who have retrospectively reflected on their educational experiences during pregnancy (Russell, 2016; Vincent, 2009; Vincent, 2016). Across these studies, key themes include exclusion and variation in the type of education settings attended (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Lall, 2007; Vincent, 2009).

Exclusion. A key theme in the literature exploring the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers, is exclusion (Lall, 2007; Russell, 2016). In the current legislative context, the term 'exclusion' is used to refer to a formal process in which a pupil is removed from their usual educational setting for behaviour reasons, either temporarily or permanently (Department for Education, 2024). However, in the literature on teenage pregnancy, the term 'exclusion' is more commonly used to describe situations and experiences where pregnant pupils and young mothers do not feel meaningfully included or supported within their educational settings (Lall, 2007; Russell, 2016).

This idea was captured in Lall's (2007) article exploring teenage pregnancy and school exclusion. Lall's article was based around findings from a research

project conducted between 2000-2003, which involved interviews with young mothers, and the professionals involved with supporting them. Most of the young mothers interviewed reflected on how they self-excluded themselves from school during their pregnancy. A key reason for this was that schools were not making appropriate adjustments or supporting them to stay in school. As a result, pregnant pupils felt 'pushed out' by their schools, so decided it was best to just leave (p.226). These findings suggest that rather than formally 'excluding' pregnant pupils, schools may be failing to create supportive and inclusive environments for them.

Comparable findings have been reported in other studies. Russell (2016), for example, conducted an ethnographic study with 8 young mothers and 1 young father who had experienced being NEET. The research involved 343 hours of participant observations and 79 interviews with young parents and the professionals supporting them. Similar to Lall, Russell (p.97) identified that some young mothers chose to 'self-exclude' themselves from education, due to a 'lack of understanding amongst staff' regarding their 'pregnancy-related health issues'. However, in contrast to Lall's findings, Russell also found that some settings formally excluded pregnant teenagers due to health and safety concerns. For instance, Russell identified that some schools were reportedly worried about pregnant students being 'bumped into' by other students (p.97). These findings are particularly noteworthy, as Russell collected data for this ethnography after the Equality Act 2010 had been implemented. Hence, at the time this research was conducted, it was illegal for education settings to discriminate against pupils for pregnancy-related reasons.

Type of Educational Provision. In addition to exclusion, another key theme in the literature exploring the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers, is the recognition that the educational destination of this group can significantly vary (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Lall, 2007; Vincent, 2009, 2010, 2016). For instance, the literature indicates that some pregnant teenagers may remain in mainstream education, attend specialist units for young parents, or access more generalised alternative provision, such as pupil referral units (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Lall, 2007; Vincent, 2009, 2010, 2016). In addition, as discussed in the section above, pregnancy may also result in educational exclusion and contribute to pregnant teenagers leaving education entirely (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Lall, 2007; Russell, 2016; Vincent, 2009, 2010, 2016).

Some authors in the literature have expressed strong views regarding the types of educational settings attended by pregnant teenagers. Lall (2007), for example, discussed the 'Bristol Unit for Schoolgirl Mothers' in their article exploring teenage pregnancy and school exclusion. The Bristol Unit was a local authority funded specialist provision that provided education exclusively for pregnant teenagers and young mothers (Hadley et al., 2024). Lall (p.228) described this unit as being the 'ideal case' for pregnant pupils, and was highly critical of more generalised alternative provisions, arguing that 'encouraging pregnant girls to attend hospital schools or pupil referral units is not a real solution and only results in further isolation'.

In contrast to Lall, Vincent (2009, 2016) presents a more balanced perspective on the type of educational settings attended by young mothers. For their doctoral thesis, Vincent conducted a qualitative investigation into the educational experiences of 14 young mothers. This involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews, with some participants interviewed up to three times, while others were interviewed once. Vincent subsequently published data from this dataset in three journal articles, each focusing on different aspects of the young women's experiences. Vincent's 2009 article, for example, examines the experiences of three young women who remained in mainstream education during pregnancy, while their 2016 article explores the experiences of those who attended various alternative provisions.

A key takeaway from Vincent's studies, is that the participants reported having a mix of both positive and negative educational experiences, regardless of the type of setting they attended. For instance, those attending alternative provisions often praised these settings for the flexibility and supportive environment they created. However, these settings were also criticised by young mothers for offering a more limited range of courses and qualifications than mainstream schools. In recognition of these mixed findings, Vincent (2016, p.67) concludes that regardless of whether a pregnant teenager attends a mainstream school or alternative provision, education settings must ensure they provide these young people with a 'range of curricula, qualifications and support' that is tailored to their specific needs.

1.3.4.3 Educational Experiences Post-Birth

The literature exploring post-birth educational experiences of young mothers is predominantly qualitative, and most studies involve semi-structured interviews with

young mothers (Anwar & Stanistreet, 2015; Calver, 2020; Clarke, 2015; Yardley, 2008). Across these studies, key themes include: a young mother's changing attitudes toward education; stories of success; and facilitators and barriers (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Dench, 2007; Ellis-Sloan, 2024).

Changing Attitudes towards Education. The literature suggests that attitudes towards education often change post-birth, with young mothers often reporting increased motivation to engage in education (Anwar & Stanistreet, 2015; Clarke, 2015; Dawson & Hosie, 2005.) This was demonstrated by Dawson and Hosie (2005) in their exploration of the pre and post pregnancy educational experiences of teenage mothers. As previously mentioned, Dawson and Hosie's research remains one of the most comprehensive explorations of teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education in the existing literature. Their research involved semi-structured interviews with 93 pregnant teenagers and young mothers; a questionnaire completed by staff from 138 schools; and a questionnaire completed by 106 professionals that work with pregnant teenagers and young mothers.

As part of their research, Dawson and Hosie found that, prior to pregnancy, only 38 of the 93 young mothers they interviewed had been attending school regularly. However, post-birth, the attendance of this group improved. Dawson and Hosie attributed the improved attendance among young mothers to several factors, including increased support, motivation to challenge stereotypes, a desire to have something to do, and the young mothers having improved perceptions of the future.

Similar findings have been reported in other studies exploring the post-birth educational experiences of young mothers (Anwar & Stanistreet, 2015; Clarke, 2015; Dawson & Hosie, 2005). Anwar and Stanistreet, for example, interviewed 10 young mothers, who they recruited from children's centres in England. As in Dawson and Hosie's study, most of these participants were disengaged with education pre-pregnancy. However, they suggested becoming a mother motivated them to return to education. Likewise, Clarke (2015) conducted a qualitative study, which involved interviews with 11 women who became mothers as teenagers. Clarke's participants described how their attitudes towards education improved post-pregnancy and discussed the importance of becoming good role models for their children.

Stories of Success. Another theme identified in the literature exploring the post-birth educational experiences of young mothers, is stories of educational success (Clarke, 2015; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Ellis-Sloan, 2024; Rudoe, 2011). This was an explicit focus in Clarke's (2015) qualitative study, which explored the factors contributing to positive outcomes for young mothers. As part of this research, Clarke (p. 47) used opportunistic sampling to recruit women whose life trajectories provided alternative narratives to the 'dominant negative teenage pregnancy discourse'. This was reflected in the participants' occupations: two were teachers, one was a postgraduate student, one was completing an undergraduate degree, one was an assistant psychologist, and two were social workers. This demographic data, in itself, reflects the key message of Clarke's study: that teenage pregnancy is not inherently associated with poorer educational and life outcomes. Similarly, Ellis-Sloan (2024) interviewed 12 women aged 35–65 who had all become mothers as teenagers. All of the participants in Ellis-Sloan's study had progressed onto higher education: most participants had a graduate degree, 4 had postgraduate qualifications and 2 had PhDs. Taken together, these two studies highlight that educational success is still achievable for young mothers.

Facilitators and Barriers. While it is clear educational success is still possible for young mothers, the literature emphasises that achieving this success is not without challenges (Ellis-Sloan, 2024; Vincent & Thomson, 2013). This idea was explored in a qualitative study by Vincent and Thomson (2013, p.9). Their article reported on findings from Vincent's larger doctoral study, in which repeated semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 pregnant teenagers and young mothers. One of the themes identified in this study was 'Pressure to Prove Yourself'. Within this theme, participants described how they wanted to demonstrate that they can simultaneously be 'good mothers' and 'responsible citizens' by engaging in education, employment and training (p.8). However, Vincent and Thomson reflected that this meant the participants often took on 'gruelling schedules of study and mothering' (p.8). These 'gruelling schedules' were explored further in the theme 'Tensions in Managing the Dual Role of Mother and Student'. In this theme, the researchers included an interview excerpt from the participant Clare, who provided an overview of her daily schedule, which involved attending college alongside cleaning the house, doing the food shop, looking after her child and arranging

childcare. This example is useful for demonstrating the various roles and responsibilities young mothers must balance, which is likely to differ substantially from their peers without children.

Although there are challenges associated with balancing motherhood and education, research has identified factors that can support successful returns to education (Carter, 2017; Ellis-Sloan, 2024). For instance, research indicates that access to childcare is critical in enabling young mothers to return to education post-birth (Anwar & Stanistreet, 2015; De Jonge, 2001; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Dench, 2007). De Jonge (2001) highlighted this in their qualitative study, which involved semi-structured interviews with 26 young mothers. As part of these interviews, young mothers were asked to reflect on the support they received during and post-pregnancy. A key finding was that post-birth, 'childcare was the single most important factor' that enabled the young mothers' 'to work or study' (p.52).

In addition to childcare, other factors have been identified as important in facilitating re-engagement with education (Carter, 2017; Ellis-Sloan, 2024). In Ellis-Sloan's study, for example, two participants were described as having 'relatively uninterrupted' and more traditional educational journeys post-birth (p.471). These participants attributed this to a combination of factors, including giving birth during the summer holidays, which meant they didn't have to take time out post-birth. In addition, their educational settings made reasonable adjustments, such as providing them with a reduced timetable and letting them take fewer subjects.

Research conducted by trainee educational psychologists has also examined the facilitating factors that can support young mothers to remain in, or re-engage with, education (Carter, 2017; McLeod, 2013). An explicit aim of Carter's (2017) study, for example, was to identify 'best practice' for promoting the inclusion of young mothers in further education (p.1). To explore this, Carter completed narrative interviews with five young mothers (age 16-19) who were currently accessing further education and also used a Q methodology structure, which involved participants ranking different strategies they would find useful. Carter then used to these findings to 'create policy guidelines' that educational settings can use 'to support other adolescent mothers in the future' (p.36). These guidelines consisted of 11 recommendations, which covered the types of support participants identified would be helpful before, during and after pregnancy. A strength of these recommendations was that they were explicitly informed by the perspectives of young parents.

However, a significant limitation was that education staff were not included in this research. Arguably, this would have strengthened the guidelines, since education staff could have provided insight into whether these recommendations were already in place, or on their feasibility.

A notable finding from Carter's research, was the importance young mothers appeared to place on relationships with education staff. For example, findings from the Q methodology task indicated that the support young mothers most valued was being allocated a dedicated support worker or key worker. The importance of this was also reflected in the narrative interviews. One participant, Layla, for instance, reflected that her relationship with her key worker was 'integral to her continuing and achieving in her academic career' (p. 60). Taken together, these findings suggest that having an opportunity to develop a relationship with a dedicated member of education staff may be an important factor facilitating young mothers' post-birth educational engagement and success.

1.3.4.4 Summary

To date, most of the studies exploring the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers have included pregnant teenagers and young mothers as the main participant group (Coleman & Cater, 2006; Ellis-Sloan, 2024; Mantovani & Thomas, 2014). Across these studies, it is clear that the educational experiences of this group can vary greatly before pregnancy, during pregnancy and post-birth (Anwar & Stanistreet, 2015; Clarke, 2015; Dawson & Hosie, 2005). A notable gap in this literature, is that very few studies have included education staff when investigating the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers. This omission is significant, as staff perspectives are arguably key for developing a comprehensive insight into the topic of teenage pregnancy and education.

1.4 Summary and Future Research

Since 1999, a considerable number of studies have explored the topic of teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education in England. However, most of this research was conducted pre-2010, which is when the teenage conception rates were higher and teenage pregnancy was conceptualised as a national social issue

that needed to be solved (Cook et al., 2015; Higginbottom et al., 2006). As the teenage conceptions rates have declined, it appears that research interest has as well. This is discouraging, since there is no evidence to suggest that pregnant teenagers and young mothers are any less marginalised within education or wider society (Hadley et al., 2024). Considering this, there is a clear rationale for further research to explore this topic from a more contemporary perspective.

Furthermore, while the existing literature exploring teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education is relatively extensive, there are still several areas that remain underexplored. For example, most of the literature on this topic has included pregnant teenagers and young mothers as the main participant group, and, in most cases, researchers have used qualitative methods to gather their views (for example: Coleman & Cater, 2006; Ellis-Sloan, 2024; Mantovani & Thomas, 2013). A strength of this, is that it means most of what is known about the educational experiences of this group, has come directly from pregnant teenagers and young mothers themselves. However, a consistent finding from these studies, is that these young people have felt unsupported by their education settings (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Dench, 2007; Lall, 2007; Russell, 2016). Yet very few studies have explored or triangulated the perspectives of young mothers with those of education staff. As a result, the current literature does not fully reflect how education settings support pregnant teenagers and young mothers. Considering this, there is a clear gap for future research to explore the topic of teenage pregnancy and education from an education staff perspective.

Chapter Two: Empirical Paper

This chapter consists of an empirical paper that investigates teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education from the perspective of secondary and further education staff. While this empirical paper can be read as a standalone chapter, it also builds upon the findings from the literature review presented in Chapter One. Additionally, while key methodological decisions relating to the empirical study are justified throughout this chapter, a more personal reflection on these decisions is provided in Chapter Three.

In this chapter, teenage pregnancy will continue to be defined as a term used to refer to individuals who become pregnant between the ages of 13 to 19, and the terms 'pregnant teenager' and 'young mother' will still be used when discussing this group (Holgate, 2012). The terms 'secondary education staff' and 'further education staff' are also used frequently within this chapter to describe the study's participant group. For the purpose of this chapter, the term 'secondary education staff' is used to refer to members of staff employed to work in a secondary education setting (e.g. mainstream, specialist and alternative provisions) who have a role that involves interacting with, and supporting the education of, young people aged 11-16. While the term 'further education staff' is used to refer to members of staff employed to work in further education settings (e.g. colleges, sixth forms) who have a role that involves interacting with, and supporting the education of, students aged 16-19 years old.

2.1 Abstract

There is currently an absence of research investigating secondary and further education staff perspectives on the topic of teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education. To address this gap, the current study explores how secondary and further education staff conceptualise and understand teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and its impact on education, and examines how they perceive and approach their roles in supporting this group. A purposive sample of seven secondary and further education staff participated in this study, and each completed a semi-structured interview. Data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to answer the following three research questions:

1. How do secondary and further education staff conceptualise and understand teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and its impact on education?
2. How do secondary and further education staff perceive and approach their role in supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers?
3. What factors facilitate or hinder how effectively secondary and further education staff can support pregnant teenagers and young mothers?

A total of 12 themes were constructed through the Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The findings highlighted that participants conceptualised pregnant teenagers and young mothers as a heterogeneous group, with diverse backgrounds, educational experiences and outcomes. All participants suggested that supporting this group fell within the scope of their usual professional responsibilities. In addition, they considered it their duty to make education as accessible as possible for pregnant teenagers and young mothers. However, the participants identified several factors that constrained their ability to provide effective support for this group, including a reluctance from their education settings to invest the time and resources required to strengthen provision for pregnant teenagers and young mothers. These findings have several implications for education settings, educational psychologists and policy makers.

2.2. Background and Rationale

2.2.1 National Context

In 1999 the New Labour government introduced their 10-year teenage pregnancy strategy, which was a fully funded, 'nationally led and locally delivered' intervention that aimed to halve England's under-18 conception rate by 2010, and increase the participation of young parents in education, employment and training (Hadley et al., 2016, p.2). To achieve these goals, a range of national initiatives were introduced to address the educational, social, financial, and health needs of young parents (Hadley et al., 2024). In addition, a dedicated 'Teenage Pregnancy Unit' was established within government (Hadley et al., 2024).

At the end of the teenage pregnancy strategy, the government did not achieve their goal of halving the under-18 conception rate (Hadley et al., 2024). However, the under-18 conception rate had significantly declined (Hadley et al., 2024). Many authors position this as clear evidence of the strategy's success (Hadley et al., 2024). Others, however, have been less complementary (Baxter et al., 2021). Baxter and colleagues (2021), for example, argued that the teenage pregnancy strategy itself had 'little, if any, effect on pregnancy rates' (p.1). This is because in their research Baxter and colleagues found that, in the same time period, other European countries recorded a similar decline in teenage conceptions. Due to this, Baxter and colleagues suggested the downward trend of conceptions in England would likely have occurred irrespective of the teenage pregnancy strategy.

It has also been harder to measure the impact of the second goal of the teenage pregnancy strategy, which was to increase the participation of young parents in education, employment or training (Hadley et al., 2016; Rudoe, 2014). For instance, there remains a lack of national data on young women who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) due to pregnancy or maternity. However, from the limited figures available, it appears pregnant teenagers and young mothers appear continue to make up a substantial proportion of the NEET population (Local Government Association, 2018; Public Health England 2018, 2019). The Local Government Association (2018), for example, estimated that 21% of 16–18-year-old females who are NEET are parents.

Despite the mixed evidence regarding the success of the teenage pregnancy strategy, national interest and prioritisation of teenage pregnancy started to gradually decline following the strategy's conclusion in 2010 (Hadley et al., 2024). For example, the government's 'Teenage Pregnancy Unit' was disbanded and there have been noticeably fewer references to teenage pregnancy in national policy post-2010 (Hadley et al., 2024). Currently, the only dedicated national guidance documents on teenage pregnancy are Public Health England's 'Framework for Supporting Teenage Mothers and Young Fathers' (2019) and the 'Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Framework' (2018). However, unlike the teenage pregnancy strategy, these frameworks were not accompanied by the same national investment or initiatives to support young parents (Hadley et al., 2024).

Arguably, the reduced national prioritisation of teenage pregnancy is unjustified, and renewed attention on this topic is warranted for several reasons. Firstly, there is limited indication that the vulnerability of young parents as a group has diminished (Hadley et al., 2024). Alison Hadley, who was involved in leading the teenage pregnancy strategy, makes this point in her book 'Teenage Pregnancy and Young Parenthood' (2024). Hadley emphasises that, despite the declining conception rates, young parents and their children continue to experience poorer educational, social, and health outcomes.

Secondly, there is emerging evidence to suggest the long-term decline in teenage conceptions may be reversing (Hadley et al., 2024). In 2021 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) recorded an increase in under 18 conceptions for the first time since 2007. This increase continued in 2022, which is the most recent year for which conceptions statistics are available. The 2022 figures report a conception rate of 17.6 conceptions per 1000 women aged 18 and under. In the absence of 2023 data, it is currently unclear whether this increase in under-18 conceptions reflects a temporary fluctuation due to the coronavirus pandemic, or whether it is the beginning of a longer-term trend. Regardless, the 2021 and 2022 statistics indicate that a substantial, and potentially increasing, minority of young people experience pregnancy each year.

2.2.2 Overview of the Existing Literature

A substantial body of research has explored the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers. Much of this research consists of qualitative

studies, in which pregnant teenagers and young mothers have been interviewed about their educational experiences (e.g. Coleman & Cater, 2006; Lall, 2007; Rudoe, 2011; Russell, 2016; Vincent, 2009). In these studies, pregnant teenagers and young mothers frequently describe having negative educational experiences both prior to, during and post-pregnancy (Coleman & Cater, 2006; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Hosie, 2007; Rudoe, 2011; Russell, 2016, Vincent, 2009). In particular, they have reported receiving inconsistent support and unfair treatment from education staff (Coleman & Cater, 2006; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Hosie, 2007; Russell, 2016; Vincent, 2009). Despite this, only a small number of studies have included the perspectives of education staff when investigating the topic of teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education in England, making it difficult to fully explain why pregnant teenagers and young mothers may be receiving such inconsistent support.

Of the few studies that have included education staff as participants, their perspectives have rarely been the primary focus of exploration (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Dench, 2007; Hosie & Selman, 2002; Rudoe, 2011; Vincent, 2009, 2016). Instead, the views of education staff have mainly been gathered to supplement the perspectives of other participant groups and help meet broader research aims (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Dench, 2007; Hosie & Selman, 2002; Rudoe, 2011; Vincent, 2009, 2016). Rudoe (2011), for example, conducted an ethnographic exploration into the educational experiences of 16 young mothers who were attending an antenatal education programme. As part of this research, five staff members were also interviewed. However, not all of these staff members were education professionals; one participant, for instance, was a midwife. This is because the course was designed to prepare young mothers for childbirth and motherhood rather than to support the attainment of formal academic qualifications (e.g. GCSEs or A-Levels). Accordingly, the staff interviews seemed to focus more on exploring teenage pregnancy and motherhood itself, rather than the educational experiences of this group. For example, one area of discussion concerned how staff taught parenting skills and provided parenting support to young mothers. Consequently, the study provides only limited, and highly context-specific, insight into education staff perspectives regarding the impact of teenage pregnancy on education and their role in supporting this group.

Dawson and Hosie (2005) and Dench (2007), by contrast, conducted a slightly more focused exploration of education staff perspectives than Rudoe's

research. As part of their mixed-methods exploration of teenage pregnancy and education, Dawson and Hosie collected data from 138 education staff using a postal questionnaire. In this questionnaire, education staff were asked a series of closed and open-ended questions about the provision available for pregnant and mothering students in their settings. Similarly, Dench (2007) conducted a telephone survey with staff from 849 education settings as part of a national evaluation of the 'Care to Learn' scheme. In this survey, education staff were asked to reflect on both the support available for young parents in their settings and the impact of the 'Care to Learn' scheme.

Whilst Dawson and Hosie's and Dench's studies were both useful in gathering broad insights into the support education staff provide pregnant teenagers and young mothers, the reliance on survey methodology meant that staff experiences and perceptions on this topic were not explored in much depth. In addition, both these studies were conducted during the teenage pregnancy strategy, in which there was greater national attention and priority given to teenage pregnancy (Hadley et al., 2024). As such, the findings from these studies are unlikely to fully reflect the current supports available for pregnant teenagers and young mothers. Considering these limitations, there is a clear need for updated research exploring education staff perspectives on supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers.

2.2.3 Relevance to Educational Psychology

Squires and Farrell (2007) define educational psychologists as 'applied psychologists' whose work is 'diverse and based on the application of psychological knowledge, skills and principles to promote the inclusion' of children and young people (p.87). While the educational psychologist role has traditionally centred on supporting children with SEN, evidence indicates that it extends beyond this to include work with a range of other groups. For example, an emerging body of research is beginning to recognise the relevance of educational psychologists in supporting young parents (Berryman, 2021; Carter, 2017; McLeod, 2013; Sheldrake, 2010; Thompson, 2018; Whiteway, 2016, 2019). Though to date, this research has been conducted exclusively by trainee educational psychologists as part of their doctoral theses (Berryman, 2021; Carter, 2017; McLeod, 2013; Sheldrake, 2010; Thompson, 2018; Whiteway, 2016, 2019).

Notably, as within the wider literature on teenage pregnancy, trainee educational psychologists' research has not explored the perspectives of education staff on this topic. This is particularly significant, given that education staff constitute one of the main client groups of educational psychology services (Atfield et al., 2023). Instead, trainee educational psychologists' research has primarily focused on gathering the perspectives of young parents, using predominantly qualitative methodologies such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Berryman, 2021; Sheldrake, 2010), Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (McLeod, 2013), and narrative approaches (Whiteway, 2016). Findings from these studies justify the relevance of the educational psychologist role in supporting young parents, and trainee educational psychologists have proposed several recommendations for extending educational psychologists' practice in this area. These include delivering targeted interventions to young parents (McLeod, 2013; Thompson, 2018), training school staff on the needs of young parents (Berryman, 2021; Carter, 2017), and working at a systemic level to challenge negative stigmas surrounding young parenthood (Thompson, 2018; Whiteway, 2016, 2019).

Despite making these recommendations in their theses, trainee educational psychologists point out that the educational psychologists' role still remains largely underdeveloped in this area (Berryman, 2021; Carter, 2017; McLeod, 2013; Sheldrake, 2010; Thompson, 2018; Whiteway, 2016, 2019). In Berryman's (2021) thesis, she suggests a potential reason for this is that schools and colleges are likely unaware of the potential contribution educational psychologists can make in relation to supporting pregnant teenagers and young parents (Berryman, 2021). One way this could be addressed is by including education staff perspectives in future trainee educational psychologist research exploring teenage pregnancy. Doing so would not only highlight to participating education staff that teenage pregnancy is relevant to educational psychologist practice, but it would also provide an opportunity to understand what educational psychologists need to do to facilitate greater education staff engagement and utilisation of educational psychology services in this area.

2.2.4 Rationale Summary and Research Aims

In 2022, the ONS (2025) estimated that there were 49.2 conceptions per 1000 women aged 19 and under, and the Local Government Association (2025) estimated there was around 20,600 young mothers under-20. Under the Education & Skills Act

(2008), all young people in England must remain in education or training until they are 18 years old. Considering this, it is likely that a sizeable minority of 13-18-year-olds in England are balancing pregnancy and motherhood alongside education.

As frontline professionals, secondary and further education staff are positioned to play a crucial role in supporting the education of this group. Yet the voices of secondary and further education staff are scarcely represented in the existing literature. This has resulted in a population and practical-knowledge gap, as very little is known about how secondary and further education staff perceive and approach their roles in supporting students who are pregnant and/or young mothers (Miles, 2017; Robinson et al., 2011).

To address these gaps, this study aims to investigate the perspectives of education staff on teenage pregnancy. Specifically, this study hopes to be among the first to explicitly explore how secondary and further education staff conceptualise teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and its impact on education. It also seeks to update the existing literature by examining how education staff currently perceive and approach their role in supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers. In addition, this study hopes to identify staff views on the potential facilitators and barriers to providing effective support for this group. It is anticipated that this enhanced understanding will help identify implications for both secondary and further education staff, and educational psychology practice.

Importantly, this study recognises that young fathers can also constitute a vulnerable group within education (Clayton, 2016; Donald et al., 2022; Russell, 2016). However, the literature emphasises that the barriers to education arising from teenage pregnancy itself, often affects young mothers and fathers in different ways (Berryman, 2021; Clayton, 2016; Donald et al., 2022; Russell, 2016). For example, young mothers describe being excluded from school for pregnancy-related reasons and remain more likely to assume primary caregiving responsibilities (Carter, 2017; Clayton, 2016; Donald et al., 2022; Lall, 2007; Russell, 2016). In recognition of this, the current study will focus exclusively on the experiences of secondary and further education staff in relation to supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers, rather than young parents more generally.

2.2.5 Research Questions

Consistent with the aims of this study, the following research questions (RQ) will be explored:

- RQ1: How do secondary and further education staff conceptualise and understand teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and its impact on education?
- RQ2: How do secondary and further education staff perceive and approach their role in supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers?
- RQ3: What factors facilitate or hinder how effectively secondary and further education staff can support pregnant teenagers and young mothers?

2.3 Methodology

The remainder of this chapter is written in the first person to reflect the principles of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA), which is the data analysis method used in this study (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In Reflexive TA, the researcher is assumed to be an active and reflexive agent in the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To make this assumption explicit, Braun and Clarke (2022) recommend researchers use first-person language when writing up their methodology and research findings.

2.3.1 Research Paradigm

Braun and Clarke (2022) define a research paradigm as encompassing a researcher's system of beliefs and values about the world, including their ontological, and epistemological assumptions, which will inform the framework for research (methodology) adopted by a researcher (p.290).

2.3.1.1 Ontology

According to Braun and Clarke (2022), a researcher's ontological position reflects their inherent assumptions about the nature of reality and being. Within research, ontology is often discussed in relation to two contrasting positions: realism and relativism (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Realism assumes that a single, objective reality exists independently of human perception, whereas relativism proposes the existence of multiple, subjective realities (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This research will

be underpinned by critical realism, which can be considered a midpoint between realist and relativist positions (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.275; Pilgrim, 2020).

Ontologically, critical realism adopts transcendental realism (Bhaskar, 2008). Consistent with most realist ontologies, critical realists believe that an objective reality exists independently of human understanding of it (Willis, 2022). However, in keeping with transcendental realism, critical realists argue that this reality can only ever be partially known (Bhaskar, 2008; Stutchbury, 2022). To reflect this, most critical realists conceptualise reality as being stratified into three domains: the empirical, the actual and the real (Bhaskar, 2008; Stutchbury, 2022). An overview of these domains, and their application to the topic of teenage pregnancy and education, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Stratified Reality in Relation to Teenage Pregnancy

Domain	Description	Application to Teenage Pregnancy
Empirical	According to Stutchbury (2022), the empirical domain consists of events that are 'observable and measurable' (p.120).	Teenage pregnancy is an observable biological phenomenon that is measured by national data on under-18 conception rates (e.g. ONS, 2025) and there is an observable presence of pregnant teenagers and young mothers attending secondary and further education settings in England (e.g. Berryman, 2021).
Actual	The actual domain consists of events that occur in the real world, but 'may not be observed at all or may be understood quite	Teenage pregnancies occur and can create educational disruption and challenges for young people, regardless of whether these

	differently by observers' (Easton, 2010, p.123; Stutchbury, 2022).	events are captured within research or national statistics.
Real	According to Stutchbury (2022) the real domain consists of 'deeper underlying structures and causal mechanisms' that 'give rise to the observable events' (p.121).	Social norms and stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy may act as underlying mechanisms that shape the policy context affecting, and influencing, under-18 conception rates and the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers.

2.3.1.2 Epistemology

According to Braun and Clarke (2022), a researcher's epistemological position reflects their assumptions about the nature of knowledge and what is possible to know. Theoretically, a researcher's epistemological positions should align with their ontological position (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For example, ontological realism can be paired with epistemological positivism, which assumes that objective truths about reality can be discovered and known (Botha, 2021). In contrast, ontological relativism aligns more closely with constructionist epistemologies, which propose that knowledge is subjective and always socially and culturally situated (Burr, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Epistemologically, critical realism broadly aligns with relativism (Willis, 2022). However, the specific relativist stance adopted by critical realists can vary (Willis, 2022). According to Willis (2022), two key epistemological variations of critical realism have been developed: one associated with Maxwell (2012) and another with Bhaskar (2008) (p.265). Maxwell (2012) advances a more constructivist account of critical realist epistemology, proposing that all knowledge of the social world is constructed, which makes it impossible to make definitive judgements about the 'truth' of reality. Like Maxwell, Bhaskar (2008) similarly recognises that different constructions of reality can exist. However, his account of critical realism incorporates the principle of judgemental rationality, which proposes that competing

explanations of the 'truth' can be critically evaluated and compared to determine which offers the most plausible account of reality. Bhaskar's position more closely reflects the assumptions underpinning the present study, as I recognise participants may hold differing constructions of teenage pregnancy and early motherhood. However, I also believe these accounts can be compared to identify areas of shared understanding.

2.3.1.3 Rationale for Critical Realism

Much of the existing research exploring teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education in England is qualitative, with critical realism and social constructionism being among the most commonly adopted philosophical positions (e.g. Calver, 2020; Carter, 2017; McLeod, 2013; Thompson, 2018). Having reviewed both these positions, I felt that critical realism provided the most appropriate philosophical foundation for this research.

One of the key differences between critical realism and social constructionism lies in their ontology (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willis, 2022). Ontologically, social constructionists tend to adopt a relativist position and would likely deny the existence of a single, objective reality (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willis, 2022). In contrast, critical realism assumes that a reality exists independently of human understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willis, 2022). This meant that by taking a critical realist positioning, I could accept that there was some underlying reality to the phenomenon of teenage pregnancy, regardless of how it is socially interpreted and understood (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willis, 2022). Ethically I felt this recognition was important, because it enabled me to acknowledge that the lived experiences of pregnant teenagers, young mothers, and the education staff supporting them reflected more than just social constructions (Willis, 2022).

Epistemologically, critical realism and social constructionism are arguably more closely aligned (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willis, 2022). For instance, both positionings would acknowledge that constructions of teenage pregnancy will vary across individuals, communities and historical contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willis, 2022). However, through Bhaskar's (2008) concept of judgemental rationality, critical realists can accept that some constructions may provide more valid explanations than others. This meant that, through this research, I could explore education staff's perspectives on teenage pregnancy without assuming that all interpretations were

equally valid. I considered this ethically important because cultural and societal constructions of teenage pregnancy can vary considerably, and I was conscious that some constructions may minimise safeguarding concerns or perpetuate harmful stereotypes about young parents (e.g. Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Higginbottom et al., 2006).

2.3.2 Research Design

Critical realism is compatible with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches (Lawani, 2020). Though, it is considered best suited to research designs that prioritises depth over breadth (Easton, 2010; Lawani, 2020). In alignment with this, I used a qualitative research design to conduct this research, with a Reflexive TA approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In the following sections, I explain the specifics of, and rationale for, each component of the research design, including participants, data collection and analysis.

2.3.2.1 Participants

Recruitment. I used purposive sampling to recruit participants, which is a sampling method that involves ‘identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest’ (Palinkas et al., 2015; p.2). This meant I could intentionally seek out and recruit participants who met the inclusion criteria (see Table 2).

Table 2

Inclusion Criteria and Rationale

Criterion	Rationale
Participants must be currently employed in a setting that provides secondary or further education to pupils aged between 13-19 in England, for example: mainstream secondary schools, academies, special schools, alternative provisions, sixth forms, colleges, and	This research defined ‘teenage pregnancy’ as referring to individuals who become pregnant in their teenage years (ages 13-19). Consistent with this, it was appropriate to include both secondary and further education staff in

local authority services (e.g. home tuition services).

this research, as both groups work with students who fall within this age range.

Participants could work in different types of settings (e.g. mainstream, alternative provisions), because the literature indicates that the educational destinations of pregnant teenagers and young mothers can vary significantly and may change as a result of pregnancy/motherhood (Crawford et al., 2013; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Russell, 2016).

To maintain some degree of comparability between participants, recruitment was limited to those working in England. This was to ensure all participants worked within the same social, political and educational context (Yardley, 2000).

Participants must work in a role that involves direct contact with students (e.g. teachers, teaching assistants, pastoral staff, SENCOs, safeguarding leads, senior leadership team).

Participation was not restricted to a specific professional role, as the literature suggests that a range of education staff are involved in supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Dench, 2007).

Participants must have experience supporting pregnant pupils or young mothers.

This criterion was important, as the study aimed to explore participants' experiences of supporting pregnant

pupils and young mothers, rather than their general views or assumptions about the topic.

To recruit participants, I developed a recruitment poster (Appendix 1) and distributed this to potential participants via several methods, including:

- Sharing the recruitment poster on my own social media (e.g. LinkedIn, BlueSky, Facebook), and in social media groups with group admin permission.
- Emailing/phoning headteachers to ask them to act as gatekeepers and share the recruitment poster to staff in their settings.
- Contacting relevant organisations/charities/unions (e.g. Brook) and asking them to share the recruitment poster with their network.

Potential participants were invited to express interest in the study by contacting me directly via email. During this initial contact, I assessed whether they met the inclusion criteria. Where eligibility was confirmed, participants were provided with a participant information sheet outlining further details about the study, along with a consent form (Appendix 2).

Sample. In total, 11 individuals expressed interest in this study. Of these, 10 met the inclusion criteria, eight returned signed consent forms, and seven took part. Consistent with the inclusion criteria, all seven participants were employed by an educational setting that provides secondary and/or further education in England and had student-facing roles. While working in these settings, all participants had experience supporting more than one pregnant teenager or young mother. Table 3 provides an overview of each participant's pseudonym, role type, and the type of educational setting in which they worked.

Table 3

Participant Information

Participant Pseudonym	Education Setting (Secondary / Further / Both)	Role Type
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Emma	Further	Teaching Role
Hope	Both	Support Role
Lucy	Further	Teaching Role
Casey	Both	Senior Leadership Role
Freya	Further	Teaching Role
Florence	Further	Pastoral Role
Tracey	Secondary	Teaching Role

I acknowledge that the reporting of participants' backgrounds in this study is limited. To some extent this is consistent with the principles of Reflexive TA, where the primary aim is to identify patterns of shared meaning across participants' accounts rather than focus on idiographic detail (Braun & Clarke, 2022). That said, there are examples of Reflexive TA research where providing greater insight into participants' backgrounds has added value to the analysis. For example, Astley-Marr (2025) included pen portraits of the eight participants who took part in their Reflexive TA study exploring special guardians' experiences of supporting the education of children in care. These pen portraits summarised each participant's special guardianship backgrounds, the professional support they had received, and the educational experiences of the children in their care. Arguably, these pen portraits added value to Astley-Marr's analysis and increased the study's transferability by enabling readers to better understand the context from which the themes were generated (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

However, despite these potential benefits, I decided not to use pen portraits in the current study. This is because I was mindful that I was asking participants to reflect on their experiences supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers, which is a relatively low-incidence population within educational settings (ONS, 2025). Due to this, I was conscious that the stories participants shared with me could potentially contain identifying details. Additionally, two participants specifically requested that their identities and the identities of their educational settings remain as anonymous as possible. Therefore, to respect their wishes and ensure this research was compliant with British Educational Research Association (BERA; 2024) guidelines, I chose to limit the reporting of participants' backgrounds.

2.3.2.2 Data Collection

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015) a qualitative research design should seek to ‘understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences’ (p.42). To achieve this, qualitative research designs need to employ methods that enable them to gather rich qualitative data, such as ‘interviews, observations and document analysis’ (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p.43). For this project, I decided to use semi-structured interviews. This method involves conducting a one-to-one interview with a participant using a combination of pre-planned and spontaneous open questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Smith et al., 2022).

Rationale. I decided to use semi-structured interviews, over other data collection methods, for several reasons. Firstly, semi-structured interviews are an appropriate method to use within a critical realist paradigm, since this method supports researchers to gather ‘in-depth information from participants’ related to their research topic (Brönnimann, 2021, p.1). Secondly, I considered this method most suitable for addressing my research aims. For example, one of my aims was to explore how secondary and further education staff perceive and approach their role in regard to teenage pregnancy. By conducting a semi-structured interview, I was able to directly explore participant perspectives through the use of pre-determined and spontaneous open questions (Knott et al., 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Smith et al., 2022). Whereas had I conducted an observation or document analysis, I would not have had the same direct access to participants’ perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Procedure. Data collection took place between June 2025 and October 2025. To minimise potential barriers to participation, all participants were offered the option of completing the semi-structured interview either in person or online. All participants opted to take part in online interviews, which were conducted using Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes in length.

To facilitate the semi-structured interviews, I used an interview schedule, which was developed using guidance from Knott and colleagues (2022; Appendix 3). Knott and colleagues suggest that an effective way to structure interview questions is by using a topic guide approach. Specifically, they recommend researchers identify three to five broad topics to explore in their interviews and suggest that these topics are aligned with the researchers aims and research questions. Accordingly, I

organised my interview schedule around four broad topics, each of which aligned with my research aims and questions:

1. Knowledge and Understanding (RQ1)
2. Perception of Role (RQ2)
3. Approaches to Support (RQ2)
4. Facilitators/Barriers (RQ3)

Consistent with guidance from Knott and colleagues, I ensured that each topic began with a 'relatively easy, open-ended' question (p.4). Alongside this opening question, I also devised a series of more focused questions to explore each topic. I used these focused questions more spontaneously during the interviews and selected which of these questions to ask based on each participant's answers to the broad opening questions.

2.3.2.3 Data Analysis

I used Braun and Clarke's (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) to analyse the data collected from the semi-structured interviews, which is a method of data analysis that involves the researcher actively engaging with the data to generate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Rationale. There are several variations of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2021) categorised these approaches into three main types: coding reliability approaches; codebook approaches; and reflexive approaches, like Reflexive TA (p.3). Out of these approaches, Reflexive TA was specifically chosen for this study due to its alignment with my research aims and critical realist stance.

Firstly, through this research, I wanted to explore education staff perspectives on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education. Consistent with my critical realist position, I acknowledged that the participants' taking part in this research may each hold differing constructions of this topic (Bhaskar, 2008; Willis, 2022). However, through my research, I hoped to identify points of convergence between their accounts (Bhaskar, 2008; Willis, 2022). Reflexive TA was well suited to this aim, as it supports researchers to identify shared patterns of meaning across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This would be less achievable through a 'coding reliability' approach to thematic analysis, since these approaches typically place more emphasis on

generating semantic, topic-based summaries of participants' accounts, rather than constructing shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Secondly, in line with my critical realist stance, I recognised that, as the researcher, I cannot be entirely separate from the research process (Price & Martin, 2018). For instance, I will bring my own knowledge, assumptions, and biases into the research process (Price & Martin, 2018). This stance conflicts with 'coding reliability' approaches to thematic analysis, where researcher subjectivity is treated as a 'threat' to analytic rigour (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.3). In contrast, my critical realist position aligns with the reflexive emphasis of Reflexive TA, in which the researcher is considered an active agent in the construction of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For these reasons, I considered Reflexive TA to be a stronger fit for my analysis than other thematic analysis approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Sample Size Justification. I considered a sample size of seven sufficient to be sufficient to conduct the Reflexive TA for several reasons. First, Braun and Clarke (2022) make clear that Reflexive TA does not prescribe specific sample sizes. Instead, they emphasise that Reflexive TA is a flexible approach that can accommodate relatively small and large samples (p.74). Second, when determining sample size, Braun and Clarke encourage researchers to consider the concept of information power, which suggests that 'the more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study, the lower number of participants is needed' (Malterud et al., 2016, p.1759). In line with this reasoning, after conducting the seventh interview, my research supervisor and I judged that the dataset to contain sufficient depth and relevance to address the research questions.

Process. Braun and Clarke's (2022) Reflexive TA consists of six phases, which they encourage researchers to follow iteratively to analyse their data. In addition to following the six phases, Braun and Clarke also recommend that researchers maintain a research journal to help promote reflexivity throughout their analysis. Consistent with this guidance, I kept and maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process (see Appendix 4).

Orientation to Analysis. I aimed to conduct the Reflexive TA as inductively as possible, which meant that I intended for the analysis to be 'grounded in the data'

rather than organised around a theory or framework (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 461). However, whilst it was my intention to adopt an inductive orientation to the analysis, Braun and Clarke (2022) reflect that Reflexive TA can never be entirely atheoretical, as researchers will always bring their own assumptions into the analysis. My critical realist positioning, for instance, influenced how I approached the Reflexive TA and the meaning I assigned to my findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For example, I did not approach the analysis expecting to uncover objective facts about the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willis, 2022). However, I did hope I could produce a 'coherent and compelling' interpretation of this reality (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.282). To achieve this, I was particularly motivated to identify points of convergence across participants' accounts and ensure that the themes I generated reflected patterns of shared meaning found within at least three interviews (Willis, 2022). In addition, when generating themes, I was keen to look beyond participants' explicit accounts and also consider how underlying mechanisms, like the educational, social and political contexts they were working within, may be influencing the experiences they were describing (Willis, 2022).

The reflexive nature of Reflexive TA also meant that I could not separate myself and my own assumptions from the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). My positioning as a trainee educational psychologist, for instance, influenced my analysis, as psychological theories inevitably informed how I interacted with the data, including Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality framework, Biddle's (1986) Role Theory, Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967), and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory. Although I did not apply these theories deductively to generate codes or themes, they did help inform my interpretation of the findings and are referenced in the theme write-ups.

Separate Analyses. For this study, I decided to conduct a separate Reflexive TA for each research question, rather than complete one integrated analysis. This approach was adopted because each of my research questions had a distinct focus: participants' conceptualisation of teenage pregnancy (RQ1), their perceptions of their role (RQ2) and facilitators and barriers (RQ3). Given the limited attention these three areas have received in the existing literature, I considered each of these questions to warrant their own dedicated exploration. This decision suited my research design, as

the interview schedule had similarly been structured around exploring these three research areas in depth. Furthermore, this approach is compatible with guidance from Braun and Clarke (2022, p.177), who state that re-analysing the same dataset to address different research questions 'is entirely acceptable' and stress that a 'dataset is not a thing that we can extract (or develop) only one analysis from'. However, to ensure this approach did not result in a 'question and answer' orientation to analysis, for each Reflexive TA, I engaged with the whole dataset holistically and approached the analysis as inductively as possible (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 162). In addition, I remained open to the possibility that my research foci could evolve once I started to engage and became more familiar with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Phase One. Phase One involves the researcher familiarising themselves with the dataset. Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest that familiarisation should consist of three key processes: immersion; critical engagement with the data; and note-taking:

1. To 'immerse' myself in the data, I downloaded the transcripts of each interview, which were automatically generated by Microsoft Teams. I then listened back to each interview recording and amended the initial transcript to ensure accuracy. Following this, I listened to the recording a second time while reading along with the transcript. Finally, I read each transcript independently of the audio recording.
2. To 'critically engage' with the data, I read each interview transcript and responded to a series of questions that Braun and Clarke designed to explore my initial assumptions and interpretations of the transcript (see Appendix 5).
3. Finally, I returned to each transcript again and, while reading, made initial exploratory notes to capture my thoughts and reflections (see Appendix 6).

Phase Two. Phase Two involves coding the dataset, which is the process of working 'systematically' through the dataset to 'identify segments of data that appear potentially interesting, relevant or meaningful' for answering the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022 p.84). I conducted the coding process in Microsoft Word by using the comment function to assign code labels to relevant segments of data (Appendix 7). Braun and Clarke (2022, p.112) recommend researchers complete at

least two rounds of coding and focus on coding data relevant to their research questions. In keeping with this guidance, I worked through the full dataset twice keeping RQ1 in mind, then repeated this process for RQ2 and RQ3. Consistent with guidance from Braun and Clarke (2022), during and between rounds of coding, I regularly added and refined my codes. To help keep track of these codes, I maintained an Excel Spreadsheet, where I recorded code labels and the location of the associated data items within the dataset (Appendix 8).

While I held my research questions broadly in mind during the coding process, my intention was still to generate codes as inductively as possible through close and critical engagement with the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For instance, I was not applying a theory or working with a predetermined list of codes. However, consistent with the principles of both Reflexive TA and my critical realist stance, I recognised that a purely inductive approach was not possible, as my own assumptions and perspectives inevitably influenced the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To help manage the impact of this, during this phase I made regular entries into my reflexive research journal.

Phase Three. Phase Three involves generating initial themes, which requires the researcher to cluster their codes together around shared patterns of meaning. To support with this, I used the Word Macro function to collate all coded data extracts for each research question into a single document (Appendix 9). After all the data extracts were collated in one document, I wrote each code label onto post-it notes and, while referring back to the coded extracts, physically moved the codes around to explore potential clusters (Appendix 10). Once I had developed provisional code clusters, I transferred them into an Excel spreadsheet and responded to a set of evaluative questions (Appendix 11). These questions helped me assess the coherence and distinctiveness of each cluster. Following this, I returned to working manually, and used post-it notes to further refine and reorganise the clusters. This iterative process continued until I reached a settled set of candidate themes for each research question.

Phase Four. Phase Four involves developing and reviewing the initial themes. I transferred the candidate themes from Phase Three into a new Excel document. I then reviewed each candidate theme against the coded extracts. This

was to ensure each candidate theme was organised around a central, shared meaning. If a candidate theme met this criterion, I worked through a set of questions that Braun and Clarke (2022) designed to support researchers with evaluating a themes coherence and distinctiveness (Appendix 12). If the theme remained robust following this process, I returned to the entire dataset and used the Word comment function to tag relevant segments of data with the theme. To support this stage of analysis, I assigned provisional names to the themes, as I found this more effective than working with numerical labels (e.g. Theme 1). Typically, theme naming is associated with Phase Five, however Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise that researchers can engage with the six phases of Reflexive TA in a recursive and flexible manner.

Once I was satisfied with the themes, I created a thematic map to visualise the overall story conveyed by the analysis (Appendix 13). I constructed this by writing the provisional theme names and their various facets onto post-it notes and arranging them to explore relationships between themes. I then summarised the overall story these themes were trying to convey in a handwritten mind-map. This process enabled me to review the overall structure of how the themes worked together.

Phase Five. Phase Five involves refining, defining and naming themes. To support with this process, I reflected on a set of evaluative questions proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022) (Appendix 14). These questions helped me to identify the scope and boundaries of each theme. Following this, I returned to the provisional names I assigned to each theme in Phase Four and refined them to more accurately reflect the central organising concept of each theme. Finally, I created a revised thematic map for each RQ, and an overarching thematic map (see Figures 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6 in 'Analysis' Section).

Phase Six. Phase Six involves the process of writing up the analysis. I wrote up each theme individually and treated this as a final stage of refinement. For example, once drafted, I reflected on whether each theme had a clear central organising concept and whether the selected data extracts were the most appropriate examples for demonstrating this. Once I was satisfied with the write up

for each theme, I organised them in a way that I felt conveyed a coherent answer for each research question.

2.3.3 Research Quality

To ensure the quality of this research, I considered and applied Yardley's (2000) criteria for promoting good qualitative research.

Table 4

Application of Yardley's (2000) Criteria to the Current Study

Criterion	Application
Sensitivity to context: the researcher demonstrates an awareness of, and relates their research back to, the existing literature, their participants sociocultural context and their own sociocultural context (Yardley, 2000).	A formal literature review was conducted, in which 87 sources were read and reviewed on the research topic. This meant I had a thorough understanding of the existing literature, which supported me with analysing and interpreting the findings from the current study (see 'Analysis' section of this paper). The analysis and interpretation of the study findings was specific to the national context participants operated within (England). At the start of each interview, I also collected demographic information on each participant (current role title, type of educational setting, number of years spent working in this setting, overall number of years spent working in education) so I could further situate their responses within their own contexts. I demonstrated awareness of my own sociocultural context and managed the impact of my own assumptions and biases by maintaining a reflexive research journal.

Commitment and Rigour: *the researcher has engaged with the research topic in depth and has demonstrated competence in the methodology used (Yardley, 2000).*

A formal literature review was conducted, in which 87 sources on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education were reviewed and read. This developed my awareness of the methods typically used to research this topic, and what their strengths and weaknesses are. Prior to conducting this research, the research design went through several revisions to ensure it was methodologically sound, including: a formative research presentation; a formative research proposal; a summative research proposal; and a review by the School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Committee at the University of East Anglia. I also scheduled regular research supervision meetings and attended drop-in 'trouble shooting' sessions to seek advice on any concerns or problems that arose relating to the methodology.

Transparency and Coherence: *the research design is coherent, and sufficient details are given about the approach taken (Yardley, 2000).*

In the 'methodology' section of this chapter, I have provided a thorough overview of the research design. In addition, in Chapter Three of this thesis, I have reflected in detail on the specific methodological choices I made throughout the research process. In keeping with guidance from Braun and Clarke (2022), I also maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process, to help manage the impact of my own biases and assumptions.

Impact and Importance: *the researcher can demonstrate that their research has the potential to*

This research addresses an important gap in the Educational Psychology literature, and the literature on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education more broadly by being, to my knowledge,

influence 'the beliefs or actions' of others (Yardley, 2000, p.223).

the first qualitative study to explicitly explore education staff perspectives on this topic. In addition to making a unique and distinctive contribution to the existing literature, this research has direct relevance to education staff and educational psychologists' practice, which is highlighted in the 'Implications for Practice' section of this chapter. The impact and importance of this research is also considered in Chapter Three of this thesis, where I discuss my plans for disseminating the study's findings.

While Yardley's (2000) criteria were helpful for guiding the overall quality of my research, Braun and Clarke (2022, p.445) caution against relying on generic criteria when ensuring the quality of Reflexive TA. Therefore, to ensure the quality of my data analysis specifically, I followed the quality guidance outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022) in Chapter Nine of their book, 'Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide'. In this chapter, Braun and Clarke begin by emphasising that, in order to produce high-quality Reflexive TA, researchers must have a clear understanding of what constitutes a good Reflexive TA and a poor Reflexive TA. One way I achieved this, was by engaging closely with the wider Reflexive TA literature. For example, I thoroughly read and reflected on Braun and Clarke's (2022) book and their related publications. Their 2021 article, 'What counts as quality practice in Reflexive TA?', provided a detailed overview of poor practice, which supported me in identifying and avoiding common problems. In addition to engaging with the Reflexive TA literature, I also explicitly referred to and applied Braun and Clarke's 15-point checklist for 'good Reflexive TA' when completing my analysis (Appendix 15).

2.3.4 Ethical Considerations

This project was designed with regard to ethical guidelines from the British Educational Research Association (BERA; 2024), British Psychological Society (BPS;2021) and Health Care and Professions Council (HCPC; 2024). In addition, prior to collecting any data, I obtained ethical approval from the School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Committee at the University of East Anglia (Appendix 16).

A key ethical consideration for this project related to confidentiality. In accordance with the BERA (2024), BPS (2021) and HCPC (2024) ethical guidelines, I had a duty to respect the confidentiality of both the participants and the young people they discussed. Given that pregnant teenagers and young mothers represent a relatively low-incidence population within schools and colleges, it was important that I took particular care to ensure they could not be identified. To guarantee this, all participants were assigned pseudonyms, and I have only reported limited contextual information about them and their roles. Additionally, during their interviews, all participants were asked to avoid sharing information that could reasonably lead to the identification of specific staff or pupils. In cases where identifying details were inadvertently disclosed, I ensured these details were anonymised or redacted during the transcription process. Furthermore, when writing up the analysis, I carefully selected quotations to ensure that no overly specific or potentially identifying information was included.

I also needed to be mindful of the broader ethical implications associated with researching teenage pregnancy. For example, I did not want this research to be used to problematise pregnant teenagers and young mothers or reinforce the negative stereotypes surrounding this group (Yardley, 2008). However, I was conscious that, within the existing literature, some education staff have previously expressed stigmatising views towards teenage pregnancy (e.g. Dawson & Hosie, 2005). Hence, I was cautious that similar perspectives could also arise in this study. My critical realist positioning was useful for navigating this dilemma because, through Bhaskar's (2008) concept of judgemental rationality, I was able to acknowledge that whilst participants may hold different constructions of teenage pregnancy, these constructions should not all necessarily be regarded as equally valid.

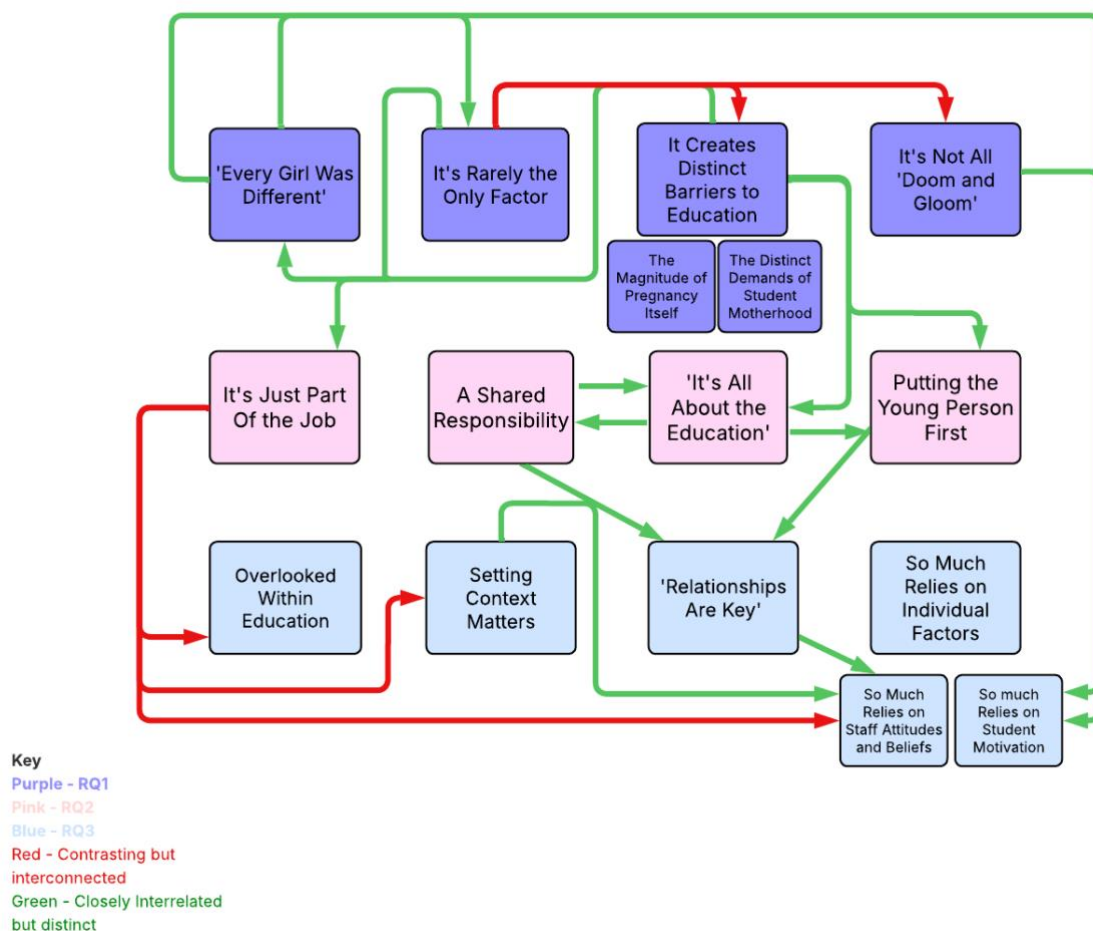
A further concern was that I did not want my findings to be used to invalidate the lived experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers. I was concerned about this because previous research has identified that education staff and young mothers can hold differing perspectives regarding the support provided (e.g. Dawson & Hosie, 2005). Again, my critical realist positioning was helpful for navigating this dilemma, as it enabled me to accept that different groups may construct the same underlying reality in different ways (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willis, 2022). Consequently, I approached this research expecting that some disconnect in

perspectives might occur and was cautious not to interpret these differences as evidence that one group's experiences were inherently more credible than another's.

2.4 Analysis

In total, 12 themes were constructed through the Reflexive TA. For RQ1, four themes and two subthemes were constructed; for RQ2, four themes were constructed; and for RQ3, four themes and two subthemes were constructed. Although each of these themes were constructed to address a distinct research question, they can still be conceptualised as being interrelated and altogether contribute to understanding the overall story of the dataset (See Figure 2).

Figure 2
Overarching Thematic Map



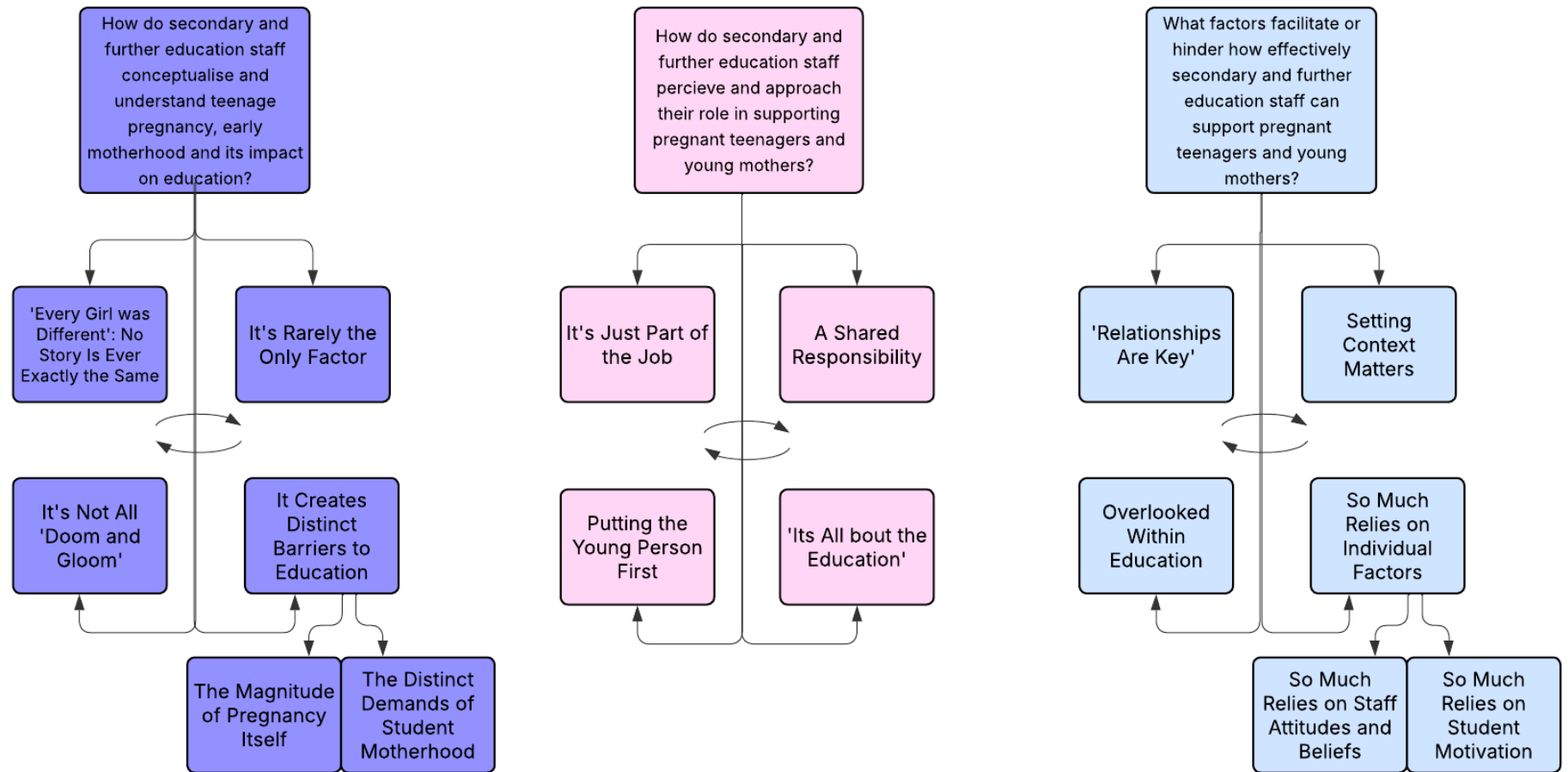
2.4.1 Presentation of Findings

As three separate Reflexive TAs were conducted, each research question and its associated themes are presented separately (see Figure 3). To report each theme, I use an integrated approach, which means that in the write-up for each theme, I discuss and interpret the findings with regard to the existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I selected this approach because it is recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022). Additionally, I judged this approach to align well with my critical realist positioning. For example, by taking an integrated approach, I was encouraged to identify points of convergence and divergence between the findings of the current study and the existing literature, which I feel supported me to develop a more 'coherent and compelling' insight into what may be happening for pregnant teenagers and young mothers in English secondary and further education settings (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.282).

It is important to note that there are data extracts that exist and further support the study's findings beyond those presented in this write-up. However, for the purpose of this write up, data extracts were selectively included to ensure they were a) most pertinent for capturing the different facets of each theme and b) preserved the confidentiality of each participant and the young people they discussed.

Figure 3

Organisation of Analysis

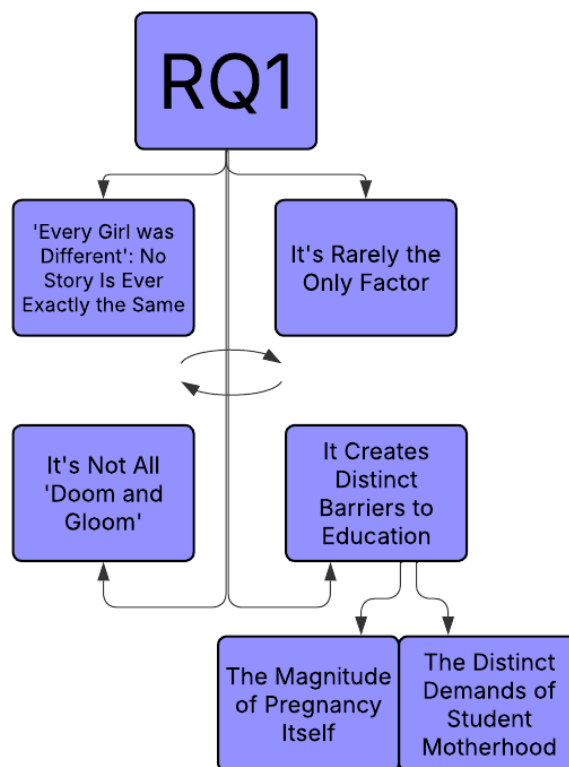


2.5 RQ1: How do secondary and further education staff conceptualise and understand teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and its impact on education?

This RQ explored how the participants conceptualise and understand teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and its impact on education. Four themes and two subthemes were constructed in relation to this research question.

Figure 4

RQ1 Thematic Map



2.5.1 'Every Girl Was Different': No Story Is Ever Exactly the Same.

Definition. This theme centres around the idea that pregnant students and young mothers are not a homogenous group which, according to the participants, meant their experiences supporting these young people was never strictly uniform. This idea was expressed explicitly throughout the interviews, as all participants directly stated and emphasised the individual differences between the pregnant teenagers and young mothers they have supported. However, this idea was also

captured more implicitly in the dataset and could be inferred from how participants chose to organise and reflect on their experiences.

The theme name derives from Emma's interview.

Emma: *...every girl was different, which again made, not made it tricky, but we just had to think very carefully about how to individualise their experience and get them through the course, so that for their futures, they do have a [qualification] that they've worked hard towards.*

In Emma's extract, she explicitly emphasises the differences between the pregnant teenagers she has supported. According to Emma, this meant that one of her key considerations when supporting a pregnant student was ensuring that the support she provided was highly 'individualised' to their specific needs. This is something other participants also reported. For example, in his interview, Casey reflected on how the heterogeneity among pregnant teenagers and young mothers has made it challenging to develop consistent systems of support in his setting.

Casey: *It's hard to write handbooks for that sort of thing, isn't it? Because each case is individual.*

Similar to Emma and Casey, other participants also explicitly recognised and emphasised the differences between every pregnant teenager and young mother they supported. For example, when asked what she knows and understands about the impact of teenage pregnancy and early motherhood on education, Hope responded with the following answer:

Hope: *...It can kind of vary from student to student depending on what the, the individual, what the parents, needs are.*

Likewise, at the end of her interview, Tracey's 'takeaway point' was to stress the heterogeneity of the young people she supported.

Tracey: *[...] I think, yeah...I think the knowledge that they, they're all different, that they all come from different places. [...] So, so their outcomes are very, very different.*

This theme was also evident more implicitly in the way each participant approached the interview and answered the questions. In most of the interviews, for example, participants chose to reflect on individual cases as way of organising and articulating their responses. A vivid example of this, is in Lucy's interview. When she was asked to explain what she knows and understands about the impact of teenage pregnancy on education, Lucy responded:

Lucy: *'So I mean, I've only really got the examples of students that I've taught and what they've lived through [...] One, one was returning post pregnancy [...] then the other instances it was becoming pregnant whilst I was teaching them.'*

Lucy then proceeded to structure her interview responses around these individual cases. She reflected on each case in-depth and emphasised the individual differences and nuances between situations. Towards the end of her interview, she concluded:

Lucy: *'I would say everyone's you know, whenever these students have talked to me about it [pregnancy/motherhood], everyone...what they've said has been completely different. You know, there's not been that much similar situation.'*

The idea that pregnant teenagers and young mothers are a heterogenous group is not novel and has been acknowledged within the literature (e.g. Crawford et al., 2013; Higginbottom et al., 2006; Hutchinson & Moore, 2012). However, the current study seems to be among the first to explicitly demonstrate that education staff also recognise this heterogeneity and appear to take this into account when supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers. This provides a useful lens for interpreting the subsequent themes constructed from this analysis.

Summary. This theme is key to understanding how participants conceptualised teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and its impact on education. It

centres around the idea that pregnant teenagers and young mothers are not a homogenous group, but individuals with unique personal circumstances and needs. Due to this, throughout their interviews, participants emphasised that their experiences supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers greatly varied.

2.5.2 It's Rarely the Only Factor

Definition. This theme explores the idea that teenage pregnancy is closely associated with prior adverse experiences, such as being in care, living in poverty and being disengaged from education. Accordingly, this theme suggests that teenage pregnancy itself is rarely the only factor influencing a young person's educational engagement and outcomes.

The association between teenage pregnancy and prior adverse experiences was acknowledged by all of the participants. Consider this extract from Freya's interview:

Researcher: *And you've talked about like the other adverse experiences these young people have maybe had. Is that something that's been common in your experience with young people that have got pregnant earlier?*

Freya: *In the secondary school context, yes. Just because it is, in my experience, that's less frequent and it usually is coupled with other adverse experiences. Like I can't remember the details, but that student that I was referring to [...] She had quite a turbulent home life anyway. Like before, she was known of by the safeguarding team and stuff.*

Similarly, Casey started their interview by describing the prior vulnerabilities of the pregnant teenagers and young mothers they have supported.

Casey: *I think I'd probably start by saying that of all the pregnant teenagers and young mothers that we work with it's, none of them, for none of them, is pregnancy their first vulnerability, so all of them have other vulnerabilities about them, be that issues with their own parents, issues with their own mental health, issues of poverty,*

housing issues, issues of being in care themselves, you know there's lots of those crossovers.

In this quote, Casey identified several adversities that, in his experience, are often associated with teenage pregnancy. The association between these adversities and teenage pregnancy are well documented within the literature. For instance, both quantitative and qualitative studies have identified an association between teenage pregnancy and poverty (Arai, 2003; Conrad, 2012; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Ermisch & Pevalin, 2003). In addition, research has also explored the association between teenage pregnancy and being in local authority care (Barn & Mantovani, 2006; Knight et al., 2006; Mantovani & Thomas, 2014, 2015). Notably, Mantovani and Thomas (2014) applied Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality framework to explore the interaction that being black, care-experienced, and a teenage mother had on their participants experiences of motherhood. This framework is useful for examining how Casey went on to conceptualise the interaction between being care-experienced and a young mother.

Casey: *You know, we've had, we've got one young mum [REDACTED] who's had [over 10] different care placements [REDACTED]. You know, those are massive, massive issues. And that's what's getting in the way. Once you put pregnancy on top- which is a obviously huge thing for someone so young, someone who's still at school- then that just tends to make them more vulnerable.*

Consistent with Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, Casey perceived pregnancy as adding to, and interacting with, the young person's existing vulnerabilities, rather than being a separate adverse event. However, there were also circumstances where Casey, and other participants, expressed that they felt pregnancy had little additional impact on a young person's educational outcomes. Consider the quotes below:

Casey: *On the whole, they're not hitting multiple GCSEs at grade four or five or above. But very often that's not a result of their pregnancy. It's a result of the other things that happened earlier in their life.*

Tracey: *I think the one, the one that came out with no qualifications, nothing would have made a difference. I'll be honest, just because of the family history.*

Lucy: *I would say the, I honestly think that if, if there had been no pregnancy or any anything to do with that, I still don't think she would have passed. I think, you know, her attendance at high school was not very good. She was, I think, she was either suspended or excluded. There was, a, there was a few things going on [...] I think her attendance at school was very poor [...] I don't think she was used to the classroom environment.*

In these extracts, participants are suggesting that the young women's educational trajectories had already been determined by their prior adversities. In Lucy's quote, for example, she discusses how one of the young mothers she supported was disengaged with education prior to starting college. In the situation Lucy is describing, the impact of this meant that the young person did not have the prior knowledge required to be successful in her college course.

Lucy: *I had just nothing to work with in terms of prior learning. There was just, you know, just capital letters, full stops. It was just, you know, it was primary school stuff that she just didn't have.*

Consistent with the theme 'Every Girl was Different', Lucy was using this example as a way to highlight some of the differences between the pregnant teenagers and young mothers she supported. However, Lucy's reflection on this young person's prior educational disengagement aligns with key findings from the existing literature, where researchers have similarly identified that prior to pregnancy, young mothers are often disengaged from education (Arai, 2003; Coleman & Cater, 2006; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Wiggins et al., 2005). As recognised by Lucy, this prior disengagement has been found to have a significant impact on the future educational outcomes of young mothers, including their attainment and whether they re-engage with education post-birth (Arai, 2003; Coleman & Cater, 2006; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Wiggins et al., 2005).

Summary. This theme is key to understanding how participants conceptualised teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and its impact on education. Within this theme, participants acknowledged that there are circumstances in which pregnant teenagers or young mothers may experience poorer educational outcomes. When such circumstances do occur, participants were keen to emphasise that was often more related to a young person's pre-existing adversities, rather than their pregnancy.

2.5.3 It Creates Distinct Barriers

Definition. This theme contrasts with the theme 'It's rarely the only factor' by exploring the idea that teenage pregnancy, in itself, can create distinct barriers to education. This idea is explored through two distinct subthemes:

- The Magnitude of Pregnancy Itself: this subtheme explores the idea that pregnancy, in itself, is a life-changing event that can create distinct barriers to education.
- The Distinct Demands of Student Motherhood: this subtheme explores the idea that balancing the dual roles of 'mother' and 'student' can create distinct barriers to education for young mothers.

2.5.3.1 The Magnitude of Pregnancy Itself

All participants conceptualised teenage pregnancy as a life-changing event for their students.

Florence: *It's such a big change in your life*

Emma: *They are going through some massive changes*

Freya: *it's quite a time sensitive thing, isn't it? Like if someone announces they're pregnant, we've only got, we've only got months until things change quite a lot. And if anything, it's going to be an immediate change as well. So, it's quite time sensitive*

Consistent with the theme 'Every Girl was Different', participants acknowledged that young women adjust to news of their pregnancy in different ways. For some their pregnancy may have been planned, whilst for others it was unexpected. Tracey, for instance, reflected on how one young woman she supported struggled to come to terms with her pregnancy, which in turn affected her motivation and engagement with education.

Tracey: *The most recent one was sort of like why even bother with GCSEs at all? Because now you know her whole life was over and she's got a child. So it was very, very difficult for her to see anything past the birth.*

Tracey's extract is notable, as it contrasts with much of the wider literature on teenage pregnancy and education, which frequently conceptualises pregnancy as a factor that motivates young women to re-engage with education (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Rudoe, 2014).

Emma also reflected on the impact pregnancy had on her student's ability to engage with, and access, education. To help make sense of this, she considered Maslow's (1943) 'Hierarchy of Needs', which is a hierarchical theory of human motivation. Maslow posits that humans must first meet lower-level needs, such as 'physiological' and 'safety' needs, before they can attend to higher-level needs such as 'esteem' and 'self-actualisation'.

Emma: *I guess when you go back to, like, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, you're really at the bottom of the pyramid with those girls, just because of everything that they're going through.*

In Emma's extract, she suggests pregnant teenagers are often operating at the lower end of Maslow's hierarchy. Although she does not explicitly define what she means by this, later in her interview it is apparent that she is referring to the physiological demands of pregnancy. For example:

Emma: *they [pregnant students] have to be very energetic, very enthusiastic when actually they are feeling rubbish. And like I say, their risk of capturing a cold or flu,*

which could make them even worse, is so much higher [...] a lot of our students travel an awful long way. So they could travel about up to an hour and a half to get into college, which you know, for some pregnant people is exhausting just in itself.

Other participants also acknowledged the implications pregnancy could have on a young women's overall physical, social and emotional health.

Hope: *I think it's the knowledge and awareness of pregnancy on young people, the impact of it, kind of physically, emotionally and mentally that would be big barriers.*

Freya: *pregnancy is not a, it's not a disorder, is it? It's not like, something? But it is still something that's going to have a physical, mental and social, I guess, impact on these pupils ...*

Freya: *it's kind of like a medical status I guess [...] it's like being of a particular status that's going to have very specific symptoms and very specific side effects that are only going to affect certain people at a certain time.*

Florence: *one of the other things we do have, is our own like counselling service. So we do, we do, say you know if you ever want to go and talk with them about your [pregnancy] because pregnancy obviously, it's a massive impact on your emotional health, social health, everything like that.*

The language used in the above extracts, such as 'disorder' and 'health', suggest participants were conceptualising pregnancy as a 'medical condition', with its own distinct symptoms. This understanding is in line with the wider literature on pregnancy, which recognises the significant medical implications and physical impact pregnancy has on women's bodies (e.g. Neiger, 2017). However, within the existing literature on teenage pregnancy and education, there is limited focused attention on how these factors may affect a young women's ability to engage with education. Though, this was alluded to briefly by participants in Vincent's (2009) research, which explored young mothers' retrospective reflections on their school experiences during pregnancy.

In Vincent's study, one participant described how hormonal changes made it more difficult to regulate her emotions in the school environment. Another shared how due to fatigue, it was harder to keep up with schoolwork in the later stages of pregnancy. When interpreting these findings, Vincent applied Minow's (1990) 'Dilemma of Difference' as a theoretical lens, which is a paradox that considers whether differences should be ignored or recognised when trying to promote equality. Using this lens, Vincent suggested there was a tension between pregnant teenagers not wanting to be treated differently from their peers but also wanting education staff to recognise and respond to their pregnancy-related needs. Positively, the participants in this study clearly recognised the impact pregnancy had on a women's body, and in the subsequent themes '*It's all about the Education*' and '*Putting the Young Person First*', it was evident they tried their best to address and respond to these needs in a sensitive manner.

2.5.3.2 The Distinct Demands of Student Motherhood

Participants recognised that for any women, teenager or not, the transition to motherhood can be challenging.

Tracey: *sometimes they haven't been out for a while [...] you know, the type of things that new mums would go through anyway*

Freya: *I mean they're hard for anyone who has baby, like it's a whole new thing. But it's going to be difficult.*

However, participants stressed that, balancing new motherhood alongside being a student is, in itself, something that created distinct challenges for the young women they supported.

Casey: *if you've got a baby, the baby's going to be ill. The baby's going to have jabs. You know then you're going to get ill because you're knackered and you're, you know, you're struggling your way through the winter getting in, getting on and off the bus from housing that's probably not great in areas of the local community, that you know are not necessarily very affluent, and you're fighting all those battles and trying*

to get food on the table, and nappys, and formula milk, and all those sorts of things.

So you have to take that into account [redacted] you know, even though, when they're in the classroom and they got that 45 minutes of maths, you need them to do 45 minutes of maths because otherwise they're not going to get the qualifications.

In Casey's extract he describes the various challenges a young mother may encounter before arriving at school. He uses this example to highlight that despite dealing with the demands of motherhood, there remains an expectation for young mothers to engage and focus on their lessons.

In their interviews, Freya and Lucy similarly recognised the additional challenges having child could create for young mothers. For example, in the extracts below they described how, for some of their students', their parenting responsibilities had a direct impact on their grades and ability to study.

Lucy: *...basically her attendance at high school was like something like 20%, and it was to do with sort of balancing childcare [...] basically just anytime she did a test, she'd get like a U or a grade one, because she just wasn't keeping up. She'd always be very good at calling in to say I can't come in today, 'my [baby's] ill' or can't come in today 'I've got to look after my [baby]'.*

Freya: *They didn't necessarily even struggle with their grades as much. It was more if they struggled with their grades, it was because of lack of attendance, which was directly due to childcare.*

Due to this, Freya questioned whether balancing the roles of mother and student is actually compatible.

Freya: *I guess like it's quite common to have the idea that it's going to have a quite a big and negative impact in the sense of it, the idea of being a young mother, especially under 19 like we were saying, and doing your full time education, doesn't really seem synonymous like that you could do both at the same time. So one of them will give is what the impression has always been with me [...] from my experience, it either means that they have to come out of full term education or that*

they do it, but it's just a lot harder and they need a support system that they might not have needed if they didn't have a child.

Biddle's (1986) 'Role Theory' provides a useful framework for interpreting the tension Freya is alluding to. Role theory posits that individuals occupy various social positions which each hold distinct expectations for behaviour (Biddle, 1986). For example, the role of 'mother' may carry expectations associated with caregiving and prioritising a child's needs, whereas the role of 'student' may involve expectations around attainment and attendance. Although individuals can hold multiple social positions simultaneously, Biddle reflects that these positions may not always be compatible. In these scenarios, Biddle suggests that 'role conflict' can occur, which is when an individual is required to attend to 'two or more incompatible expectations for behaviour' (p.82).

Considering the extracts above, it seems participants in this study were articulating an inherent conflict between balancing the dual roles of mother and student. The existing literature has similarly identified a tension between balancing motherhood alongside education (Ellis-Sloan, 2024; Vincent, 2009; Vincent & Thomson, 2013). Vincent and Thomson (2013), for example, conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 pregnant teenagers and young mothers. One of the themes identified from these interviews, was 'Tensions in Managing the Dual Role of Mother and Student'. Within this theme, the researchers reflected that 'even for those with considerable family support, juggling the dual roles of mother and student presented difficulties' (p.9). This finding aligns with Freya's extract, in which she emphasises that, even with a support system in place, balancing education with motherhood is challenging.

Summary. The theme 'It creates distinct barriers' consists of two subthemes: '*The Magnitude of Pregnancy Itself*' and '*The Distinct Demands of Student Motherhood*'. In the subtheme '*The Magnitude of Pregnancy Itself*', participants reflected on the distinct challenges that pregnancy itself can create, including difficulties adjusting to the idea of motherhood that affected motivation to engage with education, as well as the medical implications of pregnancy. The subtheme '*The Distinct Demands of Student Motherhood*' extends this by exploring the distinct challenges associated with balancing motherhood alongside an education. Taken

together, both subthemes are important for understanding how participants conceptualised teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and its impact on education. It is clear that, in contrast to the theme 'It's Rarely the Only Factor', participants strongly believed that teenage pregnancy, in itself, can create unique and specific barriers to education.

2.5.4 It's Not All 'Doom and Gloom'

Definition. This theme centres around the idea that that teenage pregnancy is not an inherently 'bad thing' and educational success is still possible for pregnant teenagers and young mothers. The theme name originates from a quote by Florence who, throughout their interview emphasised the importance of challenging the stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy. In addition, she stressed that, from her experience, teenage pregnancy is not inevitably associated with negative educational outcomes. The theme name is also shared with the title of Clarke's (2015) qualitative study, which explored factors contributing to positive outcomes for young mothers.

Consistent with the wider literature, participants acknowledged that there is a stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy and early motherhood (Yardley, 2008; Mantovani & Thomas, 2014). This was summarised succinctly by Florence:

Florence: *There's always like, the like, a negative stereotype that, you know, it [teenage pregnancy] messes up the kid's education.*

However, contrary to this stereotype, participants in this study wanted to point out that teenage pregnancy, in itself, is not inherently a 'bad thing' and can be something that is actively wanted and celebrated.

Emma: *we're more than happy to celebrate with the student if that's the situation. You know, for a lot of my students that were or have been pregnant previously, they'd be excellent mothers. And it's kind of what they were kind of born to do. Like [...] yeah, I want to get across that I don't want them to feel any stigma.*

Lucy: *she was she was very proud to be pregnant, talked about it a lot, was very excited about it.*

Furthermore, many participants wanted to stress that, despite the stereotypes surrounding teenage pregnancy, educational success is still possible for pregnant teenagers and young mothers.

Florence: *one of the things we are very keen on saying to the kids is, contrary to sort of like popular myth, you know that you've knackered your life up...Actually you know, you have now got a really good incentive to make a real success of your life.*

Tracey: *I think the overall positivity, the fact that it's not the end of their sort of...you know, it's not a problem. It's a lovely happy stance and it doesn't, it doesn't end anything, it just means that you delay things and there's sort of life beyond. And it's yeah, just not the end of education. I think that's sort of like a major thing for us. It's sort of like you can do this at any time.*

In support of this idea, participants described the various successes of the pregnant and mothering students they have supported.

Lucy: *She did really well on her GCSEs. I think she got basically the max because she was, she was entered for foundation. I think she got fives*

Florence: *I mean, I'm just thinking of the ones we've dealt with in recent years...They've all gone to uni.*

Tracey: *one was a really good student who got a good amount of GCSEs*

The acknowledgement that pregnant teenagers and young mothers can still experience traditional forms of educational success, such as passing exams and progressing to higher education, is reflected within the wider literature (Ellis-Sloan, 2024; Rudoe, 2011; Vincent, 2016). Ellis-Sloan (2024), for instance, interviewed 12 women aged 25 to 65 who had all become mothers as teenagers. Each of these women progressed onto higher education and had various academic accolades. For

example, most participants had a graduate degree, 4 had postgraduate qualifications and 2 had PhDs. While in Rudoe's (2011, p.111) ethnographic research, she reported that 'educational success at school was not impossible' for some of the young mothers she interviewed, sharing that three of her participants had achieved five GCSEs at grades A-C.

However, participants in the current study were also keen to stress that educational success shouldn't just be measured by conventional outcomes. For example, Lucy reflected on a case where a young mother demonstrated success through her improved 'relationship with the education system'.

Lucy: *She didn't pass any of the GCSEs, but you know, she kept attendance through that year, was happy, safe in college, happy with [her baby] and I think had a much better relationship with the education system than she'd had at high school.*

Similarly, Casey reflected on the importance of looking beyond conventional indicators of educational success when discussing the outcomes of pregnant teenagers and young mothers.

Casey: *as far as those outcomes [GCSEs] are concerned, I wouldn't say that we make a kind of monumental difference. But if you're going to measure outcomes in terms of well-being, safety, the opportunity to move on to something post 16 or something post 18 [...], um, then I think we make a huge difference and we hopefully make them more ready and more confident to go into society.*

In the existing literature, there is limited recognition of the less conventional forms of educational success achieved by pregnant teenagers and young mothers, such as those described by Lucy and Casey. Though, this idea was briefly captured in Dawson and Hosie's (2005) mixed-methods exploration of teenage pregnancy, early motherhood, and education. As part of this study, Dawson and Hosie reviewed the qualifications taken by 93 young mothers. When presenting their results, the researchers cautioned against assessing educational success exclusively through grades and suggested some participants had achieved progress in other ways. For example, they described how one participant, 'Tella', did not obtain GCSEs.

However, during her pregnancy, she had successfully re-engaged with the education system and increased her reading age by seven years (p.134). This example aligns with Lucy and Casey's reflections that the educational success of pregnant teenagers and young mothers may not always be captured through conventional indicators, like exam results.

Summary. This theme provides an important counterbalance to dominant narratives of negativity that can surround teenage pregnancy in the existing literature and public discourse (Clarke, 2015; Mantovani & Thomas, 2014; Yardley, 2008). Within this theme, participants stressed that teenage pregnancy is not always associated with poorer educational outcomes. To evidence this, participants shared various success stories, where their pregnant and mothering pupils had passed their exams and progressed onto higher education. In addition, some participants were also keen to point out that young mothers may demonstrate educational success in less conventional ways.

2.5.5 RQ1 Summary

RQ1 explored how education staff conceptualise and understand teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and its impact on education. Overall, participants conceptualised pregnant teenagers and young mothers as being a heterogeneous group and stressed the individual differences between those they supported. However, despite this emphasis on heterogeneity, as the researcher I was able to identify several common patterns across their accounts. In particular, all participants identified that, for most of the young women they supported, pregnancy was rarely their first vulnerability. Some participants were particularly keen to stress this point, because they wanted to make it clear that educational success is still possible for pregnant teenagers and young mothers. Accordingly, in cases where educational success did not occur, they suggested this was most likely linked to a young person's pre-existing adversities rather than pregnancy itself.

A useful theoretical lens for making sense of these findings is Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality framework, which provides a framework for understanding how multiple aspects of an individual's identity, such as race and gender, interact to influence experiences of discrimination and oppression. Crenshaw originally used intersectionality as a framework for demonstrating how black women's experiences

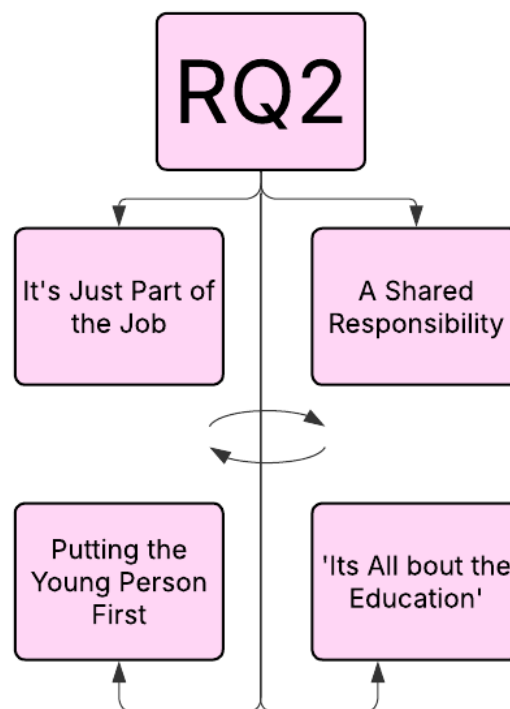
of discrimination were dually influenced by the intersections between race and gender. However, it has since been applied more broadly, including in the teenage pregnancy literature (e.g. Mantovani & Thomas, 2014). In the context of this study, this framework is helpful for recognising why the educational outcomes of pregnant teenagers and young mothers may vary. As, from an intersectionality perspective, it is likely that pregnancy and motherhood do not operate in isolation from other aspects of an individual's identity and experiences.

2.6 RQ2: How do secondary and further education staff perceive and approach their role in supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers?

This RQ explored how the participants perceive and approach their role in regard to supporting pregnant pupils and young mothers. Four themes were constructed in relation to this research question.

Figure 5

RQ2 Thematic Map



2.6.1 It's Just Part of the Job

Definition. This theme explores a core idea expressed by participants throughout the dataset: that supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers' falls within their normal professional responsibilities. Participants articulated this in various ways. Some participants reflected that teenage pregnancy is just something that has 'always happened' within schools and is therefore something education staff should anticipate as part of their role. Others expressed that, as part of their role, they had a duty to support pupils from a range of backgrounds and with a wide array of needs. Consequently, they suggested that supporting pregnant and mothering students is something that simply falls within this responsibility.

One aspect of this theme, was the idea that teenage pregnancy is something all professionals working with teenagers should be prepared to encounter. This view was articulated succinctly by Florence during her interview:

Florence: *I think it's [teenage pregnancy] an occupational hazard of teaching teenagers. And you know, I mean, I remember when I was a 21-year-old NQT. This was back in, god like [year], I think [year]...And it was my first ever sociology class, so I was I was 21/22 and I was teaching a girl in [REDACTED], who, she was just turning 18, but she already had one child at 16 and was just about to have her next child just after the exam's finished. And yeah, it's just, it's just always just been one of those things that's always happened wherever I've, wherever I've worked, just because that's what young people do.*

Florence's conceptualisation that pregnancy is an 'occupational hazard' of teaching teenagers aligns with findings from the existing literature. Rudoe (2011), for example, conducted an ethnographic study which explored the educational experiences of young mothers attending an antenatal education programme. As part of this study, five staff members were interviewed. In one interview, 'Caroline', a secondary school careers adviser, commented that teenage pregnancy has always occurred, and implied this was simply something schools need to be prepared for (p.93).

Another aspect of this theme was the view that supporting pupils with additional needs is simply part of everyday practice in education. This idea was expressed by Freya.

Freya: *the job of being an educator, it changes all the time, doesn't it? Because your little clients, your little customers or whatever like they, change all the time. And their needs change all the time, either in bulk, like in terms of how we have more like children that aren't able to read, for example at the moment, but also specific people. Like each year you might have someone with a different need and you adapt to that. That's like part of the whole, that's what we got trained to do, was to adapt to the needs of the people in the room.*

According to Freya, teenage pregnancy was just another example of one of the many additional needs she was required to adapt to and support.

Freya: *in terms of pregnancy and being a mother- they are to me under an umbrella of many different adverse circumstances that a student could have and it's not necessarily our responsibility to like fix it and you know make the situation as perfect as possible, but we can do whatever we can, with the resources we have, to make the lessons as accessible as we can, like we would do that for any adverse situation, whether someone's a young carer, whether someone's disabled or you know*

A similar sentiment was shared by other participants.

Tracey: *We work with an awful lot of young people who [find education challenging] for a wide variety of reasons, and I sort of just see this [teenage pregnancy] as one other 'one'.*

Florence: *we have so many young people from so many difficult challenging backgrounds that really for us a student who is pregnant or a young parent, it's just another challenge that we have to rise to in terms of support in the same way that we have young people who are carers, looked after children, living in poverty. You know this left, right and centre stuff then you know it's just sort of part of us being quite resilient and flexible as a college.*

Lucy: *when you've got a class of kids who all have their own situations, you know, as I said, like these few girls [pregnant students/young mothers] I'm talking about across 2 academic years, you know they're mixed in with all sorts of other situations. You know, you've got students that are under the Child Protection Act. I've got students that have potentially experienced homelessness, hunger, you know?*

In the extracts above, participants positioned pregnancy as simply one of the many needs they need to respond to within their roles. Consequently, they reflected that supporting pregnant or mothering students did not require anything exceptional or beyond the scope of their existing professional roles

Florence: *I mean basically we just take it like we do all the other students, you know we work because we're in a-in a area of really low socio-economic, you know, standards, you know 75% of our kids come from poverty, you know, all these different things for us, it's just like, it's just another thing that we need to deal with and you know we, we support them in the same way that we support all our young people who come from all these different backgrounds, you know...*

Tracey: *I feel like we treat all of our young people as individuals. And we try and put in place whatever we can to support that young person that we feel we need to, and that's not a 'pregnant girl' dependent at all, I think all of our students are treated individually and we do the best we can for all of them.*

Hope: *They're just treated the same apart from they're pregnant. So, we just take into them, into, factor in their medical conditions and you know, if they've got morning sickness or they're just struggling, then we work, we work really holistically around them and what they need. And I think that's really the same of other settings. You can't really discriminate against it.*

To some extent, the idea that supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers is 'just part of the job' has been reflected by education staff in earlier research (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Dench, 2007; Rudoe, 2011). For example, as part of their mixed-methods investigation of teenage pregnancy and education, Dawson

and Hosie (2005) surveyed 138 school staff. Their findings indicated that most school staff were not opposed to the idea of pregnant students attending their settings. For example, when asked what type of educational provision they would encourage for pregnant teenagers and young mothers, staff suggested they should 'remain in mainstream as far as possible' and continue with the 'normal curriculum with whatever flexibilities are necessary' (p.159). These insights broadly align with the current theme, insofar as participants similarly believed teenage pregnancy was compatible with mainstream education, and that these pupils did not require exceptional or specialist arrangements.

More broadly, there has been an increasing push for education staff, at a national level, to ensure they are adapting their practice to meet the needs of individual learners (Lin et al., 2026). For example, the 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' (2026) white paper sets out the government's commitment to developing a more inclusive education system for all children and young people. This current policy context may help to explain why participants in the current study felt strongly that adapting their practice to support pupils with diverse needs, including pregnant pupils and young mothers, was simply part of their professional role.

Summary. This theme provides insight into how education staff perceive and approach their role in supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers. Participants suggested that supporting this group falls within the realms of their regular professional responsibilities. Most participants pointed out that supporting pupils with additional needs is simply something all education staff are expected to do. For example, they described how within their normal role they are expected to support pupils from a range of backgrounds and with a range of diverse needs. Consequently, they viewed supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers as being no different from this. Some also reflected that, given the age of secondary and further education students, teenage pregnancy is something that should be reasonably be expected and anticipated by staff who work with this age group.

2.6.2 A Shared Responsibility

Definition. This theme explores a core idea that was expressed implicitly and explicitly by participants throughout the dataset: that supporting pregnant pupils and

young mothers is a shared responsibility. Implicitly, this theme was evident in how participants addressed questions about their role and approaches used to support pregnant teenagers and young mothers. Explicitly, this idea was captured through participants' conceptualisations of there being a 'network' of professionals surrounding pregnant teenagers and young mothers.

Across the dataset, participants consistently emphasised the notion of 'shared responsibility' in regard to supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers. Implicitly, this was evidenced through the participants use of language and interpretation of interview questions. For example, participants often used collective pronouns such as 'we' to describe the support they implemented for pregnant students and young mothers. In addition, they also tended to answer on behalf of their settings, rather than just for themselves.

Casey: *I think there's a there's a whole range of things that we do. I think I'd start by saying that, you know, we, we try, whatever we do, we try to remember and whatever structure we put in place, we try to remember that these kids have got a hell of a job on their hands beyond just education. So, we're trying to operate, I suppose, in a, in a trauma informed way.*

Florence: *what we would do is like, as soon as we get notified by the student that you know they're having a child and due date, whatever, so we will e-mail out to all their teachers [...] we do it quite centralised and coordinated because there's no point having like a scattergun approach and nobody knows who's got responsibility [...] It's very much like right, this is the kid, this is what we're all doing...*

At a more explicit level, several participants described pregnant students and young mothers as being supported by a network of adults, rather than just one individual.

Tracey: *there is a sort of network around that, that person, that young person, and we're all sort of working together to try and get them what they need, which is an education, a healthy baby and then a life after that [...] But I mean, you know, there's health visitors, midwives, social workers, and us... We, we make a good team, we*

generally sort of are all on the same page with it because it does get overwhelming when they have so many appointments.

Freya: *I'm having this picture of we've got a child and then they've got a lot of adults surrounding them [...] So like, they've got the adults who are potentially able to give childcare, they've got the adults around them that are potentially able to inform them of more things.*

Florence: *I mean what we, what we always do when we have pregnant students is we always allocate them to one of like the senior members of pastoral, so either like the safeguarding manager and or myself tend to be the main two people that get allocated, so we act for like a point of care for like the young person, but also like parents and carers, and then if there's any additional services involved like social services or midwives or whomever we, you know, coordinate all that for them.*

Participants explained how, due to these networks, the responsibility for supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers was never just down to one person. In Freya's interview, she expressed this idea by explaining how, in her role of class teacher, there are limits to what she can realistically do or provide to support pregnant teenagers and young mothers. As such, she describes the reassurance she feels in knowing that other professionals can take responsibility for the aspects of support she can't provide.

Freya: *there's only so far I can reach as a classroom teacher outside of the classroom. So, when you've got those, like, really sturdy and consistent systems in place outside of the classroom, where you know that, that their mentor is going to have checked in or you know that, that welfare, that counsellor, or whoever is going to have contacted them...That makes a massive difference because you know, it's like you're all actually communicating with each other.*

This idea was also captured in Lucy's interview, where she describes how, as a teacher, her primary duties were to promote the teaching and learning of pregnant teenagers and young mother. Consequently, she stressed that that other

professionals were responsible for addressing the more pastoral or administrative aspects of support required by this group.

Lucy: *it wouldn't be my responsibility to know that [national legislation and guidance regarding teenage pregnancy], I would put that to like safeguarding team, pastoral team tutor or like a form tutor [...] it wasn't necessarily my responsibility to look for stuff like that or make decisions about it, you know, if anyone was making decisions about absences or their attendance like, that wasn't, I was just there to teach them and build relationships.*

Overall, the suggestion that supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers is a 'shared responsibility' aligns with the current legislative context, which explicitly promotes a multi-agency approach to supporting this group (Hadley et al., 2024; Public Health England, 2018, 2019). Multi-agency working has also been referenced in the existing literature on teenage pregnancy and education (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Dench, 2007). Both Dawson and Hosie (2005) and Dench (2007), for example, surveyed education staff about supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers. In both these studies staff reported working with a range of external agencies. However, due to the use of survey methodology, neither study explored education staff's perceptions or experiences of joint working in much depth. Therefore, the current theme extends this literature by demonstrating that, for participants in the present study, joint working is integral to how they approach their role in supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers.

Another notable difference between prior research and the current study, is the external agencies education staff reported working with. In Dawson and Hosie's study, for example, 'Teenage Pregnancy Co-ordinators' and 'Education Welfare Services' were the most commonly used services by staff. Yet, neither of these services were mentioned by participants in the present study, who instead described working with social workers, midwives and nurses. This difference likely reflects changes in the national context: Dawson and Hosie's and Dench's studies were both conducted during the teenage pregnancy strategy. As part of this strategy, a range of national initiatives were introduced to address the educational needs of young parents (Hadley et al., 2024). For example, each local authority was required to appoint a 'Teenage Pregnancy Co-ordinator' to oversee and organise support for

pregnant teenagers and young parents (Hadley et al., 2024). However, since the strategy concluded in 2010, this role has become a 'rarity' within local authorities (Hadley et al., 2024, p.160). This may explain why participants in the current study did not talk about 'Teenage Pregnancy Co-Ordinators'.

Summary. This theme provides insight into how education staff perceive and approach their role in supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers. According to the participants, responsibility for supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers is never attributed to one individual. Instead, they suggested that this responsibility is distributed across a range of professionals, both within and external to their education settings. This finding is consistent with the existing literature, which similarly highlights the prevalence of joint working between education staff and external agencies (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Dench, 2007).

2.6.3 'It's All About the Education'

Definition. This theme centres on a core idea within the dataset: for education staff, supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers revolves around prioritising the young person's education. This theme is complementary to the theme 'A Shared Responsibility', as it provides additional context into what education staff perceive to be the priorities and boundaries of their role, in contrast to other professional groups. The theme name derives from Tracey's interview:

Tracey: *It's all about the education, isn't it? That that's sort of like our primary focus and although we are there and we're sort of, you know, supporting the young person at that time, which is a very difficult time in their life, it's education focused. It is thinking about how you need some basic qualifications, and how we can help you get them.*

Tracey's extract captures the main facet of this theme, in that she viewed the 'education staff' role as being contained to providing the educational aspects of support. A similar view was articulated by other participants. Casey, for example, reflected that their emphasis on education was what distinguished education staff from other professionals, such as family nurses.

Casey: *...if we went back to your question from a few minutes ago about what's, who do you support in the main right mum or baby? I would say mum they [family nurses] would say baby, you know that's their, I guess that's probably their first instinct. Because [...] I am the, I'm a teacher, I'm in charge of attendance, I'm in charge of progress, I'm in charge of, you know, those sorts of things that have a little bit more of a quantitative measure to them. So then, my role is to be a little bit more hard-nosed with them and say, look, I know it's tough and I know that your head is full of all this stuff that you know you can't, you're telling me you can't shift at the moment and you're really struggling, but if you don't shift it now, if you don't like park it and go into those lessons, we're going to have the same problem in a year's time. You know, we need you to get into those lessons. We need you to get you as close to your qualifications as you can because that's really going to help you*

In Casey's extract, he explains how he has to be 'hard-nosed' with the pregnant teenagers and young mothers he supports when it comes to their education. For him, his primary focus is ensuring that these young women engage with education and work towards a qualification. This aligns with the perspectives of other participants.

Emma: *if a student comes to me and says I'm pregnant, my first thought is well, we need to get you to finish the course.*

Tracey: *Our sort of overriding thing is to get them some qualifications, so that they do have a future, they can get to college, even if it's not, not, imminent, not in the following year, but in the future.*

Lucy: *I've got to try and get them to pass their GCSE's*

Florence: *we talk about, right, you're going to get your grades at college, and we can, you know, so then you've got them in the bag. So, then that opens up apprenticeships, opens up uni, opens up employment, and you know we can, we will still offer like support even after they leave like we'll be like a reference for them for like part time jobs.*

Consistent with their emphasis on attainment, participants felt it was their duty to make education as accessible as possible for pregnant teenagers and young mothers.

Florence: *for us, we then work with our exams team and our additional learning support team. So for instance, if they're going to sit like exams pregnant, you know, then it's like, you know, do they need like a separate room or, you know, obviously comfy chair? Do they need rest breaks, do they need to be able to walk around so you know, we sort that out so that they can achieve the potential in their exams. And we, you know, coursework and everything. We make sure that teachers will sit with them one to one, offer help and stuff, give them that extra support*

Lucy: *She was very determined that she was just going to have the baby and also sit her exams. How realistic that is, I don't know? But college just sort of said: OK, well, if that's what you want to do, we're going to do, you know, whatever we can to support with that.*

Tracey: *we will support them through their exams in any way we can or for whatever subjects we can*

Freya: *my student was given loads of extensions to things and was allowed to get that qualification in a slightly different manner.*

From the extracts above, it is apparent that participants were motivated to ensure that the young women they worked with were supported to access and engage with education. This included being flexible and responsive to a young women's needs and providing reasonable adjustments like extensions and additional tutoring. This finding aligns with Dawson and Hosie's (2005, p.159) survey of school staff, in which the participants highlighted that their 'priority' was to 'continue to support' the pregnant student 'in every way possible' to ensure their continued access to education. Notably, however, Dawson and Hosie suggested that this finding contrasted with the perspectives of young mothers who, instead, frequently report receiving inadequate support from their education settings during pregnancy.

This suggests there may be a potential disconnect between the perceptions of education staff and young mothers regarding the support provided.

Another important facet of this theme, was that participants considered it their duty to help minimise the disruption that pregnancy could cause to education. For example, several participants described sending work home during maternity leave and supporting a speedy return post-birth.

Lucy: *I know she was given some work, sent home with some work. If she had time, you know when she was having the baby.*

Hope: *we just take it at their pace and just try and get them back as quick as possible because we know that's what's best for them and a lot of them really do want to come back before you know the six weeks they're ready to come back.*

Lucy and Hope's extracts are notable, in that they contrast with the perspectives of education staff reported in the existing literature. In Rudoe's (2011) ethnographic study, five education staff were interviewed, some of whom argued that young mothers should not be pressured into returning to education. Instead, they suggested that young mothers should be encouraged to spend time bonding with their babies. These contrasting perspectives may reflect the differing contexts in which participants were working. In Rudoe's research, the staff interviewed were involved in delivering an antenatal programme for young mothers, which included teaching the women about childbirth and parenting. Considering this, prioritising a speedy return to education or training post-birth might have somewhat conflicted with the programmes focus. In contrast, Lucy and Hope work in secondary and further education settings, where a key focus is on supporting students to obtain formal qualifications, such as GCSEs and A-levels. This might explain why they placed importance on quickly reintegrating young mothers back into education post-birth.

Summary. This theme provides insight into how education staff perceive and approach their role in supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers. It highlights that education staff perceive their role to be predominantly education focused. For instance, the participants all suggested that they had a duty to ensure

education is accessible for pregnant teenagers and young mothers. This offers a different perspective to existing literature, in which young mothers have often described feeling pushed out and forgotten about by their teachers once they become pregnant (Coleman & Cater, 2006; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Lall, 2007; Vincent & Thomson, 2010).

2.6.4 Putting the Young Person First

Definition. This theme centres around the idea that education staff viewed themselves as putting the individual pregnant teenager or young mother first in their practice. This theme was most evident when participants were discussing how, in situations where competing demands were present, they would prioritise the interests of the pregnant teenager or young mother over others. This theme was also captured through the participants' emphasis on respecting the autonomy of pregnant teenagers and young mothers and being student-led when planning support.

As explored in the theme 'A Shared Responsibility', a range of professionals are involved in supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers, who will each have different roles and priorities. Alongside being education focused, participants in this study understood their role to be student-centred. One of the primary ways participants articulated this, was through their reflections on who their priority was, the mother or the baby. All participants suggested that their primary duty was to the young woman, not the baby.

Emma: *...that student is our priority. So making their education experience, kind of still remain, student centred for them, I think it's something really important for me.*

Lucy: *if it was a student coming to me about a conversation, you know an issue, or a concern about the child I would listen to it absolutely, because that still affects them as well, that is their world, that, that is a huge part of their world and is key to them. But I absolutely see myself as 'for the student', yeah.*

Casey: *my priority and my role is [supporting] the young person who is pregnant or the young mum [...] Whilst it remains part of my responsibility to see links, so if*

there's a vulnerability for the young person, there's likely a vulnerability for their baby and to make sure that I'm passing that on and having those conversations, my role is to support the school age or post sixteen child.

In the extracts above, Lucy and Casey explain how young mothers are often inextricably linked with their child. For instance, Casey recognises that if he has a safeguarding concern regarding a young mother, this will likely affect their baby as well. However, both Lucy and Casey make clear that their ultimate intention is put the young mother 'first'.

Another aspect of this theme was the importance participants placed on respecting their student's right to autonomy. Emma and Hope articulated this by comparing pregnant teenagers with pregnant adults. They felt strongly that pregnant teenagers should not be perceived or treated any differently from pregnant adults.

Emma: *I know that they're students, but I do wonder, you know, when they get, if they were in a job and they were pregnant, just not as a teenager, you know, there would be no communication between the employee's manager and their midwife or whatever. You know, it's, that pregnant lady is the communication centre for her own needs and wants and you know whether she needs time off and things like that*

Hope: *I just think they should, they just should be treated like an adult who's pregnant. It, just because they're younger, it doesn't really make a difference. They're still entitled to everything, you know, an adult will still go at work, they'll still go to university, they'll still go to college, if they're at college, if they're working their way up the education system, they...I don't think they should be treated any different.*

In keeping with this emphasis on autonomy, participants felt it was important to be guided by the pregnant student's wants and needs when planning support. According to Hope, this sometimes meant deprioritising her own goals of re-engaging young mothers with school and instead focusing on what the young person was actually saying they needed.

Hope: *I was already on the back foot because they didn't like education. So then I changed my perspective and said OK, if you don't want to come to [school], that's fine but how can I support you getting what you need from school and it was about accessing CAMHs, it was about accessing, accessing education and the limited education that she wants*

For Emma and Florence, being student-led meant not making assumptions about their student's situation and waiting to be directed by the young person.

Emma: *When they share the news with me, my first response is: is it a congratulations sort of situation? You know, and if they respond, yes, then I'll be very happy for them and say, oh, that's great and, you know, congratulations. And if they say no, not really then we would sit down and say, OK, how can we support you?*

Florence: *I mean, obviously you should always really be directed by a young person in this situation [...] if the kid is happy staying here at college then that's absolutely fine we'll sort some out. If they do want to get that more specialist stuff, then we would work with like, education and you know the local authority or social workers or whatever.*

Overall, it was clear that when supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers, participants felt it was imperative to put the young person first. This aligns with the wider national and global legislative context, which emphasises the importance of including young people's views in decision making (e.g. UNCRC, 1989, Article 12). However, the existing literature on teenage pregnancy and early motherhood highlights potential tensions with this approach. For example, in her thesis, Berryman (2021) used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore the educational experiences of five young mothers. One participant, 'Beth', described how her education setting allowed her to lead decisions about what support she needed. However, she seemed to interpret this not as empowerment, but as a lack of staff understanding about the support available (p.170). This indicates that there may be a potential disconnect between staff intentions and young people's actual experiences: while staff may view their approach as respecting the young person's

autonomy, pregnant teenagers and young mother may perceive education staff as lacking the knowledge and confidence to provide them with support.

Summary. This theme provides insight into how education staff perceive and approach their role in supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers. It highlights how education staff positioned themselves as being advocates for the pregnant student and young mothers. According to participants, this involves being guided by the student's wants and needs and prioritising the student's interests in situations where competing demands were present. However, when considered alongside existing literature, it is possible that this commitment may not always be experienced as intended by pregnant students or young mothers. As highlighted in Berryman's (2021) thesis, it can leave some young women feeling like education staff lack clarity or confidence in how to support them.

2.6.5 RQ2 Summary

RQ2 explored how education staff perceive their role in regard to supporting pregnant pupils and young mothers. Four themes were constructed to address this research question. In summary, these findings indicate that the participants all considered supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers to fall within the scope of their normal professional role and responsibilities. However, due to the diverse needs of pregnant teenagers and young mothers, participants emphasised that responsibility for supporting this group is often shared among multiple other education staff and external agencies. Despite sharing this responsibility, participants considered the contributions of education staff to be unique and distinctive. For instance, participants discussed how, unlike other professionals, their primary responsibility is to the young person rather than to her baby. Furthermore, participants emphasised that their role is education-focused, which means their primary duties revolve around making education as accessible as possible for pregnant teenagers and young mothers.

These findings align with insights from previous studies in the literature (e.g. Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Rudoe, 2011). For example, in Dawson and Hosie's (2005) mixed-methods study, education staff similarly reported that they attempt to make education as accessible as possible for pregnant teenagers and young mothers and often support this group through multi-agency working. However, as also noted by

Dawson and Hosie, these findings contrast with the perspectives of young mothers themselves, who often reflect negatively on the support they received from education staff. As suggested in the theme summary for 'Putting the Young Person First', this indicates a potential disconnect between the perceptions of education staff and young mothers regarding the support provided.

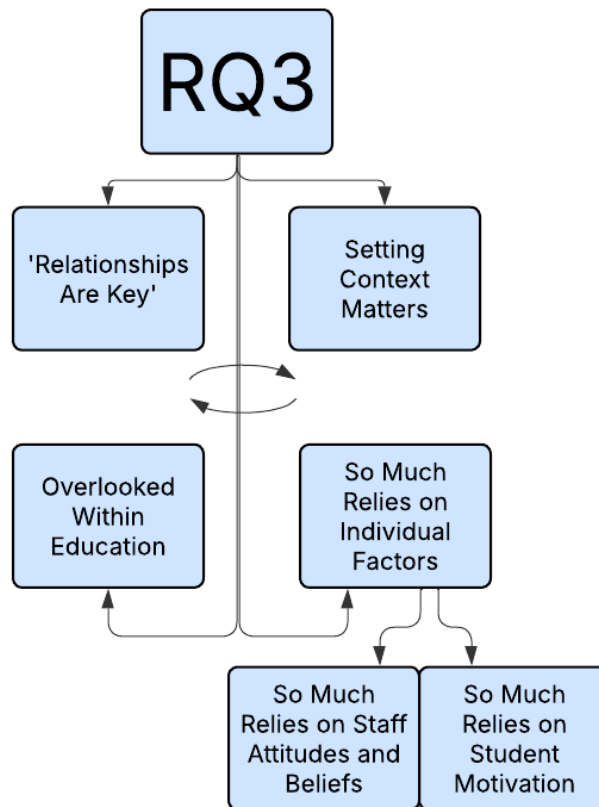
This disconnect between the accounts of pregnant teenagers, young mothers and education staff can be understood through the lens of critical realism, which is the onto-epistemological positioning underpinning this research. Critical realism recognises that different groups are likely to develop different constructions of the same underlying reality (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willis, 2022). Hence, some divergence between the accounts of education staff and those of pregnant teenagers and young mothers should be expected (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willis, 2022). It would be beneficial for future research to more explicitly compare and critically evaluate these differing constructions. Consistent with Bhaskar's (2008) concept of judgemental rationality, such research would likely be helpful for developing a more robust construal of pregnant teenagers and young mothers' educational reality.

2.7 RQ3: What factors might facilitate or hinder how effectively secondary and further education staff can support pregnant teenagers and young mothers?

This RQ explored the factors that helped and hindered how effectively participants felt they could support pregnant pupils and young mothers. Four themes and two subthemes were constructed in relation to this research question.

Figure 6

RQ3 Thematic Map



2.7.1 Overlooked Within Education

Definition. This theme centres around the idea that because teenage pregnancy is perceived as being so ‘rare’, support for pregnant teenagers and young mothers is not prioritised by education settings. This idea was explored in several ways. For instance, some participants captured this idea by reflecting on the rarity of teenage pregnancy itself. While other participants explored this idea by comparing teenage pregnancy to other more prevalent areas of need, like SEN.

Across the dataset, participants emphasised that teenage pregnancy was a rare phenomenon in schools.

Emma: *when I was in another setting, we, I, I never had any teenage pregnancies, and the only teenage pregnancy I remember was when I was actually at school as a student, I don't know whether this is relevant is or not.*

Hope: *not everybody, not every professional in their lifetime might, they might not come across this.*

Lucy: *I just didn't really think about it that much because it wasn't something that either was experienced by a friend of mine or someone I knew at school or in any other previous setting. So, I previous to that, I hadn't really given it that much thought, it's only when I then started working with female students that had those situations and seeing the impact that then I'd given it thought.*

Participants suggested that the perceived rarity of teenage pregnancy had a direct impact on the systems available to support pregnant teenagers and young mothers within their settings.

Casey: *I think most schools would be like [...] if we did have a pregnant student and they did want to keep the baby and they did want to stay here. What would we do? How would we deal with that?*

Emma: *The only thing that I get told and I don't again know if this is in writing, is that they need a risk assessment for their placement. They do, all pregnant students in our setting, get sent to the nurse and then the nurse does like a mother and baby check. However, our setting has, no longer has a nurse and is not looking to recruit another nurse. So it's not a withstanding framework that we have, again which is poor. But I've never been, you know, when I go to my manager and say look, this student is pregnant, I've never been made aware of any policy to do with expected mothers.*

In her extract, Emma highlighted that there was no formal policy or framework to guide how she supported pregnant students. In addition, she pointed out that previously available provision, such as the student nurse, no longer existed. When reflecting on why this was the case, Emma believed this was a conscious decision to allocate time and resources to more prevalent student needs.

Emma: *I don't really know why there is a lack of support. Maybe it is because it's not as prevalent I guess as SEN. Obviously we have a whole SEN designated team,*

where students go to for a chat. And I guess it comes back down to that idea of funding. Why would they fund a whole teenage pregnancy department when actually through the whole, you know, number of students that we have, it would be a small fraction that would need that support

Similar to Emma, other participants believed that the relatively low number of pregnant students and young mothers meant their settings could not justify the time or financial investment required to strengthen how they support this group.

Lucy: *the college or whatever trust, or whatever takes a look at their student body, sees the numbers where certain need is and say if it's, you know, 20. You know, typically if there's...If college are deciding what CPD or external providers they're going to invest in...If it's two students a year [that get pregnant], or one student a year, we're talking about, which it is in this case. It just happened to be I was teaching that group where this happened, you know, so we're talking about three members of staff in the whole student body that have had to experience this, they'll say that needs pretty low. You know, it's all relative, isn't it*

Florence: *in a perfect world it'd be lovely to have like a pregnant student young parent like pastoral person who works with them and is able to do more, you know, in terms of like social services or working with housing or working with parents, you know, stuff like that. But you know [...] We don't have enough pregnant students to justify it, and it's-it's-it's very much a perfect world thing and you know we, I mean [...] so every year we probably have about five or six pregnancies, so you know, it's not huge numbers*

Freya: *I think it's a mixture of, yeah, how infrequent it tends to happen, at least in the areas that I was in, like, maybe it would be different if I was in a different school, in a different area, that that was more of an issue, like for example in our area, we had a major issue with county lines and like young, like people grooming children into doing things like that. So, there was a big focus on that. So, I'm assuming that if there was a big issue with teen pregnancies, then that would be a focus in their safeguarding sessions.*

Freya's observation that greater attention would be given to teenage pregnancy if cases were higher, provides an important reflection point. In the 2000's, teenage pregnancy was conceptualised as a national problem in England (Hadley et al., 2024). To address, the government implemented their 10-year teenage pregnancy strategy, which was a fully funded, nationally led and locally delivered intervention that aimed to halve under-18 conception rate by 2010 and increase the participation of young parents in education, employment and training (Hadley et al., 2016). By the end of the strategy in 2010, under-18 conception rate had decreased significantly (Hadley et al., 2024). This decline coincided with a gradual reduction in national prioritisation and policy focus on teenage pregnancy (Hadley et al., 2024). Considering this, Freya's perception that greater attention would be given to teenage pregnancy if cases were higher, is arguably consistent with past policy patterns.

Summary. This theme provides valuable insight into RQ3, which explores the factors that may facilitate or hinder how effectively secondary and further education staff can support this group. It centres on the idea that teenage pregnancy is not currently prioritised within education. Participants suggested that this was due to the perceived rarity of teenage pregnancy, which, in their view, meant that support for pregnant teenagers and young mothers was overlooked. This hindered how effectively participants could support pregnant teenagers and young mothers, as their settings were reluctant to invest the time and resources required to strengthen provision for this group.

2.7.2 Setting Context Matters

Definition. This theme centres around the idea that the type of educational setting education staff work within, is a key factor that can help and/or hinder how effectively they can support pregnant teenagers and young mothers. Participants articulated this idea by comparing and contrasting different education settings. Some reflected on the differences between individual providers by contrasting their own setting with another in the same local area. Others reflected more broadly on the distinctions between secondary and further education settings, and mainstream and specialist provision.

In her interview, Lucy reflected on differences between her college and another local college. Based on her understanding of the city's context, she questioned whether the other institution may have had greater experience in supporting teenage pregnancy than her own setting.

Lucy: *in the same city we have a FE provider that has a lot more technical and vocational qualifications, and I wonder if I wonder if they have more experience of it [teenage pregnancy] and therefore have more policies*

Later in the interview, Lucy returned to this comparison. This time, she more explicitly questioned whether some of the young women she supported might have experienced better outcomes in the other setting, as it offered a wider range of courses and may have been better equipped to provide the level of support they needed.

Lucy: *I think they should have done some sort of vocational course, maybe at level one, which isn't what we provide. In terms of, like academic support with English and Maths it, again, it's not something we have. But it's almost like they needed to do sort of Year 7 or Year 8 stuff- there was a gap missing in what they knew. I don't think it's something that we could have offered really. And that's the thing really if, you know, on paper, what if we hadn't heard about their circumstances, and just saw on paper on their attendance and results? We would have signposted them to the local FE college that has these level ones and that's what we would have recommended*

In their interviews, Freya and Casey reflected on their previous experiences of working in mainstream secondary schools.

Casey: *if you're a pregnant person who works in a school or works in a university or works wherever, then you know your employer would make reasonable adaptations to allow for that, whereas a school timetable doesn't really allow for that, and a school building doesn't allow for that because they're packed and they're really busy [...] So the lesson they missed, they need to catch up, you know, the whole*

*school timetable can't move- that's impossible because there's another 1499 kids
you still got to teach.*

Freya: *Because of secondary schools having that very structured system, you
can't, you just, being in the mainstream system, you can't be as flexible around that,
it's just not possible*

In the above extracts, Freya and Casey discussed the challenges associated with supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers, whilst working within an inflexible mainstream environment. These reflections are consistent with findings from the existing literature, in which mainstream settings are often criticised for being less flexible and willing to meet the needs of pregnant teenagers and young mothers (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Lall, 2007; Rudoe, 2011; Vincent, 2016).

Due to the perceived inflexibility of mainstream settings, some participants reflected on whether the educational needs of pregnant teenagers and young mothers could be better met in specialist settings, where education staff likely have increased capacity to provide more bespoke and personalised support.

Florence: *I can see the advantage in terms of like you know, specialist
schools or classes for, you know, young parents, you know, where you're can have
access to like specialist staff and you know each other and you could offer that
support network and you know, sharing your knowledge around pregnancy and
experiences. And having that like that sort of community around it, so I can see that.*

Florence's reflection aligns with findings from the existing literature (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Lall, 2007; Rudoe, 2011; Vincent, 2016). Vincent, for example, conducted a qualitative investigation into the educational experiences of 14 young mothers, most of whom attended specialist provisions. Of those who attended specialist provisions, many praised their specialist setting for offering more personalised and flexible support than their previous mainstream school. However, despite these benefits, researchers have also cautioned that specialist settings may contribute towards the segregation of pregnant teenagers and young mothers from

both their peers and wider society (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Lall, 2007; Vincent, 2009). This is something Florence was similarly concerned about.

Florence: *if you if you get pulled out of college, sent somewhere else, like I said, it's that othering and I just don't think that's helpful, if we start marginalising people going right you're there, you're there, you know, we must separate these girls out and they must go elsewhere. I just think it's a bit stigmatising and, but also I just think well in the rest of their life, they're going to be around everybody else, mainstream society.*

While debates surrounding specialist and mainstream provision are well established in the existing literature, an absence of research has considered the differences between the secondary and further education contexts when it comes to supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers. This is something several participants in the current study reflected on.

Casey: *if they're school age, they have a kind of modicum of choice. Their choice is stay where you are and keep attending your mainstream school or whatever other PRU you might be at [...] If they're post 16, they have a little bit more of a choice because you know they've got, you know, a college option there or they could of course by that point be doing some kind of apprenticeship.*

Freya: *obviously secondary pupils were under 16. So immediately there's an issue of consent. Immediately, there's, you know, it's like something's off here. But at FE, it's more of like, OK, they're a minor so we can't make a lot of these decisions without their guardians, but it's not necessary. We need to know the context to know whether or not it is a safeguarding issue.*

Florence: *it's a little bit easier [in post-16] because we've not really got the implication of them being underage. So even if the conception happened under the age of 16, well, by the time we get the student through they're 16. So I think for us, that legal status you know makes it a lot different like to what high schools have to do in terms of supporting their teenage parents. So for us, you know, we don't, don't have those concerns that high school might do.*

In Casey's extract, he suggested there was greater flexibility available to pregnant teenagers in post-16 settings. While in their extracts Florence and Freya focused more explicitly on differences related to students' age. The 'legal status' Florence is referring to is likely the Sexual Offences Act (2003), which sets the age of consent in England and Wales to 16. In accordance with this act, pregnancy involving a young person under 16 is likely to be considered a safeguarding concern. Despite this, there is an absence of clear statutory guidance within Keeping Children Safe in Education (2025) outlining how education staff should investigate this. Considering this, Florence and Freya are perhaps right to suggest that supporting pregnant students may be more straightforward in post-16 settings, since this removes the safeguarding complexities associated specifically with pregnancies involving those under 16.

Summary. This theme centres around the idea that the type of education setting education staff work within, is a key factor that can either help or hinder how effectively they can support pregnant teenagers and young mothers. For example, some participants reflected on the challenges of meeting pregnant teenagers and young mothers' needs within an inflexible mainstream environment. While those working in further education settings suggested that the age of students acted as a facilitating factor, as it removed some of the safeguarding and legal complexities associated with teenage pregnancy.

2.7.3 'Relationships Are Key'

Definition. This theme centres around the idea that relationships between staff and pregnant teenagers and young mothers are a 'key' factor that can help, or hinder, the effectiveness of the support they provide to this group. This theme name derives from Tracey's interview:

Tracey: *I think relationships are key, but basically with the young person themselves, so you know you have to be, you have to be trusted, you have to be supportive, non-judgmental, all of those things.*

In Tracey's extract she emphasises the importance of building relationships with pregnant teenagers and young mothers. A similar view was articulated by other participants.

Hope: *I think it's key, so if you don't have the relationships with either of them, it's not going to work*

Emma: *I think, you know a really important part of safeguarding these young mothers is the relationship you have with them.*

Despite the importance participants placed on relationships, they also acknowledged that positive relationships with students cannot be assumed. Consider Emma's extract below:

Emma: *I'm very lucky in the sense that all of my students that did get pregnant, I'm very close with in the sense that they're very open with me.*

Emma's use of the word 'lucky' suggests that she did not take the positive relationships she had with her pregnant students for granted. This idea was also explored in Casey's interview, where he acknowledged that, in his experience, pregnant teenagers often had poorer relationships with the education system and, consequently, weaker relationships with staff.

Casey: *The girls don't have to tell you [about being pregnant/a mother], right? And the families don't have to tell you. It helps if they do, because then you can you know you can put some support around that young person, but, it's, it's got to be their call, really [...] some kids love their school and really value the school's input, and parents have trust in the school and therefore will really value the teachers input and the pastoral staff's input. But there's also a big tranche of people who don't have that positive experience at school and who don't necessarily have that trust in the service of the school. And I would suggest, without any hard data to back it up, but you would find more pregnancy occurring in that second tranche of people I've just described who don't have the trust in school and authority and might have a little bit more of a chequered educational history and therefore you're less likely to find out.*

Casey's observation of a link between educational disengagement and teenage pregnancy aligns with findings from the wider literature, which has historically identified educational disengagement as a key factor associated with teenage pregnancy (Arai, 2003; Bonnell et al., 2005; Coleman & Cater, 2006; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Wiggins et al., 2005). In his extract, Casey suggested this might make it more difficult for staff to become aware of a student's pregnancy, as these young people may be less likely to disclose it. Casey positions this as a barrier, since it can delay or limit opportunities for staff to put support in place.

Hope described having similar experiences to Casey and agreed that developing a positive relationship with a pregnant teenager or young mother was not always straightforward. She explained that one way she worked around this was by utilising the more established relationships these young people had with other professionals.

Hope: *It depends on the relationship that they've got. So if they've got, if that young person has got a better relationship with another person, I would then seek that support from that other person because they're getting more of the information out that I want, that I need to think of a support plan or a guidance plan and then I would go back and use that person, because it's about the relationship, so they might not know me, they might not see me that often [...] it seems a little bit manipulative of me, but actually I'm getting what I need to support them in the best way for them, which is picking the person that they've gotten the better relationship with.*

This theme strongly aligns with the existing literature, which also highlights the importance of relationships between pregnant teenagers, young mothers and education staff (Berryman, 2021; Carter, 2017; Thompson, 2018; Vincent, 2016). For example, in their doctoral thesis, Carter (2017) identified that the relationships young mothers had with education staff could be a key facilitator of their educational re-engagement. More broadly, the wider educational literature similarly identifies teacher-student relationships as a key factor influencing academic engagement and achievement, with systematic reviews consistently demonstrating their significance (e.g. Di Lisio et al., 2025).

Summary. This theme provides valuable insight into RQ3, which explores the factors that may facilitate or hinder how effectively secondary and further education staff can support this group. It emphasises the importance of the relationships between education staff and their pregnant and mothering students. Within this theme, participants positioned positive staff-student relationships as a facilitating factor, that enabled them to provide more timely and targeted support. In contrast, poorer relationships were conceptualised as being a barrier that could prevent education staff from meeting a pregnant teenager or young mother's needs.

2.7.4 So Much Relies on Individual Factors

Definition. This theme considers how participants positioned individual staff and student factors as a key facilitating and/or hindering factor when it comes to supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers. This idea is explored through the two subthemes:

- **So Much Relies on Student Motivation:** this subtheme explores the idea that the effectiveness of the support education staff provide to pregnant teenagers and young mothers is contingent on whether a student is willing and motivated to engage with this.
- **So Much Relies on Staff Attitudes and Beliefs:** this subtheme explores the idea that education staff will have divergent views and beliefs towards pregnancy, which can influence how effectively they support this group.

2.7.4.1 So Much Relies on Student Motivation

Throughout the dataset, participants described putting a range of support in place for their pregnant and mothering students, such as providing additional tutoring, exam adjustments and completing risk assessments. However, despite these efforts, some participants felt the effectiveness of such support was ultimately dependent on whether students sought this out and engaged with it. This was articulated by Emma.

Emma: *we rely very heavily on the student coming to us, communicating if they've got an appointment or if they can't attend a lesson. And the response to that is catch up online. If you know, if you're really struggling, you know where I am.*

In some cases, this emphasis on independence was effective. For example, several participants described working with particularly conscientious students, whose motivation to engage with education appeared to enhance the impact of the support provided.

Florence: *I don't know whether we're really lucky that we get some really lovely, lovely girls and they just really work, you know they just wanna do well.*

Emma: *I'm lucky that [my course] requires quite high GCSE grades, so often you have more dedicated, aspirational, conscientious students.*

Lucy: *I would always send her the PowerPoints...And always before the next lesson she had the PowerPoints printed in a folder, her notes made, and she knew it, ready for the next lesson. So she, like, she just took responsibility for that and was very, very determined to keep up with her studies.*

In contrast, Tracey and Lucy both reflected on scenarios where pregnant students had not engaged with the support offered, limiting its effectiveness.

Lucy: *We, like the college, tried to support, but she just refused our support and she did not pass any of her exams.*

Tracey: *the latter young person was not interested in in GCSE, so functional skills were mentioned, but actually in the end they refused to do anything. So, support was the support, the relationship was the same, it's just yeah, whether it worked or not and for that particular young person, not much did.*

A useful theory for making sense of these findings is 'Attribution Theory' (e.g. Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967), which is a psychological theory that explains how

individuals interpret and assign causes to events and behaviours. For instance, according to Heider (1958), individuals typically attribute the causes of events to either dispositional or situational factors. Consistent with this, it seems from the extracts included in this subtheme, that participants were accrediting the effectiveness of their support to dispositional characteristics of the young person. For example, Florence, Emma, and Lucy suggested that 'successful' students demonstrated individual qualities such as motivation and conscientiousness. In contrast, Lucy and Tracey attributed poorer outcomes to internal factors, including disengagement or a reluctance to accept support.

2.7.4.2. So Much Relies on Staff Attitudes and Beliefs

Participants positioned individual staff attitudes and beliefs as being a key factor that could help or hinder how effectively pregnant teenagers or young mothers may be supported. For instance, all the participants in this study described themselves as being supportive and non-judgemental towards pregnant students and young mothers and felt strongly that most education staff would hold similar views. Consequently, they believed most education staff would naturally try their hardest to support this group of young people.

Casey: *everywhere that I have worked, whether that is on a kind of full-time permanent basis, whether that's mainstream teacher, whether that's leadership role, whether it's on supply teaching [...] I haven't walked into a school or spent time in a school where I've ever thought that there weren't enough people to put that support in place. Do you see what I mean? I think there's enough people who would see the vulnerability and see the kid that sat behind that vulnerability and understand what they have to do to make that kids journey as comfortable as they could*

Freya: *I think it's in most teacher's character, it's like natural to want to do everything you can for every student.*

Emma: *Obviously, all of the teachers in my department are lovely and are very caring and nurturing and are very happy to do an awful lot to support the pregnant student.*

However, participants did reflect that a minority of staff may hold more stigmatising views and suggested that differences in staff attitudes could influence the support provided.

Florence: *it's [teenage pregnancy] just sort of one of those things about, about working in this sector. Do I think all teachers would agree with me? Probably not. I think there are some who think that you know, the girls should sort of be shipped off to some sort of special school where they could have, like, small classes and stuff like that.*

Lucy: *Of course, you know, there's, you know, there's some staff that will automatically go, right, 'they're pregnant. OK, so that's it, they're not going to achieve anything, they're write off', and I would say, also a little bit of like, well, they're a 'stupid girl' because they've got pregnant aspects of that [...] I think for some staff as well, that's quite hard for them to not have a feeling of it, you know, or a side either way [...] I choose to be non-bias and you know and just prioritise the student. But I think other staff find that more difficult.*

The findings reported in this subtheme align with those from the existing literature. For example, in Dawson and Hosie's (2005) mixed-methods study exploring the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers, 138 school staff completed a survey on teenage pregnancy. The findings from this survey indicated that, while the majority of staff were broadly accepting towards pregnant teenagers and young mothers, a notable minority expressed more negative views. For example, 13% of staff believed that pregnant students provide a bad image for the school. This resonates with the findings from the current study, in which participants suggested that although most staff are supportive and non-judgemental towards pregnant students and young mothers, this is not the case across all staff.

Summary. This theme, and the associated subthemes, provides valuable insight into RQ3, which explores the factors that may facilitate or hinder how effectively secondary and further education staff can support this group. For instance, in the subtheme ‘So Much Relies on Student Motivation’, participants suggested that support was most effective when students were more motivated to engage with their education. While in the subtheme ‘So Much Relies on Staff Attitudes and Beliefs’, participants highlighted how individual staff biases regarding teenage pregnancy will influence how education staff perceive and approach their role in supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers.

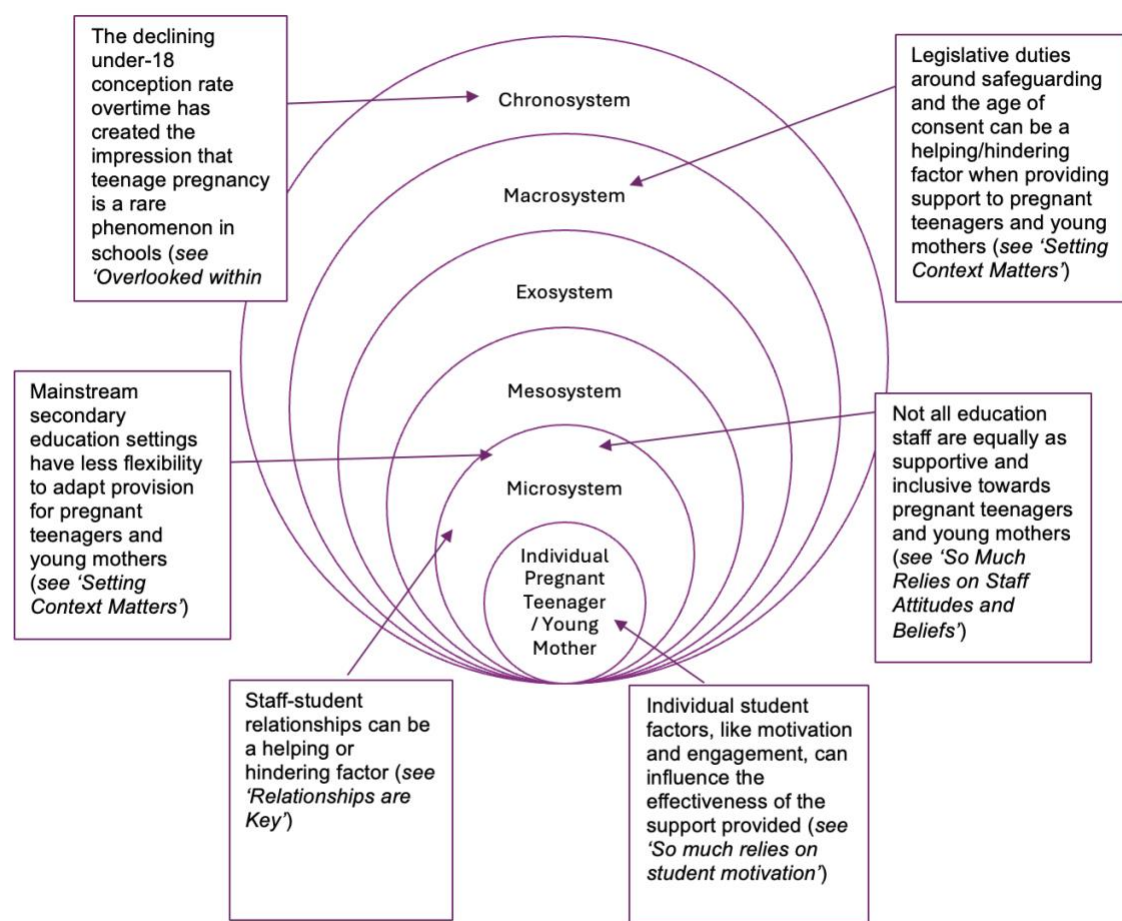
2.7.5 RQ3 Summary

RQ3 explored the factors that helped and hindered how effectively education staff felt they could support pregnant pupils and young mothers. It was clear several systemic and individual level factors influenced how effectively education staff felt they could support pregnant teenagers and young mothers, including legislative duties, setting context, relationships, and staff and student attitudes. From a critical realist perspective, these findings provide valuable insight into some of the underlying mechanisms that are likely influencing the reality of how pregnant teenagers and young mothers are supported within English education settings (Braun & Clarke 2022; Willis, 2022).

A useful framework for synthesising these findings, is Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which posits that individual development is influenced by a series of interconnected systems. These systems include: the chronosystem, which accounts for the changes within and across systems overtime; the macrosystem, which refers to the broader societal and cultural factors that may impact an individual, such as societal attitudes and political systems; the exosystem, which consists of settings that individuals are not actively involved with but indirectly influence them; the mesosystem, which considers the relationship between an individual’s most immediate environments; and the microsystem, which includes an individual’s most immediate environments. Figure 7 demonstrates how an eco-systemic lens can be used to interpret the themes relating to RQ3.

Figure 7

Application of Ecological Systems Theory to RQ3 Findings



2.8 Conclusions

To conclude the empirical chapter, I will reflect on the distinctive contributions of this research, consider implications for practice, discuss the study's limitations, propose directions for future research, and provide a synthesis of the study's main findings.

2.8.1 Distinctive Contributions

The findings from this study make a novel contribution to the educational psychology literature. To my knowledge, only six trainee educational psychologists have conducted their doctoral research on the topic of teenage pregnancy (Berryman, 2021; Carter, 2017; McLeod, 2013; Sheldrake, 2010; Thompson, 2018; Whiteway, 2016, 2019). All of these studies focused on exploring the perspectives of young parents. Thus, the current study has extended this literature by adding the

perspective of education staff. This is an important contribution, given that education staff constitute one of the main client groups of educational psychology services (Atfield et al., 2023). Therefore, by listening to the perspectives of this group, this study provides clearer insight into how educational psychologists can further develop their role in supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers.

Beyond the educational psychology literature, there are a small number of studies that have gathered and reported on education staff perspectives when exploring the topic of teenage pregnancy in England (e.g. Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Rudoe, 2011; Vincent, 2009, 2016). Like the current study, some of these studies have also used semi-structured interviews to explore education staff perspectives on teenage pregnancy (e.g. Rudoe, 2011; Vincent, 2009, 2016). However, a key difference between previous research and the current study is that, in the current study, the primary analytic focus was on education staff perspectives. Whereas, in previous research, interviews with education staff have only been conducted to supplement and contextualise the data gathered from pregnant teenagers and young mothers themselves. Consequently, the current study makes a unique contribution to the existing literature by being, to my knowledge, the first to use qualitative methods to exclusively gather, analyse and report on education staff perspectives in relation to teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education. This has resulted in several new and updated insights, including:

- The recognition that educational success is still possible for pregnant teenagers and young mothers but may be achieved in less conventional ways.
- The recognition that specialist, mainstream, secondary and further education settings will likely differ in their capacity to meet the needs of pregnant teenagers and young mothers.
- The recognition that not all education settings will prioritise teenage pregnancy and may not have dedicated policies or training available to help guide how education staff should support this group.

2.8.2 Limitations and Future Research

While this research made several distinctive contributions to the literature on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education, it still has a number of

limitations that could be addressed through future research. One key limitation relates to the potential transferability of the study's findings. The existing literature indicates that the educational destinations of pregnant teenagers and young mothers can vary (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Crawford et al., 2013). Consequently, the participant inclusion criteria for this research were kept intentionally broad: participants were recruited nationally from both secondary and further education settings, and from a range of provision types (e.g. mainstream and alternative). However, despite setting these broad criteria, I chose not to report specific details regarding the types of settings in which participants worked (e.g. specialist or mainstream) or their geographical locations. This was to protect the anonymity of the participants, and the pregnant teenagers and young mothers they had supported. While this decision was ethically justified, this choice could limit transferability of the study's findings, since readers may lack sufficient contextual detail to determine whether the findings are applicable to their own experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Future research could mitigate this limitation by exclusively exploring education staff perspectives within a single type of educational setting (e.g. mainstream secondary schools) or a more specific geographical context (e.g. within one local authority).

A further limitation of this study, is that all seven participants volunteered to take part in this study. Consequently, these participants likely all had a particular interest in, and motivation to discuss, teenage pregnancy and early motherhood (Elston, 2021). As such, the findings may not reflect the full diversity of staff attitudes and beliefs on this topic, a possibility also acknowledged by participants within the subtheme '*So Much Relies on Staff Attitudes and Beliefs*'. Future studies could seek to mitigate this limitation by using methodologies designed to generate larger and more varied responses. For example, a potential direction for future research could be to replicate Dawson's and Hosie's (2005) study, who used survey methodology to gather the perspectives of 138 education staff on teenage pregnancy. Such research would likely capture a larger and more diverse range of education staff perspectives than the current study.

Another valid critique of this study is that it did not include the voices of pregnant teenagers and young mothers. Although the purpose of the study was to explore education staff perspectives, there were ways in which the voices of pregnant teenagers and young mothers could have been more meaningfully incorporated. For example, they could have been involved in the development of

research materials, such as co-constructing the interview schedule. This may have strengthened the study by ensuring that the topics explored were more closely aligned with the priorities and lived experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers themselves. This is an approach that future researchers exploring this topic should consider adopting. Alternatively, future researchers may wish to more explicitly triangulate and compare the perspectives of pregnant teenagers, young mothers and education staff. There is a clear rationale for this, given that the current study identified a potential disconnect between education staff intentions and the actual educational experiences of young mothers.

2.8.3 Implications for Practice

From this research, I have identified several implications for practice for both education settings, educational psychologists and policy makers in relation to supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers. These implications have been organised in accordance with Lall's (2007) framework, which proposes that the education of pregnant teenagers and young mothers should be explored by professionals across three levels: education prior to conception, education during pregnancy and education post-birth.

2.8.3.1 Prior to Conception

The existing literature indicates that for many young mothers, pregnancy is rarely their first or only vulnerability (Dawson & Hosie, 2005). For example, research has identified an association between teenage pregnancy and deprivation (Arai, 2003; Conrad, 2012; Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Ermisch & Pevalin, 2003), being in local authority care (Barn & Mantovani, 2006; Knight et al., 2006; Mantovani & Thomas, 2014, 2015), and prior educational disengagement (Coleman & Cater, 2006; Dawson & Hosie, 2005). This understanding was similarly reflected in the present study, particularly within the theme *'It's rarely the only factor'*.

In the theme *'It's rarely the only factor'*, participants acknowledged that there are circumstances in which pregnant teenagers or young mothers may experience poorer educational outcomes. When such circumstances do occur, participants were keen to emphasise that these outcomes were often more related to a young person's pre-existing adversities, rather than their pregnancy. Considering this, in order to improve outcomes for all pregnant and mothering students, education settings need

to start implementing interventions to help identify and address these pre-existing adversities. Crucially, these interventions must not be narrowly focused around preventing teenage pregnancy itself. A similar conclusion was identified by McLeod (2013) in their doctoral thesis exploring 'Teenage Mothers and Education'. McLeod (p. 159) argued that 'in order to improve outcomes for the teenage mother, educational psychologists must apply preventative strategies to students perceived as at risk, in contrast to picking up the pieces at the end of educational failure'.

Education Settings. Education settings should develop formal systems for identifying students at risk of educational disengagement and must implement timely support. The present study, alongside prior literature, demonstrates the importance of positive relationships between education staff and pregnant teenagers and young mothers in supporting re-engagement with education (Berryman, 2021; Carter, 2017; Thompson, 2018; Vincent, 2016). Therefore, one practical strategy education settings could implement is a staff-based 'mentor' or 'key person' system for young women identified as being at risk of educational disengagement. This designated staff member could provide an opportunity for these young women to develop a consistent and supportive relationship within their educational setting, which may function as a protective factor against educational disengagement.

Educational Psychologists. Educational psychologists are well placed to support with the development of preventative and early-intervention approaches. For example, educational psychologists could support education settings to develop and refine their identification and early prevention systems, as outlined above. Additionally, in the subtheme '*Overlooked Within Education*', participants suggested that education settings may be reluctant to prioritise teenage pregnancy due to its perceived rarity. Educational psychologists could address this proactively by making it explicit in planning meetings that they offer support for pregnant teenagers and young mothers, and by clearly outlining this within their service offer materials and on their websites. In doing so, educational psychologists would help ensure that, if such a situation arises, education settings are aware of available support and able to respond promptly.

Policy Makers. Currently, the only dedicated national guidance documents on teenage pregnancy are Public Health England's 'Framework for Supporting Teenage Mothers and Young Fathers' (2019) and the 'Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Framework' (2018). These frameworks recognise that factors associated with teenage pregnancy include educational disengagement, poverty and being in local authority care, all of which were also identified by participants in the current study. However, when outlining the role education settings should play in supporting young people prior to pregnancy, the guidance focuses predominantly on their duty to deliver relationships and sex education. Considering the findings of this research, this is arguably too narrow of a focus. Therefore, it would be beneficial for this guidance to be updated so that it highlights the broader role that education settings could play in addressing the factors associated with teenage pregnancy.

2.8.3.2 Pregnancy

In their doctoral thesis, Carter (2017, p.124) reflected that whilst 'pregnancy' may not meet the criteria set for 'SEND' as outlined in the SEND Code of Practice (2015), it could still be considered an 'additional need' since pregnant teenagers will require 'differentiated support' from their peers. This is something participants in the current study agreed with. For instance, in the subtheme '*The Magnitude of Pregnancy Itself*' participants highlighted the various barriers pregnancy can create for students. While in the theme '*It's all about the education*', participants suggested that in order to access education, pregnant teenagers would require reasonable adjustments to be made for them. This recognition is noteworthy, given that in the existing literature young mothers consistently report receiving poor or inconsistent support from education staff during their pregnancy (Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Lall, 2007; Russell, 2016; Vincent, 2009, 2016). This divergence in perspectives suggests there may be a disconnect between education staff intentions and the actual experiences of pregnant teenagers, which highlights the need for greater clarity in how education settings communicate and implement support for pregnant students.

Education Settings. Notably, most participants in the current study shared that their education setting did not have a formal policy addressing teenage pregnancy. The development of such a policy would provide a clear way for

education settings to outline and communicate how pregnant and mothering students will be supported.

Educational Psychologists. Educational psychologists could play a role in addressing the disconnect in perspectives between education staff and pregnant teenagers, either by supporting at a systemic level (e.g. through policy development) or at an individual level (e.g. by facilitating consultations). Although definitions vary, consultation is generally understood as a collaborative process in which educational psychologists support the development of shared understanding between multiple stakeholders and facilitate the creation of action plans (Nolan & Moreland, 2014; Royle & Atkinson, 2025). Consistent with this, educational psychologists could facilitate consultations between pregnant teenagers and education staff and support them to work together and generate an agreed plan of support. By involving both pregnant teenagers and education staff in this process, it may help address and minimise differences in perceptions between these two groups regarding the support provided.

Policy Makers. At present, the most up-to-date national guidance on teenage pregnancy is the Public Health England (2018) 'Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Framework'. This framework does talk about the role of schools/colleges in relation to teenage pregnancy. However, it focuses mainly on their duty to help prevent teenage pregnancies by delivering relationships and sex education and provides very limited guidance on how education settings should actually support pregnant teenagers. Given the findings from the current study, more detailed national guidance would be useful for providing greater clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of education settings in supporting pregnant teenagers.

2.8.3.3 Post-Birth

Participants in the current study conceptualised motherhood as a life-changing event that can create distinct barriers to education. This was most apparent in the subtheme '*The Distinct Demands of Student Motherhood*', where participants reflected on the competing demands associated with balancing the roles of mother and student. This aligns with findings from existing literature, which similarly indicate that motherhood can create distinct barriers to education due to the

practical challenges associated with childcare and the tensions involved in managing the conflicting roles of mother and student (Ellis-Sloan, 2024; Vincent, 2009; Vincent & Thomson, 2013).

Education Settings. Education settings should ensure that all young mothers attending their setting have a clear support plan in place. Such plans should be developed collaboratively with the young mother and could include reasonable adjustments, such as flexibility around deadlines and access to ‘catch-up’ tutoring where required.

Educational Psychologists. Educational psychologists could play a role in supporting young mothers with navigating their return to education. For example, educational psychologists could facilitate initial reintegration meetings between education settings and young mothers. During these meetings, educational psychologists could use person-centred planning tools, such as ‘Making Action Plans’ (Vandercook et al., 1989) or ‘Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope’ (Pearpoint et al., 1993), to ensure that the young mother’s voice remains central to discussion and that support plans are built around her individual needs (Gregory & Atkinson, 2024). Educational psychologists could also utilise their therapeutic skills to develop targeted programmes of support for young mothers, and either deliver these programmes themselves or advise and train education staff to implement these (Atkinson & Kenneally, 2021). Such programmes could focus on helping young mothers adjust to their new roles and develop strategies to support them with balancing the demands of both education and motherhood.

Policy Makers. At present, the most up-to-date national guidance on supporting young parents is the Public Health England (2019) ‘Framework for Supporting Teenage Mothers and Young Fathers’. Within this 50-page guidance document, only two pages are dedicated to education. On these two pages, very limited guidance is provided outlining the duties of education settings in regard to supporting the education of young parents. This highlights the need for updated, dedicated national guidance that clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities of education settings in supporting young mothers.

2.8.4 Synthesis of Findings and Implications

In summary, this research aimed to investigate the views and experiences of secondary and further education staff in regard to supporting the education of pregnant teenagers and young mothers. To my knowledge, this is the first qualitative study to exclusively examine education staff perspectives on this topic. As such, the findings provide a novel contribution to the existing literature and have resulted in several implications for practice, which are synthesised in Figure 8.

Figure 8

Synthesis of Findings and Implications

Teenage Pregnancy, Early Motherhood and Education

A Reflexive Thematic Analysis Study into Secondary and Further Education Staff Experiences

Supporting Pregnant Teenagers and Young Mothers

Stage	Key Finding	Implications for Education Settings	Implications for Educational Psychologists	Implications for Policy Makers
Prior to Conception	Pregnant teenagers and young mothers are a diverse group with a wide range of needs and backgrounds. For many of these young people, pregnancy is rarely their first or only barrier to education. For example, findings from this study and previous research, indicate that young mothers are often disengaged from education prior to pregnancy (e.g. Dawson & Hosie, 2005).	Develop systems for identifying and supporting female students at-risk of educational disengagement.	Proactively advertise support and services relating to teenage pregnancy during planning meetings and through service offer materials to increase awareness of the support available.	National guidance, such as the 'Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Framework' (Public Health England, 2018) should be updated to outline the broader role of education settings in supporting young women prior to pregnancy, beyond just relationships and sex education.
During Pregnancy	In this study, education staff perceived themselves as having a duty to provide student-led and education-focused support for pregnant students. However, previous research indicates that pregnant teenagers may not always perceive or experience this support in the way education staff intend (e.g. Dawson & Hosie, 2005).	Develop a staff and student-friendly teenage pregnancy policy.	Facilitate consultations between pregnant teenagers and education staff to address misconceptions and agree action plans.	Publish updated, dedicated national guidance on the education of pregnant teenagers. This guidance should clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of education settings in regard to supporting this group.
Post-Birth	Becoming a parent is a life-changing event that can create distinct barriers to education. In this study, education staff suggested one of the main challenges young mothers experience is balancing their new caring responsibilities alongside the regular demands of education.	Work collaboratively with young mothers to develop agreed plans of support.	Facilitate reintegration meetings with young mothers and education staff, utilising person-centred planning tools.	Publish updated, dedicated national guidance on the education of young mothers. This guidance should clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of education settings in regard to supporting this group.

Chapter Three: Reflective and Reflexive Account

This chapter presents a reflective and reflexive account of the research process. Although it can be read as a standalone chapter, it is closely interrelated with Chapter One and Chapter Two, as it reflects chronologically on the decisions made throughout the literature review (Chapter One) and the empirical study (Chapter Two).

3.1 Introduction

‘Research’ is positioned in the Currie Report (2002) as being one of the five core functions of the educational psychologist role. This is reflected in the British Psychology Society (BPS, 2023) standards of accreditation for trainee educational psychologists, which requires trainee educational psychologists to ‘not only to be critical consumers of research and emerging knowledge, but also to contribute to the development of knowledge and skills by undertaking research benchmarked at doctoral level’ (p.8). In this chapter, I will apply the skills of ‘reflection’ and ‘reflexivity’ to demonstrate how, through my thesis research, I have successfully developed competence in this area of practice.

Although often discussed in tandem, reflection and reflexivity are distinct skills (Adongo, 2025). Adongo (2025) defines reflection as a skill that ‘enables individuals to think about past experiences and how they affect future practice’ (p.1). In this chapter, I apply this skill by reflecting in chronological order on the research process. In contrast, Adongo conceptualises reflexivity as a skill that ‘enables individuals to look within the self and analyse how internal processes or characteristics that are specific to the individual can influence decisions’ (p.1). In this chapter, I will demonstrate reflexivity by speaking openly about my biases and assumptions, and how these have influenced my decision-making throughout the research process.

3.2 Identifying the Research Area

When I began the Doctorate in Educational Psychology in September 2023, I did not have a clear idea of the research area I wanted to pursue for my thesis. To help identify a research topic, I began collating a list of areas relevant to educational psychology that I found interesting or felt had been underexplored. I updated this

regularly throughout my first year with ideas that emerged during seminars and whilst on placement. I added teenage pregnancy to this list early on, during a seminar on Early Years. In this seminar, we discussed the importance of exploring a young person's early life history when facilitating consultations, including perinatal mental health. This prompted me to reflect on what educational psychologists might understand about young parents and their role in working with and supporting this group.

Over the following months, I began to refine my research focus. Through conversations with several family members and friends working in education, I became aware that teenage pregnancy was something they had each encountered in their professional roles. However, they reflected that there was limited support available for this group and were unsure what happened to these students once they disclosed their pregnancies. This resonated with my own experiences at school, where several students in my year group became pregnant and seemed to disappear. Consistent with these anecdotal experiences, I noticed that there was also an absence of dedicated, national guidance on how educational settings should support pregnant teenagers and young mothers. This led me to narrow my focus area towards pregnant teenagers and young mothers, and the support they receive within education.

A valid critique of my chosen research area, was my decision to focus exclusively on young mothers, rather than including young fathers. This was noticed by one of my participants, Florence, who, during her interview, questioned why young fathers had not been included and suggested they may be an equally, if not more, vulnerable group within education. Florence's observation aligns with an emerging body of research which indicates that, similar to young mothers, young fathers often experience various forms of social and educational adversity prior to becoming parents (Clayton, 2016; Donald et al., 2022; Whiteway, 2019). I agree that young fathers can also constitute a vulnerable group within education, and my decision to focus on young mothers was not intended to overlook or undermine this. Instead, this choice was largely influenced by my own positionality, which can be conceptualised using the 'Social GRRAAACCEESSS' framework (Burnham, 2012). This term is an acronym proposed by Burnham (2012) to encompass the various 'voiced-unvoiced' and 'visible-invisible' aspects of identity that influence practice and decision-making.

Figure 9

The Social Graces Framework (Burnam, 2012)



Gender is one of these social GRRRAAAAC CEEESSS. As a cis-gender woman, this aspect of my identity was particularly influential when refining my research focus, as I am motivated to advocate for and address gender inequality for all those who identify as women. In the literature on teenage pregnancy, it was clear to me that inequality persists for pregnant teenagers and young mothers. For example, young mothers describe being excluded from school for pregnancy-related reasons and remain more likely to assume primary caregiving responsibilities (Carter, 2017; Clayton, 2016; Donald et al., 2022; Lall, 2007; Russell, 2016). Therefore, I felt it was justified to focus my research on pregnant teenagers and young mothers, given the distinct barriers to education experienced by this group.

That said, I did feel cautious about exploring such a gendered topic. In my professional practice and personal life, I strive to be gender-inclusive and an ally of the transgender community. Therefore, I reflected extensively on my use of language when designing this research to ensure it was sensitive to the fact not all birthing teenagers will identify as ‘women’ or ‘mothers’. In addition to engaging with the

literature, I discussed this with my friend, who has recently finished their master's degree in 'Gender Studies' and is a sex education professional. They shared a resource with me from Brook (n.d) that describes five different approaches to language: gender neutral; physiological language; gendered language; gender-additive language; and gender inclusive language.

Reassuringly, this resource advises that approaches to language may vary depending on context and can be used in combination with each other. Consistent with this, I eventually decided to use the gender inclusive language 'pregnant teenager', rather than 'pregnant girl' to reflect the fact that not all pregnant teenagers will identify as 'women' (Rioux et al., 2021). However, I opted to use the gendered language of 'young mother' and 'motherhood' when discussing the post-birth experiences of pregnant teenagers. This is because, I was interested in researching the gendered element to the educational experiences of teenagers who identify as mothers. Therefore, it was important I used language that clearly signified this to gatekeepers and potential participants when advertising my study. While, at the time of conducting this research and writing my thesis, I was satisfied with my language choices, I remain open to feedback as I believe this is an essential quality of being both an ally and a reflective and reflexive practitioner.

3.3 Conducting the Literature Review

I began the process of conducting my literature review in July 2024. Crucially, this was my first time engaging academically with the literature on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education. Therefore, I decided that before formally beginning my literature review, I would conduct a preliminary scoping search of the literature to develop my understanding. For this initial search, I did not apply any clear inclusion or exclusion criteria when selecting studies, other than using the broad search terms 'teenage pregnancy', 'teenage mothers', 'early motherhood', 'school', and 'education'. This is because I wanted to develop a broad understanding of the literature before potentially narrowing my focus. This initial search, however, returned over 100,000 sources.

Given the volume of literature I had identified, I first considered using a systematic approach to help guide my literature review, which is a 'highly structured and protocol-driven' approach (Efron & Ravid, 2018, p.18). I thought this approach could be helpful, as from the outset, systematic reviewers are guided by a specific

research question and rigid inclusion and exclusion criteria (Efron & Ravid, 2018). Hence, using this approach would likely support me with streamlining and reducing the number of sources I had to review. However, on balance, I considered the limitations of a systematic approach to outweigh its practical advantages. For instance, I was concerned that using a systematic approach might restrict my ability to develop a comprehensive understanding of the literature, as I would only be reviewing studies that met my predefined inclusion criteria. Additionally, I was apprehensive about my ability to even develop a justified set of predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria, given my limited baseline knowledge of the teenage pregnancy literature.

Having decided not to adopt a systematic approach, I began evaluating the suitability of other potential approaches instead. A narrative approach appealed to me, as narrative reviews are often used when researchers want to develop a comprehensive understanding of a topic and identify gaps for future research (Efron & Ravid, 2018). I felt this aligned closely with the overarching purpose of my literature review, which was to help me advance my understanding of the teenage pregnancy literature, and develop a rationale for my own research project in this area.

Unlike systematic approaches, narrative reviews are not guided by a predetermined research question or strict inclusion criteria (Efron & Ravid, 2018). Instead, reviewers are able to 'evolve' and 'reformulate' their questions during the review process, and inclusion and exclusion criteria are applied more flexibly than in systematic reviews (Efron & Ravid, 2018, p.25). In practice, this meant I could begin my literature review by focusing broadly on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood, and education, and then progressively refine my focus as my understanding of the literature developed. For example, as I engaged with the literature, I realised that the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers can differ significantly between countries, due to variations in national policy, education systems and societal attitudes (Brooks, 2012). Most notably, I was surprised to learn about the teenage pregnancy strategy (1999-2010) and the legacy of this policy in England (Hadley et al., 2024). This led me to refine the scope of my review to focus exclusively on literature relevant to the English educational context, that had been published from 1999 onwards. Through this gradual narrowing of my focus, I was

able to eventually reduce my search results down from over 100,000 results to a final sample of 87 sources.

3.4 Developing the Rationale

Of the 87 sources I reviewed, there was a notable lack of research on teenage pregnancy conducted by educational psychologists or published in journals such as 'Educational Psychology in Practice'. However, I did identify six theses completed by trainee educational psychologists on this topic (Berryman, 2021; Carter, 2017; McLeod, 2013; Sheldrake, 2010; Thompson, 2018; Whiteway, 2016, 2019).

A similarity across all of the trainee educational psychologist theses was their use of qualitative methodologies to obtain the views of either young mothers or young fathers. From a trainee educational psychologist perspective, this did not surprise me, as gaining the voices of children and young people is a central part of the educational psychologist role (Smillie & Newton, 2020). Therefore, it made sense to me that trainee educational psychologists would prioritise gathering the views of young parents themselves. However, from a researcher perspective, I had reservations about this exclusive focus on young parents' voices- not because I did not value these perspectives, but because in the wider literature on teenage pregnancy, a substantial number of studies have similarly used qualitative methodologies to explore the educational experiences of young parents (e.g. Rudoe, 2011, 2013; Vincent, 2009, 2016).

In contrast, my literature review identified a dearth of research exploring the perspectives of other groups, such as education staff, on teenage pregnancy. This gap surprised me, as I anticipated education staff to be a more accessible participant group for researchers, given the ethical complexities associated with researching children and young people (Berryman, 2021). Additionally, in topics adjacent to teenage pregnancy, such as sex education, education staff perspectives are more widely explored (e.g. Cumper et al., 2023; Westwood & Mullan, 2007). Yet, across the 87 studies I reviewed on teenage pregnancy, only a small number of studies included the perspectives of education staff. Of the studies that did include education staff, very few seemed to analyse this data in much depth, if any at all (e.g. Rudoe, 2011). Therefore, I felt to move the literature forward and develop a more

comprehensive insight into the educational experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers, gathering the views of education staff was a crucial next step.

Despite developing a clear rationale to focus on education staff, I initially felt insecure about my chosen participant group, and research area more generally. I was conscious that teenage pregnancy was a relatively niche area of educational psychology practice; it was not something I had personally encountered as a trainee educational psychologist, and anecdotally I was only aware of a small number of educational psychologists who had experience working with this group. Therefore, I was concerned about the potential applicability of my research to educational psychology practice.

My insecurity was heightened on the day I planned to submit my ethics application, when a colleague questioned how my research links to educational psychology. Although this question was posed as genuine interest, rather than a critique, it led me to doubt my research, and I contacted my research supervisor to consider changing my participant group from education staff to educational psychologists. In this moment, I felt focusing on educational psychologists may make it easier to directly demonstrate the applicability of my research to practice. Crucially, before committing to this change, I came across a thesis by Berryman (2021), a trainee educational psychologist, which had not appeared in my earlier searches. In this study, Berryman interviewed young mothers about their educational experiences and suggested that a next step for future research, would be to explore the perspectives of education staff. Reading this thesis was an important moment in my research journey, as it provided me with the confidence I needed to continue with my original focus.

3.5 Ontology and Epistemology

My first formal introduction to ontology and epistemology occurred during Year 1 of the doctorate, where we had an introductory seminar on this topic. During this seminar, we were encouraged to think of ontological and epistemological positions as existing along a spectrum, with realist ontologies and positivist epistemologies on one end, and relativist ontologies and constructionist epistemologies at the other. Critical realism was positioned as being the midpoint along this spectrum, as it acknowledges the existence of an objective reality (realism) but suggests that our

knowledge of this reality is always partial and that multiple constructions of the same reality can coexist (relativism) (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willis, 2022).

Following this seminar, we had to choose and apply an ontological and epistemological position to a piece of mock casework. At the time, my understanding of ontology and epistemology was still developing, so I tentatively chose a critical realist positioning because it seemed like the best 'fit' for capturing my underlying values and beliefs. My confidence in, and understanding of, my critical realist positioning then evolved once I engaged with the literature on ontology and epistemology. In particular, I remember finding Bhaskar's (2008) concept of judgemental rationality compelling which suggests that different constructions of reality can be compared in order to tentatively determine which may offer the 'truest' account. I felt this aligned with my role as a trainee educational psychologist, where I am often required to critically evaluate multiple constructions of a situation to develop my own psychological formulations around what support might be needed.

However, despite personally aligning with critical realism, when designing this research project, I was open to exploring alternative ontological and epistemological stances. For example, I initially considered adopting a feminist epistemological stance due to my study's focus on exploring a gendered topic. However, I decided this positioning did not fully align with the primary aim of the study, which was to explore the perspectives of education staff on teenage pregnancy. This is because, feminist research is focused on prioritising and legitimising women's voices within the research process (Ardevini-Brooker, 2017; Wilson, 2023). Therefore, adopting a feminist positioning would have made it difficult to justify not involving pregnant teenagers or young mothers in this research. In contrast, by maintaining my critical realist positioning, I was not restricted to using a particular participant group so could design a project that better suited my aims (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willis, 2022).

3.6 Developing the Research Design

Having confirmed my critical realist stance and research aims, I began to evaluate potential research designs. Although critical realism is compatible with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches, it is particularly well aligned with research designs that prioritise depth over breadth, such as qualitative approaches (Lawani, 2020). A qualitative design was also well suited to the primary

aim of this study, which was to explore the views and experiences of education staff regarding teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education.

While I found it relatively straightforward to select a qualitative design, identifying which qualitative approach to use was more challenging. The flexibility of critical realism meant that several qualitative approaches could be justifiable (Lawani, 2020). In addition, the primary aim of my study (to explore the views and experiences of education staff regarding teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and education) could arguably have been addressed by a range of qualitative approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Due to this, I thoroughly evaluated several qualitative approaches, including a sequential explanatory design, an instrumental case study, and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) before ultimately deciding to conduct a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) study (Appendix 17).

There were several reasons why I opted to conduct a Reflexive TA study, as opposed to using other qualitative research designs. First, and most importantly, my research supervisor, other members of the course team, and I all agreed that a Reflexive TA approach was a good fit with both my critical realist stance and research aims. Secondly, as part of the research proposal process, a member of the course team highlighted that, compared with other qualitative designs, Reflexive TA was likely better suited to accommodating the practical constraints that could arise with researching my topic. For instance, IPA typically requires homogenous samples (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Smith et al., 2022). However, based on my review of the literature and broader understanding of teenage pregnancy, I anticipated that recruiting a homogenous sample would likely have been challenging. For instance, the existing literature suggests that there can be substantial variation in both the educational settings attended by pregnant teenagers and young mothers, and the roles and responsibilities of the education staff supporting them (e.g. Dawson & Hosie, 2005; Dench, 2007). In contrast, Reflexive TA can accommodate more diverse samples than IPA, which I felt made it a more appropriate methodological choice for my project (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.6.1 Choosing the Data Collection Method

Braun and Clarke (2022) outline that Reflexive TA is suitable for analysing data emerging from a range of qualitative methods, including interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Consequently, I evaluated several potential data collection

methods before deciding semi-structured interviews were the best fit for my project. One alternative method I strongly considered was an online open-ended survey. This is because, I was conscious that there can be several logistical barriers to organising education staff to participate in research (Bartlett et al., 2017). Therefore, I felt that an online survey may help alleviate some of these barriers, since it would require less time commitment from participants (Braun et al., 2021). However, I had concerns that relying exclusively on this method may limit the depth of the data collected, because I would not be able to ask clarifying questions or follow-up on participants' responses (Braun et al., 2021). Due to this, in my summative research proposal, I initially suggested pairing an open-ended survey with semi-structured interviews.

In my proposal feedback a course tutor questioned whether I needed to use both methods to achieve my research aims and recommended that I just conduct semi-structured interviews instead. This feedback was valuable, as it prompted me to reconsider my research design with my research supervisor. Together, we agreed that there were several methodological and practical benefits to removing the survey element of my project. For example, we judged semi-structured interviews to be better aligned to my research aims and critical realist stance than the survey. Additionally, removing the survey also enhanced the feasibility of my project, since it meant I could dedicate more time to recruiting participants for the interviews.

3.6.2 Designing the Semi-Structured Interview

As semi-structured interviews involve the use of both pre-planned and spontaneous questions, I was required to develop an interview schedule (Smith et al., 2022). To support with this, I reviewed the reflective chapters and appendices of other trainee educational psychologist theses to explore how their interview schedules had been constructed. I found this beneficial for developing my practical understanding of the design process, such as the number of questions I might realistically be able to cover in an hour. In addition, I searched for guidance in the literature on how to design interview schedules. Specifically, I found the guidance from Knott and colleagues (2022) helpful and used this to inform the development of my own schedule.

As I had anticipated recruitment for my study would be challenging, I made the decision not to conduct a pilot of my interview schedule. Methodologically, this

was justifiable as when researchers ‘have a very small pool of respondents’, it is considered acceptable not to conduct a pilot (Bearman, 2019, p. 8). I acknowledge, however, that some researchers might view this as a limitation (Bearman, 2019). Therefore, I took additional steps to ensure my interview schedule was well developed and suitable for addressing my research aims. For instance, the interview schedule was informed by my understanding of the existing literature and guidance from Knott and colleagues (2022). In addition, it was also reviewed by both my research supervisor and the ethics committee.

While my decision not to conduct a pilot was methodologically sound, it did place additional pressure on my first interview, since it was my first time using the interview schedule. Reassuringly, during this interview, I felt the schedule worked well and I was pleased with the data that had been generated. In particular, the reflective questions at the end were a useful way of concluding the interview and allowing participants the opportunity to add further insights I may not have otherwise captured.

Despite these strengths, as reflected in the ‘Limitations and Future Research’ section of my empirical chapter, I do regret not co-designing the interview schedule with pregnant teenagers or young mothers themselves. I strongly believe this would have enhanced my research, by ensuring that the topics explored were more closely aligned with the priorities and lived experiences of pregnant teenagers and young mothers themselves. However, at the time of designing my study, I felt this would not be logistically possible due to time constraints and the additional ethical complexities this would create.

3.7 Participants and Recruitment

When determining the participant group for this project, I knew early on that I wanted to explore the perspectives of education staff. However, I was unsure whether to focus on secondary education staff, further education staff, or both. While there was a rationale for all of these options, my initial preference was to focus on secondary education staff. One of my motivations for this was that existing trainee educational psychologist research has been skewed towards focusing on teenage pregnancy in further education contexts (e.g. Berryman, 2021; Carter, 2017). As a result, many of the existing implications for educational psychology practice relate more to the further education context. Therefore, I felt that focusing on secondary

education settings would be a useful way to help address this imbalance in the trainee educational psychologist literature.

Consistent with this rationale, I initially attempted to recruit participants exclusively from secondary education settings. My primary recruitment strategy was to email secondary school headteachers, inviting them to act as gatekeepers for my study and to share my recruitment materials with their staff. Accordingly, between the 9th of May 2025 and the 20th of June 2025, I sent an introductory email and a follow up email to 62 secondary school headteachers (Appendix 18). However, the majority of headteachers did not respond to either of my emails.

Of those who did respond to my emails, all declined my invitation. I was prepared for this, as the literature highlights the challenges of using gatekeepers to access participants, particularly in school-based research (Bartlett et al., 2017; Lay, 2019; Wanat, 2008). Notably, authors such as Lay (2019) and Wanat (2008) point out that school staff may be less likely to act as gatekeepers if they feel threatened by the research, for example where there is a perceived risk to the school's reputation. This aligns with my experience, as when declining my invitation, several headteachers explicitly made comments such as 'we don't have that problem here'. Based on these responses, I got the impression that some headteachers did not want their schools associated with my research topic, perhaps due to the stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy (Berryman, 2021; Yardley, 2008).

The high number of non-responses and 'no's' from headteachers meant that I needed to reconsider my recruitment strategy. Accordingly, I met with my research supervisor, and we agreed to extend the study to include further education staff. This was a straightforward change, as I had already included a clause in my ethics application allowing recruitment to be extended to further education staff if needed. Within a week of updating my strategy, I recruited my first participant, and this interview took place in June 2025. This reassured me that expanding my recruitment had been the right decision, both in terms of how quickly I was able to recruit a participant, and the depth and relevance of the data this interview generated.

3.8 Data Analysis and Findings

For this project, I used Braun & Clarke's (2022) Reflexive TA to analyse the semi-structured interview data. This was not my first time using TA, as I had previously used Braun and Clarke's (2006) 'Thematic Analysis' to analyse data for

my undergraduate dissertation. However, Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise that TA as an approach has significantly evolved since their initial 2006 article, and stress that 'Reflexive TA' is its own distinct approach to TA. Therefore, despite having prior familiarity with the six phases of thematic analysis, I did not want to assume competence and made sure I engaged thoroughly with the guidance from Braun and Clarke (2022).

Before beginning my analysis, I reviewed previous trainee educational psychologist theses from the repository that had also used Reflexive TA. From reading these, I noticed there were significant variations in how trainee educational psychologists have used and applied Reflexive TA. I found the approach taken by Moors (2025) and Baker (2024) particularly noteworthy, as they conducted separate Reflexive TAs to address each of their research questions. This was something I had not initially considered for my research, as I had always assumed you could only conduct one Reflexive TA per dataset. However, I later discovered that even Braun and Clarke (2022) themselves suggest this approach is acceptable. This inspired me to also conduct separate analyses for each of my research questions. I felt this suited my research better than conducting one, integrated analysis, as each of my research questions explored a distinct focus.

While my analysis was guided around my three research questions, I was cautious not to reduce my analysis to a 'question and answer' approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.162). To ensure this, I engaged with the dataset holistically and remained open to the possibility that my research foci could evolve as I became more familiar with the data. For example, following the coding process, I refined the wording of RQ1 from '*what do secondary and further education staff know and understand about teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and its impact on education*' to '*how do secondary and further education staff conceptualise and understand teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and its impact on education?*'. I made this change, because I felt it better reflected the codes identified in the analysis.

One aspect of my analysis that I found especially challenging, was naming the themes and it took me several weeks to finalise them. Reassuringly, Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 193) acknowledge that theme naming can feel 'stressful' because of the pressure to get it 'right'. For example, I initially named the theme 'Setting Context Matters' 'Support Looks Different in Different Settings'. However, when writing up this theme, I felt the name 'Support Looks Different in Different Settings' was too

descriptive and I was worried it didn't clearly convey the central organising concept of the theme: that the context of the setting education staff work within will influence the support they are able to provide. Due to this, I developed several alternative names, including 'Where You Work Matters', 'Educational Context Matters' and 'Setting Context Matters'. I eventually chose the name 'Setting Context Matters', because I felt it in comparison to the other candidate names, 'Setting Context Matters' was both 'catchier' and broad enough to reflect the theme's different facets.

Another aspect of my analysis that I found especially challenging, was knowing when to stop reducing and refining themes. Originally, I constructed 16 themes, which I felt was too high. While Braun and Clarke (2022) themselves are cautious about providing guidance on an 'ideal' number of themes, from their work and other theses, I formed the impression that fewer, more nuanced and complex themes are generally preferred over a larger number of more fragmented or 'thin' themes (p.143). Therefore, I was concerned that the high number of themes I had constructed, might cause readers to inadvertently perceive my analysis as lacking depth. To manage these concerns, I followed guidance from Braun and Clarke and took a break from my analysis. Upon returning from this break, it became clear to me that across the original 16 themes, there were some significant areas of overlap. This led me to merge some of my closely related themes together around one shared, overarching concept and create subthemes. Through this process, I managed to reduce the total number of themes down to 12.

Although I was happier with these 12 themes than I was the original 16, Braun and Clarke (2022, p.377) suggest that the analysis can only be considered finished once it is deemed 'good enough'. I found this 'endpoint' challenging to determine independently, as the 'iterative and open' nature of Reflexive TA meant there was always potential for me to continue refining and editing the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.403). To navigate this, I worked with my research supervisor to help establish a sense of finality. For example, in our supervisions, they gave me the space to talk through my analysis and reflect on why I made certain decisions and analytic choices. Then, following the submission of my draft chapters, they expressed their satisfaction with my findings and encouraged me to move away from data analysis.

3.9 Proposed Dissemination of Findings

To my knowledge, this is the first qualitative study to exclusively explore education staff perspectives on supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers in the English educational context. Therefore, the findings offer a novel and original contribution to the existing literature. Due to this, I believe it is important to have a clear plan for disseminating my findings. At present, I plan to target the dissemination of my findings to three key audiences:

1. Educational Psychologists
2. Secondary and further education settings
3. Teenage Pregnancy Knowledge Exchange

Educational Psychologists

I have already begun disseminating my research to educational psychologists. In November 2025, I presented my study as a 'Research in Progress' project at the Eastern Region Conference. At this point, I had not yet completed my data analysis. Therefore, my presentation focused on my literature review findings and research methodology. Despite this, it was still a positive and encouraging experience, as many educational psychologists seemed to be interested in the topic and expressed a desire to develop their role in supporting young parents.

I have plans to disseminate my findings to my placement service during our 'service CPD day' in July 2026. This will involve presenting my findings to fellow trainee educational psychologists, assistant educational psychologists, and educational psychologists. In addition to sharing my research findings, I intend to use this presentation as an opportunity to discuss the implications my research has for educational psychologists' practice. By doing this, I hope I can encourage my placement service to implement some of these recommendations for the next academic year.

Finally, I intend to explore the possibility of publishing my research in a journal, such as 'Educational Psychology in Practice' or 'Educational & Child Psychology'.

Secondary and Further Education Settings

Following the submission of my thesis, I will prepare an infographic poster summarising the findings of this study. As outlined in my 'Participant Information

Sheet' and 'Consent Form', I will email this infographic to all participants who opted into receiving the results of this study. I also plan on sharing this infographic in my placement service's half termly newsletter for schools, and on their social media.

Teenage Pregnancy Knowledge Exchange

I plan to share my findings with the Teenage Pregnancy Knowledge Exchange, which is an 'e-network' for professionals interested in teenage pregnancy. In addition to sharing my research with this group, I hope to gain their advice and support on further dissemination.

Finally, I plan to upload my thesis on UEA's online digital repository. This will be open access, which means I can direct all of these audiences to it for a full overview of my study findings.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Recruitment Poster



Research Opportunity

Teenage Pregnancy, Early Motherhood and Education

What is the research about?

This research will explore the knowledge, views, and experiences of education staff who have supported pregnant teenagers and young mothers.

Who is conducting this research?

This research is being conducted by Lily Norris, a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East Anglia.

This research has been approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee)

Can I take part?

You can take part if:

- You work in a secondary or further education setting in England.
- You have experience working with a student who is pregnant and/or a young mother.

What will taking part involve?

Participation will involve a 45 minute to 1-hour long interview (online via MS Teams or in-person upon request).

The interview will explore your knowledge, views and experiences of supporting pregnant girls and/or young mothers in secondary and/or further education settings.

How do I sign up?

If you are interested in taking part, or would like further information, please email the researcher:

Lily Norris, l.norris@uea.ac.uk

Ethics Application Number: ETH2425-1495

Appendix 2 - Participant Information Sheet & Consent Form

Miss Lily Norris
Trainee Educational Psychologist

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Education and Lifelong
Learning

University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Email: REDACTED
Tel: Please email to arrange a phone call
Web: www.uea.ac.uk

Teenage Pregnancy, Early Motherhood and Education

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about how secondary and further education settings support pregnant girls and young mothers. This research study aims to explore the knowledge, views, and experiences of secondary and further education staff who have supported pregnant teenagers and young mothers. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are currently employed as a staff member in a secondary and further education setting in England, and you have experience working with a student who is pregnant and/or a young mother. Up to 20 participants are being recruited for this study.

This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher(s): Miss Lily Norris.
This will take place under the supervision of Dr Andrea Honess (a.honess@uea.ac.uk),
School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia.

This research project is being completed in part requirements for the Doctorate in Educational Psychology. As a Trainee Educational Psychologist, I am a student at the University of East Anglia and on a professional practice placement at a Local Authority in the Eastern Region. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or their placement Local Authority, now or in the future.

(3) What will the study involve for me?

Taking part in this study will involve a 1:1 interview with the researcher. This can be conducted online over MS Teams, or in person in a mutually agreed public space (e.g. a library). The interviews will last between 45 minutes to an hour. You can request breaks at any point during the interview.

For the purpose of transcription, online interviews will be audio/video recorded via MS Teams. In-person interviews will be audio recorded using MS Teams.

For online interviews, you will have the option to turn your camera off. All audio and video recordings will be permanently deleted once the transcription process is complete.

During the interview, I will ask open questions that will elicit your knowledge, views and experiences of supporting pregnant girls and young mothers. Due to the nature of the topic under exploration, it is possible this interview may include discussion on potentially sensitive topics, i.e. underage sexual activity

You will have the opportunity to review your interview transcript. Once your interview is completed, I will take up to 2 weeks (14 calendar days) to transcribe it. Once I have written up your interview, you will have the option to view the transcript. This will be emailed to you, and you will 7 calendar days to amend or add comments.

After the interview, the information you gave me will be stored using a pseudonym name to anonymise the data. This is to ensure that you will not be identified by anyone outside of the interview. Any references to specific people, situations, events or places will also be anonymised (or redacted) to ensure your anonymity.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

The interview should take around 45 minutes to an hour to complete. Some interviews may be shorter/longer depending on your own how much you wish to discuss.

You will have the option to review your transcript, if you choose to do this, it will take a little more of your time to do so.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part.

Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia ((or or the Local Authority Educational Psychology Service that is hosting the researcher.) now or in the future.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your data is fully anonymised. You can do this by sending an email to me at l.norris@uea.ac.uk.

(6) What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?

You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview.

After the interview, you will have the right to withdraw from this study until your data has been transcribed and fully anonymised. After this point, it will not be possible to withdraw, as individual responses will no longer be identifiable.

(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Due to the nature of the topic under exploration, it is possible this interview may include discussion on potentially sensitive topics, i.e. underage sexual activity. Furthermore, there is a risk that you may experience emotional discomfort when discussing your experiences of supporting a pregnant student and/or young mother. If you feel that some questions or aspects of the study triggered discomfort, talking with a dedicated service might help. Please note, the research team are not responsible for any of the services suggested:

Education Support, 08000 562 561, <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk>

(8) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

By participating in this study, you will be given an opportunity to reflect on your own practice and share your views on supporting pregnant girls and young mothers in educational settings. Very limited research has explored the perspectives of education staff on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood, and education. Therefore, by participating in this study, you will help amplify the voices of education staff on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood, and education. Furthermore, it is hoped that the findings from this research will result in recommendations for Educational Psychology practice, and help improve how pregnant students, young mothers, and the staff who work with them are supported within educational settings.

(9) What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?

All personal data and information you provide during the study will be anonymised and pseudonymised before it is used in the research.

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's [Research Data Management Policy](#).

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published and may also be used for other scholarly and educational purposes such as in teaching, but you will not be identified if you decide to participate in this study. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were used. The study findings may be deposited in a repository to allow it to facilitate its reuse. The deposited data will not include your name or any identifiable information about you.

(10) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Miss Lily Norris (l.norris@uea.ac.uk, Please email to arrange a phone call) will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would prefer to discuss your questions over the phone, please email the researcher, Lily Norris (REDACTED) to arrange a phone call.

(11) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study.

You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by ticking yes to this question on the consent form

This feedback will be in the form of a poster of the key findings

This feedback will be shared directly to you via post or email.

(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University of East Anglia at the following address:

Miss Lily Norris
School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ
REDACTED
Please email to arrange a phone call

Or you can contact my research supervisor, Andrea Honess:
Dr Andrea Honess
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ
REDACTED
Please email to arrange a phone call

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning: Yan Lebeau (Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk,).

(13) How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

(14) What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

(15) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and Email I.norris@uea.ac.uk to confirm your interest in taking part, and we can arrange a suitable date and time for an online interview. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

(16) Further information

This information was last updated on 27 March 2025.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by email from the researcher, Lily Norris, REDACTED

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (Second Copy to Participant)

I, [PRINT NAME], am willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia (or the Local Authority Educational Psychology Service that is hosting the researcher.) now or in the future.
- I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

Audio-recording YES ☐ NO ☐

Video-recording YES ☐ NO ☐

Reviewing transcripts YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?
YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered YES, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

.....
Signature

.....
PRINT name

Appendix 3 - Interview Schedule

Thank you for taking part in this interview exploring education staff perspectives on supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers. For this research, I am interested in your views and experiences of supporting pregnant girls and young mothers as part of your professional role. This is not a test of your knowledge, there are no right or wrong answers.

Just to remind you, that since this research is exploring teenage pregnancy, we may discuss potentially sensitive topics such as underage sexual activity. If at any time you would like to stop, or to skip a question, please just let me know.

Additionally, I ask that you keep the identity of any individual students or staff members you discuss anonymous to maintain confidentiality.

Does that sound okay? Are you still willing to take part in the discussion?

I will start this interview by asking you some demographic information that I might not already have. This information will be anonymised, but it is important for understanding the context of your responses, such as your professional background and experience. Then, we will move onto talking about your views, understanding and experiences of teenage pregnancy.

When I press record, your audio and video will be recorded. I will delete this recording once I have transcribed the interview. If you do not want your video recorded, you can turn your camera off. Are you happy to start? [if yes] I will press record now.

Demographic information (if not shared before)

1. What is your current role title?
2. What type of education setting do you work in (e.g. secondary school, sixth form, alternative provision, further education setting).
3. How long have you worked in this setting?
4. How many years of experience do you have working in secondary/further education?

Possible Interview Questions to choose from

Knowledge and Understanding

Can you share what you know or understand about the impact on teenage pregnancy and early motherhood on education?

Can you share what you know and understand about how educational settings, such as your own, should support pregnant teenagers and young mothers?

How do you think becoming a parent at a young age affects a student's educational progress and future opportunities?

What types of support do you think are most effective in helping pregnant students and young mothers stay engaged in education?

Approaches to Support

Can you share any examples of how you or your educational setting have supported a pregnant student or young mother?

What strategies or approaches have you used, or would you use, to support a pregnant student or young mother in your educational setting?

What role do relationships (e.g., with students, colleagues, external agencies) play in shaping your approach to supporting pregnant students and young mothers?

How would you create a supportive and inclusive environment for pregnant students and young mothers in your setting?

Perceptions of Role

In your opinion, what role should educational settings play in supporting pregnant students and young mothers? Why?

To what extent do you see supporting pregnant students and young mothers as part of your professional responsibilities?

How do you think your role differs from or overlaps with that of other professionals (e.g., other members of staff, Educational Psychologists, external agencies)?

Which professionals or services do you believe are best placed to support pregnant teenagers and young mothers in education? Why do you think they are well-suited for this role?

When supporting a pregnant student or young mother, do you view your role as supporting the student, their child, or both? Please share your perspective on this.

Facilitators/Barriers

Could you describe and explain the systems that are in place to support pregnant girls or young mothers that attend your setting? If there are none, or you are not aware of any, why do you think that is?

What types of support have helped you when working with pregnant students and young mothers?

What types of support would have helped you better support pregnant students and young mothers?

What challenges or barriers do you think prevent education staff from providing effective support to this group?

Reflective Questions

What motivated you to take part in this research?

Has taking part in this discussion influenced your views on the role of education staff in supporting pregnant students and young mothers? If so, how?

Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered?

Appendix 4 - Reflexive Research Journal Extracts

09.01.26

Throughout the dataset, it seems several participants are implying that they believe, or others around them believe, that being well-educated, e.g. having GCSEs, is important for ensuring a young mothers' success. I want to capture this meaning as a code, but I am not quite sure what to label this. Some ideas I have are: 'Having an education makes them a better mother', but this label implies that educational success is a requirement for being a 'good mother', which I don't think these parts of the dataset are suggesting. I wonder if I need to break the meaning down more. For example, it seems some participants are articulating a strong belief that 'traditional' forms of academic success, e.g. GCSEs, represent the pinnacle of educational success. Then, maybe the link to motherhood is a separate idea?

30.1.26

Today I was reflecting on Research Question 2 and wondered whether I actually knew what I am trying to find out. I questioned whether my interviews had generated the relevant data for this question, as I was struggling so much. After a break, however, I realised it was me that needed to move beyond surface level interpretations like 'to provide pastoral support' to really consider what this meant about how they perceived and approached their role. To help with this, I spent some time clarifying my understanding of the distinction between perception and approach, and wrote some definitions and guiding questions to help me:

- *Perception = how participants understand their role: whether they see supporting pregnant students as part of their job; how they define their responsibility; what they believe good support looks like; how important they consider their role.*
- *Approach = how they carry out that role: the actions they take; whether they are proactive or reactive; how they initiate conversations; how they adapt teaching; their general style of engagement.*

In summary, I've decided perception is more 'what do I think my role is?', and approach is more 'given my role, what do I actually do?'. Based on this clearer understanding, I think I do have more confidence in my ability to address this research question. However, I am aware that this is my own understanding of these terms, which means another researcher analysing this dataset or reviewing my findings, might interpret the terms 'perceive' and 'approach' differently.

12.2.26

Today I felt unsure about my coding and worried that I was doing it incorrectly. I do not want my insecurity as a researcher to result in me developing codes that are too 'fine grained' in the hope I generate 'enough'. To address this problem, I started looking for an 'average' number to reassure myself. To gain perspective, I returned to Braun and Clarke and watched online videos and guides (e.g. Degree Doctor) to hear how others describe their coding process. This helped me feel more reassured, as even though there is not a 'right' number of codes, the number I generated did not feel too small or too large compared to the advice and examples out there. For now, I will keep my existing codes. I think expanding or reducing them any further at this

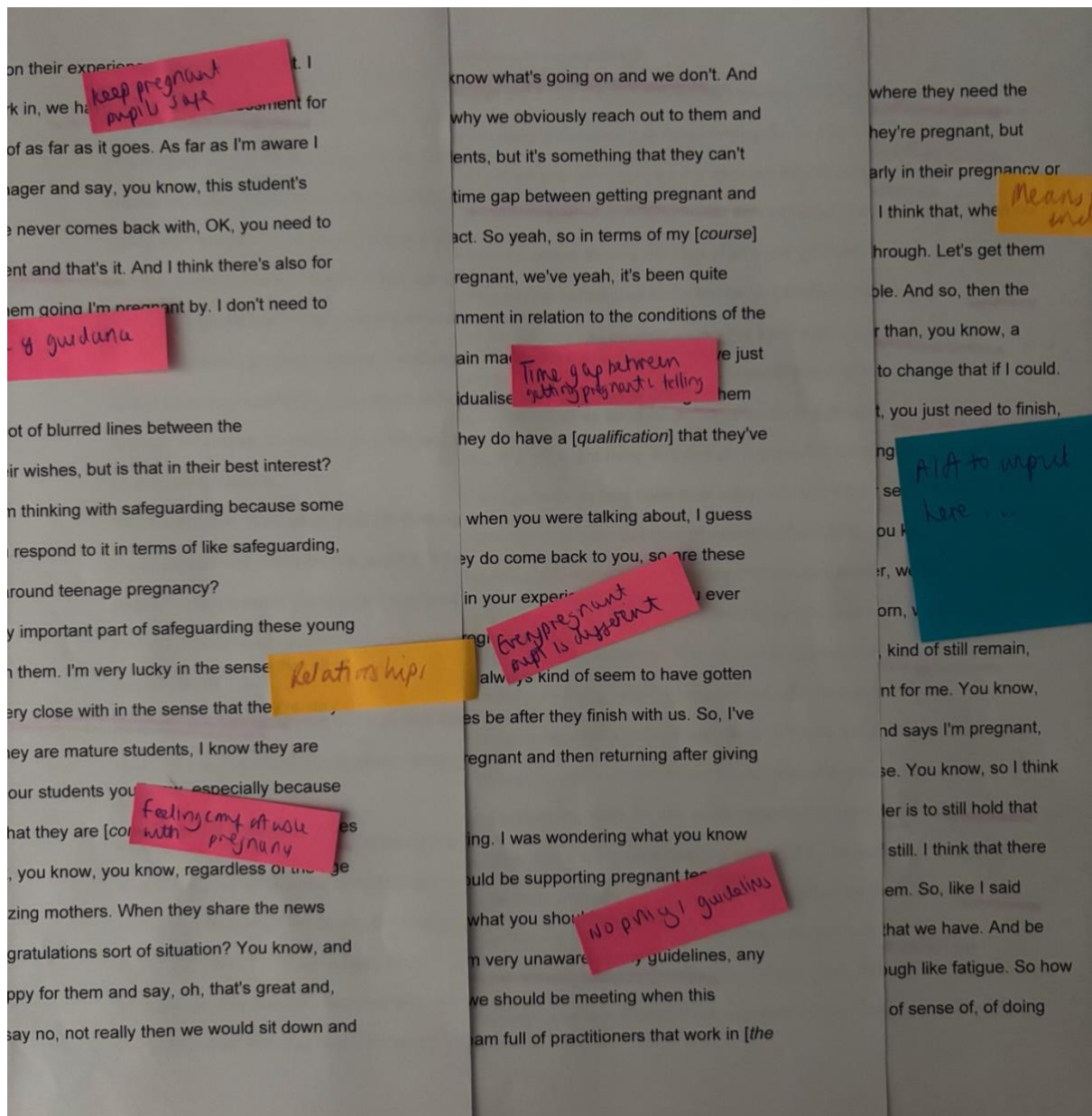
stage might unintentionally move me into theme development and blur the analytic stages. I think I am ready to take the codes into 'Phase 3'. I wanted to record this, because I think it is important for maintaining my reflexivity- for instance, my anxiety as a relatively 'new' researcher is having an influence on how I conduct my analysis.

Appendix 5 - Phase One Critical Engagement with the Dataset

Please note, the questions I used to guide this stage of the analysis were adapted from Braun and Clarke (2022, p.100)

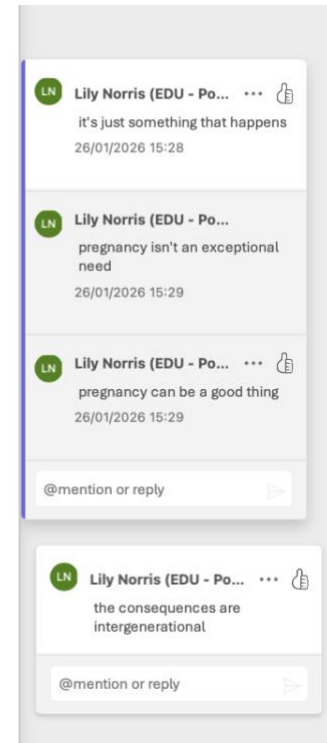
Question	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6	Participant 7
How is this participant making sense of teenage pregnancy, and its impact on education? Any reflections on their role?	Relies on personal experience, wants to avoid stigmatising pregnant pupils. but	I think they perceive teenage pregnancy as being an individual problem- e.g. do	They don't seem to view teenage pregnancy as a problem necessarily	Teenage pregnancy is not necessarily bad and it definitely is not the only barrier in a	they are very inclusive when discussing teenage pregnancy and they come from a science background, and reflect on that in	this participant is very positive and inclusive when describing whether the participant has extensive teenage pregnancy is not a problem, the stereotype young people's lives- 9 times out of 10 they	recognise young people's lives- 9 times out of 10 they
Why might they be making sense of teenage pregnancy and their role in this way?	The type of course they teach, their personal interests and experiences (talks emotionally charged- reflects on personal experiences/thoughts/feelings; considers it in relation to their specific	Maybe this is because they think it is a 'rare' thing, or because all these almost judgemental? Is that the right word? Not in a horrible or bad way. But I get the impression they	They're role is not in a mainstream school- they have more flexibility than I they don't seem to view teenage pregnancy as a problem, but do consider it a mistake	They have had an extensive career, and currently work in a specialist setting. In pregnancy is not the main barrier in these young people's lives- 9 times out of 10 they	they come from a science background, and reflect on that in pregnancy is a biological state. It is not the only vulnerability these young people's lives- 9 times out of 10 they	I wondered whether the participant has extensive teenage pregnancy is not a problem, the stereotype young people's lives- 9 times out of 10 they	They care about their role from a perspective of a system that I thought every day
In what ways do they make sense of teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and its impact on education? Any reflections on their role? Facilitators/Barriers?	reflects on personal experiences/thoughts/feelings; considers it in relation to their specific	Is that the right word? Not in a horrible or bad way. But I get the impression they	view teenage pregnancy as a problem, but do consider it a mistake	main barrier in these young people's lives- 9 times out of 10 they	biological state. It is not the only vulnerability these young people's lives- 9 times out of 10 they	pregnancy is not a problem, the stereotype young people's lives- 9 times out of 10 they	perspective of a system that I thought every day
How socially normative is their depiction of teenage pregnancy and education?	on not wanting to further stigmatise this group, which is	normative- you need to attend school to stay in school, had	thoughts- very. You need GCSEs or some form of	can't have multiple three prior participants. This participant recognises	young people's lives- 9 times out of 10 they	they and I assume their positive/inclusive outlook on	that I thought every day
What assumptions or biases do they seem to have about the world, e.g. potential epistemological stances?	teenage pregnancy is not planned, it is a problem, it is not ideal, it is shocking. they will	there's different types of success- academic and then other. These pupils would have	passing GCSEs is essential to be a good mum. Teenage pregnancy	Pregnancy is not the main barrier in these young people's lives- 9 times out of 10 they	very positivist. Pregnancy is a biological state. Pregnant	they seems to be interpreting the topic from a social	every day
Why am I reacting to the data in this way? Can I recall how I felt in the interview?		I felt this way during the in-person interview. so might be	The answers/responses are short. I	At the time of this interview, I remember finding it really	I had a break in analysis, so have a fresh mind. I might	I really enjoyed this interview when	I felt like the interview
What pre-existing ideas and knowledge does my interpretation of this interview rely on?	The literature, my own experiences working in educational settings	the literature, my own experiences in educational settings, my values as a TEP.	The responses are shorter than in the prior two interviews, so have to really	My own biases towards this interview, as I reacted positively and resonated with	The literature, my own experiences working in educational	my own experience facilitating the interview with	the way I was asked during
Could I make sense of this interview in a different way?	Maybe they are not feeding into the stigma, and reading it as a transcript is different to how it felt	maybe they are voicing their own frustration around limited resources, expectations on	I need to try and take away my personal feelings/emotions associated with this	I need to be more neutral, and try to consider the data at face value as well, rather than just cloud	I wonder if my epistemological position is influencing how I interpret and read	I need to try and look at the data at face value now, to see if there are	focus on safeguarding the pa

Appendix 6 - Initial Thoughts and Reflections



Appendix 7 - Coded Transcript Extract

301 comment about potentially giving them some sex education lessons in personal tutor
302 time because we've never had that that amount of students pregnant in one class
303 before. I don't think the setting that I am currently, I don't think they've ever got a
304 year without a pregnancy. So, I think it's, I think it is fairly normal and as staff we're
305 more than happy to celebrate with the student if that's the situation. We, I think we
306 get affected when we do have students that suffer miscarriage or we have another
307 student who I also teach, whose in a very vulnerable situation. [REDACTED]
308 [REDACTED]
309 [REDACTED]
310 [REDACTED]
311 [REDACTED]
312 [REDACTED]
313 [REDACTED] So on staff, you know that breaks
314 me, that does, when you have a baby coming into the world that has a very
315 vulnerable mother and a very vulnerable situation to come into. And you know, you
316 just know that there's not enough funding to put that mother into an environment so
317 that her child can thrive.
318 [REDACTED] And to those coming to those situations are those environments that



The screenshot shows a social media thread with three posts by a user named Lily Norris (EDU - Po...). Each post includes a profile picture, name, and a thumbs-up icon. The posts are as follows:

- Post 1: "it's just something that happens" (26/01/2026 15:28)
- Post 2: "pregnancy isn't an exceptional need" (26/01/2026 15:29)
- Post 3: "pregnancy can be a good thing" (26/01/2026 15:29)

Below the posts are two input fields for replies, each containing the placeholder text "@mention or reply" and a send button.

Appendix 8 - Phase Two Excel Spreadsheet

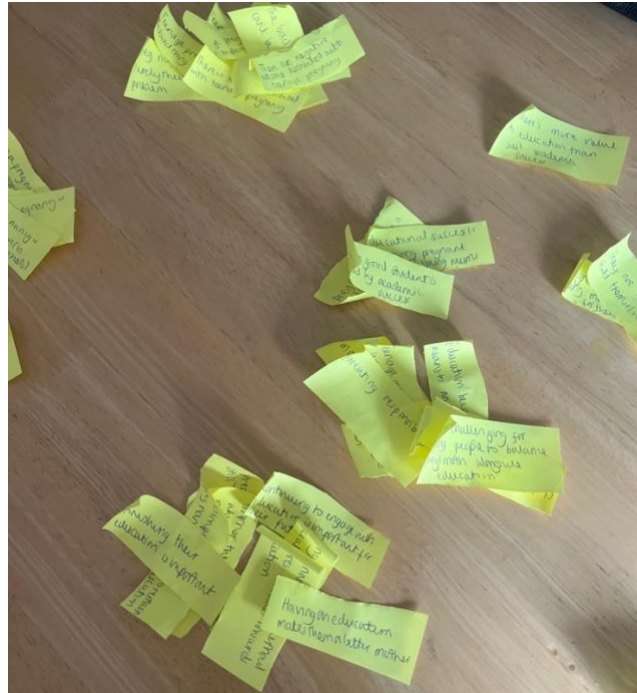
How do secondary and further education staff conceptualise teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and its impact on education? - <u>update ethics</u>								
Code	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	
Pregnancy is a medical condition	lines 15-19, lines 24-25		1425	1950	2097; 3057		3265	3953
Pregnancy is disruptive to education	Lines 8-12	599	1401; 1735		2603		3275	3972
Pregnancy is a need in itself	Line 93-95	607; 1017;		1862	2840; 3072		3570	4416
its not their only 'problem'	Line 90-92	759	2114; 2496				3254	4283
its not their first vulnerability		589-594; 596; 814	1858	3150			3705	4203
it's just something that happens	303				3139		3364	
It's possible to challenge the stereotype	Line 69-72		1721				3247	
Teenage pregnancy is a rare phenomenon	Line 117-119; 299	559-562; 1158		1871	2798	3787; 3788	4186	
Educational success is rare among pregnant teenagers and young mothers		567-569; 964	1402				3413	
Being a good student is defined by academic success	Line 69-72	964	1466					
Education isn't just about grades or exam success	Line 219-222;	814	2201					
Pregnancy isn't an exceptional need	Line 56-57; 303	1166	1486				3395	3952
Teenage pregnancy is life changing	246	563-565	1402		3041		3481	
it accelerates the transition into adulthood		629					4036; 4076	

How do secondary and further education staff perceive <u>AND APPROACH*</u> their role in: mothers?								
Code	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	
Supporting pupils with diverse needs is just part of the role	1054 1437; 1456 1862 2840; 2842; 2889 3433; 3647							
Not a typical part of the role	117; 299	558; 723	1750	1865; 1980; 2165; 2386	2796; 2879	3773; 3787	3964; 4187	
Supporting them is a choice	385			2016; 2028	2879; 3090	3512		
Prevent teenage pregnancies	301			2345; 2369	2779; 3112; 3130; 3144		4047	
The students is their priority, not their babies	210	1124	1608	2098; 2108; 2215	2857; 2875			
Get them the qualifications they need	33; 206	1235	1397; 1441	2228	2663	3248; 3582; 3723; 3734		
Preparing them for adulthood	175			2201; 2241		3401; 3584; 3723		
Schools are just one piece of the puzzle		664; 957	1419; 1453; 1593	1919; 2278	2611; 2998; 3003	3281; 3381; 3555; 3661; 3676	3978; 4027; 4100; 4111; 4162; 4164	
Focus on the education side of things	1082 1575; 1602						3980	
Responsibility is shared amongst staff- it's not just down to one person	50; 325	704; 713; 733		2078	2783; 2824; 2990; 3017	3280; 3303; 3311; 3380; 3683	4119; 4321; 4348	
Priority of care to their babies	1119		1623		2866	3310; 3577	4122; 4114; 4140; 4158	
Be an advocate for the student	219	1068				3292	3957; 4070; 4078	
Be supportive and non-judgemental	72; 304	781; 1098	1452; 1716			3253; 3285; 3289; 3294; 3246; 3454; 3480; 3657	3958; 4059	

What factors facilitate or hinder how effectively secondary and further education staff can support pregnant and young mothers?

Code	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7
Relationships are Key	65; 291		1451	2123			4201, 4315, 4335, 4350
Lack of funding	315; 347; 407		1498; 1686			3779	4237, 4229
Approaches vary depending on the age of students	77			1927	2694; 2711; 2716; 2730; 2758; 2763	3322, 3351, 3504, 3510, 3729	3936, 4162
Support relies on the student communicating their needs	26; 29, 57, 60; 175; 202; 343; 402	709; 711; 915; 1010		1955; 1966; 1979	2707	3536, 3553	
Lack of experience	117	558					
Lack of knowledge	48	1095; 1151; 1173	1591	2444; 2453	2765; 3028; 2036	3772	4416
Learning from colleagues	51, 54; 441			2013; 2398; 2408			
Lack of systems in place	54; 92; 140; 148; 331; 360; 365; 388	732		2012; 2483	2830; 2878, 2902		4186, 4388
Depends on pupil motivation and engagement	135; 145; 270; 343	615; 621; 673; 781; 813; 942; 948; 1003	1403; 1475; 1713		2956	3413, 3611, 3741	4203

Appendix 9 - Physical Exploration of Code Clusters



Appendix 10 - Collated Codes

Author: Lily Norris (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Comment: each case is unique

Text: it's completely dependent on the situation

Author: Lily Norris (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Comment: each case is unique

Text:

our s
the s
woul
she h

Author: Lily Norris (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Comment: each case is unique

Text: I mean there are ones that we've worked with that managed to get GCSEs, then ones that didn't, more time would wouldn't have made more GCSE, but it might have been not so crammed in and not so rushed and pressured

Author: Lily Norris (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Comment: each case is unique

Text: each case is individual,

Author: Lily Norris (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Comment: each case is unique

Text: Sometimes those needs are more extreme than others, and sometimes it's really not

Author: Lily Norris (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Comment: each case is unique

Text: it depends on the circumstances

Author: Lily Norris (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Comment: each case is unique

Text: it depends on the kids situation

Author: Lily Norris (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Comment: each case is unique

Text: It can kind of vary from student to student depending what the, the individual, what the parents needs are and where they want to be placed

Author: Lily Norris (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Comment: each case is unique

Text: it kind of depends when the baby's born and when they can start back in education and when they're feeling ready

Author: Lily Norris (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Comment: Each case is unique; Education secures their futures

Text: every girl was different, which again made, not made it tricky, but we just had to think very carefully about how to individualise their experience and get them through the course, so that for their futures, they do have a [qualification] that they've worked hard towards.

Author: Lily Norris (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Comment: each case is unique; pregnancy isn't an exceptional need

Text: when a student turns around to us and says that they're pregnant, I don't really feel like we all immediately kind of put net on to them. It's all very disjointed, dependent on the situation of the student.

Author: Lily Norris (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Appendix 11 - Phase Three Excel Spreadsheet

Please note, the questions I used to guide this stage of the analysis were adapted from Braun and Clarke (2022, p.155 & 173)

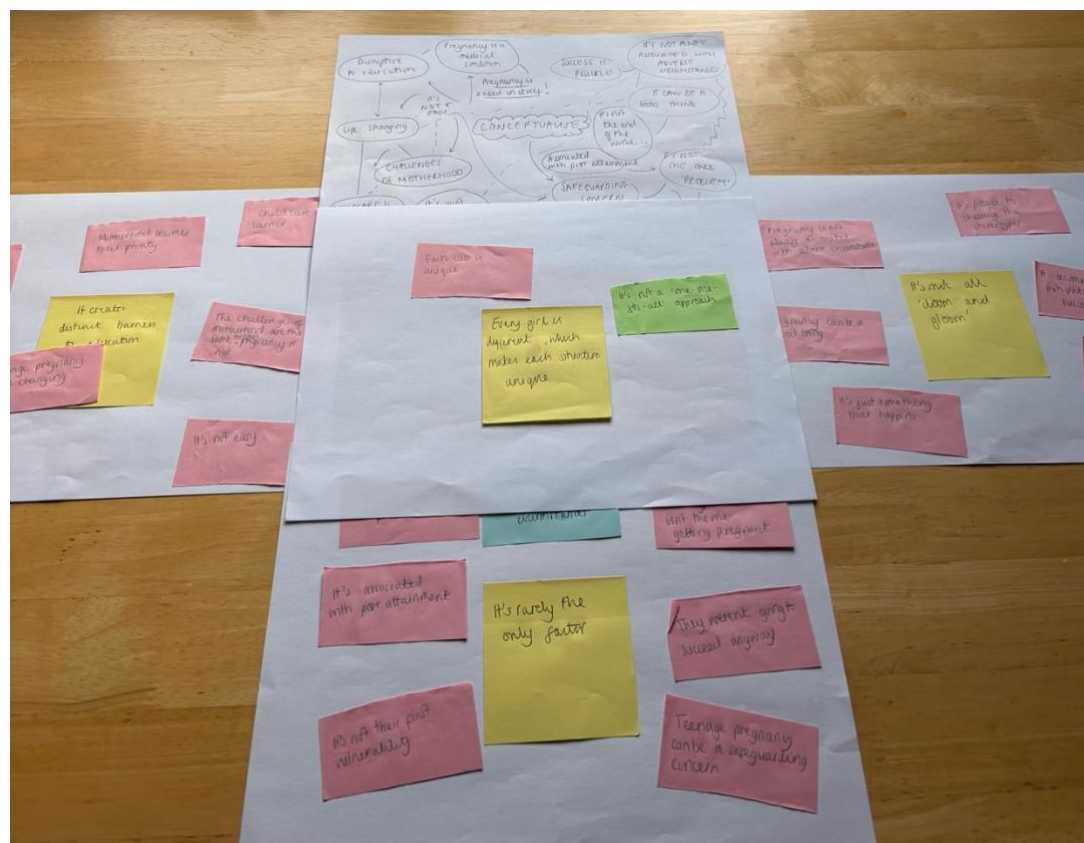
	A	B	D	E	F	G	H
	Cluster	Code Label	Relevant Question	Are these codes all around the same	Are there enough meaningful data to evidence	Are the data contained within each cluster too	Does this cluster convey something important and
1							
9	2	wider pupil circumstances					
	2	they weren't going to succeed in education anyway					
10							
11	3	it's just something that happens	1	Yes	Yes (see Macro document and Cluster 3)	Yes	yes
	3	it wasn't the plan, but it's not the end of the world					
12	3	pregnancy can be the catalyst for support					
13	3	pregnancy can be a good thing					
14	3	it becomes their motivator to succeed					
15	3	Pregnancy is not always associated with adverse circumstances					
16	3	It's possible to challenge the stereotype					
17							
18	4a	Pregnancy is a medical condition	1	Yes	Yes (see Macro Document and Cluster 4)	Yes	100%
19	4a	Pregnancy is disruptive to education					
20	4a	Pregnancy is a need in itself					
21	4b	pregnancy can be a good thing					
22	4b	Childcare is a barrier					
	4b	Motherhood becomes their priority					
23	4b	Teenage pregnancy is life					

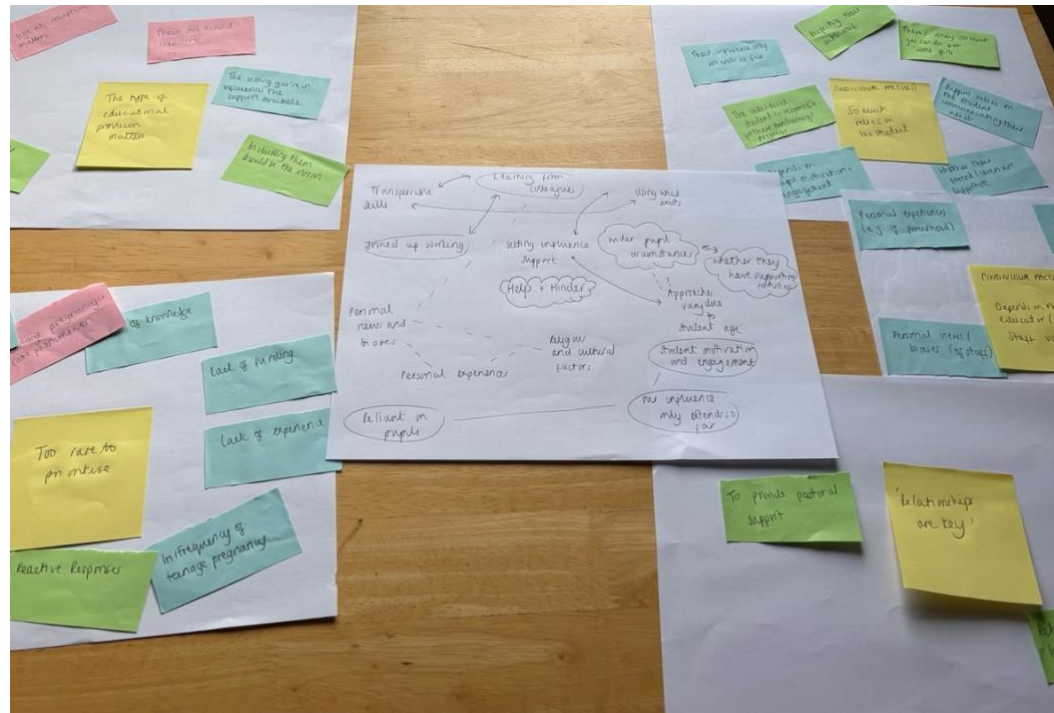
Appendix 12 - Phase Four Excel Spreadsheet

Please note, the questions I used to guide this stage of the analysis were adapted from Braun and Clarke (2022, p.173)

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	
	RQ	Theme	Provisional Theme Name	Does this theme have clear boundaries? What are they?	Are there enough meaningful data to address this theme?	Are the data contained within each theme?	Does this theme convey something important and relevant?	Next Steps	
1		1	1	Every girl is different, which makes each situation unique	Yes- this theme is about the idea that every situation is different, you can't generalise. This is explicit, and also implicit through the way participants have decided to share individual stories when illustrating points, to emphasise the differences between situations.	Yes- 2 pages of direct quotes, plus the implicit evidence, e.g. choosing to describe individual cases when illustrating points, rather than links between them. It also occurs in every interview.	No- It is all around the idea that no case is the same, or when trying to make a generalisation, recognising that it won't be the case for every girl.	Yes. It occurs in every interview, as a way of structuring their arguments.	Refine theme: use the quotes with this.
2		1	2	It's rarely the only factor.	This theme centres around the idea that, for many pregnant young women, pregnancy is not their first experience of adversity, and is also not the only factor impacting on their educational engagement/attainment.	Definitely.	The theme centres on pre-pregnancy adversities, and also adversities during pregnancy/motherhood (e.g. LAC, own families)	Yes, it is important for highlighting that pregnant teenagers and young mothers often face educational adversity prior to pregnancy- I think this is really important for thinking about where interventions should be targeted	I think this theme is really central to and probably the fastest becoming so prevalent throughout the dataset.
3		1	3	It's not the end of the world'	This theme is around the fact that pregnancy isn't the end of the world. Firstly, girls still can be successful. Secondly, it's about challenging that narrative that it's always negative- sometimes becoming pregnant is actually a wanted and celebrated thing. It's not all bad, amongst all this negativity there is positivity.	Yes	It's all about the fact that pregnancy can be positive, and success is possible- it's not the end of the world. Challenging that dominant narrative.	It does, but the provisional name maybe doesn't capture it fully- it is education focused predominantly so maybe needs to capture that.	It could be 'it's end of the world' think 'doom and gloom' is almost better- it's a direct parallel quote, and often the theme is disconnected to the negative/stereotype 'there is a stereotype that.... BUT....' think the theme currently works
4		1	4	It creates distinct barriers to	Yes. It is about the barriers	Yes, and data across all	They are all around	Yes. It emphasises that	Refine theme.
		Final Themes	Revised Themes	Candidate Themes	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4	Theme 5

Appendix 13 - Phase Four Thematic Maps





Appendix 14 - Phase Five Excel Spreadsheet

Please note, the questions I used to guide this stage of the analysis were adapted from Braun and Clarke (2022, p.192)

	A	B	C	D	E
	Q1 Themes	Overview of theme (<i>what is it about?</i>)	What are the boundaries of this theme? <i>What is included/excluded?</i>	What is unique and specific about this theme in contrast to others?	What does this theme contribute towards the overall analysis? Is it worthy of being a theme?
1	Every Girl Was Different': No story is ever exactly the same	This theme captures the idea that pregnant students and young mothers are not a homogenous group, meaning that approaches to supporting them often need to be individualised and responsive to each situation. This theme was evidenced by participants throughout the dataset, both explicitly and implicitly. Explicitly, participants made direct comments and reflections where they emphasised the differences between the young women they have supported. Whilst implicitly, the theme was reflected in the way participants approached and answered the interview questions. For example, rather than generalise their experiences, participants frequently reflected on specific cases, comparing and contrasting	This theme includes explicitly comments about the individuality and uniqueness among pregnant teenagers and young mothers, including reflections on their backgrounds and outcomes. In addition, this theme includes implicit data around how participants chose to answer and respond to questions. For instance, by using specific case examples, and a perceived difficulty to generalise their approaches and experiences of teenage pregnancy.	This theme was strongly related to the research question, and every theme could be considered a 'subtheme' of this theme, since 'every girl was different' was emphasised throughout the dataset.	This theme provides an analytic lens through which the remaining themes were interpreted.
2	It's rarely the only factor	This theme describes how pregnancy itself is not necessarily an adversity, or the main adversity resulting in poorer outcomes for pregnant teenagers and young mothers. Where pregnant	This theme includes the extracts where participants reflect explicitly on a young person's prior vulnerability, speculate on a young person's prior	This theme recognises that there are adverse outcomes associated with teenage pregnancy, but conceptualises pregnancy itself as rarely being the	A perspective on how teenage pregnancy is understood by education staff,. This theme is also helpful for contextualising themes more related to
	Final Themes	Revised Themes	Candidate Themes	Theme 1	Theme 2
				Theme 3	The

Appendix 15 - Braun and Clarke (2022) 15-Point Checklist

Criteria	Associated Phase	Actions Completed	Evidence
1	One	Each transcript was analysed to an appropriate level of detail. I made a great effort to ensure each transcript was accurate to the participant's verbal interview.	• Appendix 7 • Thesis, Section 2.3.2.3, 'Data Analysis' see 'Phase One'
2 & 3	Two	Each data item was given equal analytic attention. To ensure this, prior to each round of coding, I started with a different item in the dataset. This meant I didn't inadvertently give one data item more attention. The coding process was thorough and repeated a total of six times, two per research question.	• Appendix 5 • Appendix 6 • Appendix 8
4	Three	For each theme, all associated data extracts were identified and collated into a document using the word macro function.	• Appendix 10 • Appendix 11
5	Four	For each candidate theme, the associated coded data and full dataset was reviewed.	• Appendix 10 • Appendix 11 • Appendix 12 • Thesis, Section 2.3.2.3, 'Data Analysis' see 'Phase Four'
6	Five	I took steps to ensure each theme was organised around a clear central concept and were each internally coherent, consistent, and clearly distinct from one another	• Appendix 11 • Appendix 12 • Appendix 13 • Appendix 14 • Thesis, Section 2.4 'Analysis', see associated write-up
7, 8, 9, 10	Six	The data extracts in the write up were selected as I considered them to best evidence the analytic claims being made. Each theme was organised to tell the best story about each research	• Thesis, Section 2.4, 'Analysis' • Thesis, Section 2.3.2.3 'Data

		question, and within each theme the data extracts were arranged to tell the most coherent story about the theme. When writing up each theme, I used theory and research to interpret the data extracts rather than just paraphrase the data.	Analysis', see Phase Six • Thesis, Section 5, 6 & 7
11	N/A	I gave myself sufficient time to complete all phases of the analysis. Familiarisation of the data began immediately after each individual interview was conducted: I transcribed each interview immediately after, then returned to each transcript/recording multiple times before coding began. Coding officially began in December 2025. A first draft was completed in March 2026.	• Thesis, Section 3
12	N/A	I have clearly outlined the specific TA approach used in this thesis (Reflexive TA).	• Thesis, Section 2.3.2.3 'Data Analysis', see Rationale
13 & 14	N/A	My methodology write up aligns with the actions I took, and I have clearly stated my ontological and epistemological position. Additionally, the language I use throughout the empirical paper match my ontological/epistemological stance.	• Thesis, Section 2 • Thesis Section 2 aligns with the Appendices • Thesis, Section 3.4
15	N/A	I have ensured, when writing up my thesis, I describe myself as being 'active' in the research process	• Thesis, Section 2 • Appendix 4 • Thesis, Section 3

Appendix 16 - Ethical Approval

University of East Anglia

Study title: Supporting Pregnant Girls and Young Mothers in Education: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Staff Experiences

Application ID: ETH2425-1495

Dear Lily,

Your application was considered on 28th April 2025 by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved**.

You are therefore able to start your project subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

This approval will expire on **31st May 2026**.

Please note that your project is granted ethics approval only for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethics approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) before continuing.

It is a requirement of this ethics approval that you should report any adverse events which occur during your project to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) as soon as possible. An adverse event is one which was not anticipated in the research design, and which could potentially cause risk or harm to the participants or the researcher, or which reveals potential risks in the treatment under evaluation. For research involving animals, it may be the unintended death of an animal after trapping or carrying out a procedure.

Any amendments to your submitted project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) in advance to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.

Approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) should not be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you need guidance on how to make your study UK GDPR compliant, please contact the UEA Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk).

I would like to wish you every success with your project.

On behalf of the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee)

Yours sincerely,

Melanie Aplin

Ethics ETH2425-1495 : Miss Lily Norris

Appendix 17 - Potential Research Designs

Please note, the information presented in this table is adapted from a table that was previously submitted as part of my summative research proposal.

Research Question	How do secondary schools support pregnant teenagers and young mothers?	How do secondary schools support pregnant teenagers and young mothers?	What are the experiences of secondary school staff who are, or have previously, supported students who are pregnant students?
Ontology/Epistemology	Critical Realism	Critical Realism	Critical Realism
Research Design	<u>Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods</u> A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design begins with a quantitative data collection phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This data is analysed and is used to inform the subsequent qualitative data collection phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).	<u>Instrumental Case Study</u> An instrumental case study is used when a researcher is interested in exploring a phenomenon (e.g. teenage pregnancy), rather than a specific case (Kekeya, 2021). It can be helpful for gaining an 'insider's view' of a phenomenon (Laframboise & Shea, 2014).	<u>Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)</u> IPA methodology is underpinned by three theoretical orientations (Pietkiewiz & Smith, 2014). 1. Phenomenology- IPA researchers aim to explore a phenomena as it appears to the subject, and explore the

			meaning and significance of their participants lived experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). 2. Hermeneutics- IPA researchers emphasise the role of interpretation in understanding human experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA involves a double hermeneutic process, as researchers interpret participants' interpretations of their own experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). 3. Idiography- Instead of producing generalisable findings, IPA researchers aim to offer insights into how individuals or groups make sense of a given situation (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).
Participants and Recruitment	○ Gatekeepers: Principal EP, Headteachers, Facebook Group Admins ○ Participants: Secondary school staff ○ Recruit secondary school teachers via headteachers	○ Gatekeeper: Principal EP/ Headteachers ○ Contact Secondary Headteachers, ask if they have recent (current or previous academic year) experience	○ Gatekeeper: Principal EP, Headteachers, Facebook Group Admins ○ Participants: Secondary school staff who have recent experience supporting pregnant pupils/young parents.

	using principal EP school contact lists and advertise nationally in Facebook groups and on personal social media (LinkedIn).	supporting a pregnant student/young mother. ○ If yes, interview headteacher. ○ Use snowball sampling to recruit additional participants from within the school.	○ Recent experience is defined as experience occurring in the last five years. This is because conception rates have not fluctuated much in this time, and neither has the legislative context (Hadley et al., 2024 ONS, 2025). ○ Secondary school staff will be recruited via multiple methods. For example, I will use my Principal EP as a gatekeeper for contacting Headteachers in my placement local authority. These headteachers can share the research with their staff. In addition to this, I will recruit nationally by advertising in Facebook groups and on personal social media (LinkedIn). ○ I will aim to recruit around six to ten participants, because this will give me an opportunity to examine similarities and differences between individuals (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2022). Moreover, Smith and colleagues (2022) recommend that around 6-10 interviews (not participants)
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			are suitable for professional doctorate studies using IPA.
Data Collection	Phase 1: ○ Online survey shared to secondary school staff ○ Generate descriptive statistics related to their experiences supporting pregnant students/young mothers. ○ At the end of the survey, participants can click a link to sign up for the second phase of the study. Phase 2: ○ Semi-Structured Interviews ○ Participants recruited from online survey. ○ Interviewed online via teams ○ Interview schedule refined based on Phase 1 results.	○ Semi-Structured Interviews with different secondary school staff, beginning with the headteacher. ○ The interviews will incorporate participatory approaches. E.g. ask participants to map out the different roles and systems involved in supporting students who are pregnant/mothers. ○ Potential to incorporate other methods, like staff surveys or content analysis of school policies.	○ To collect data, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews will be used. ○ This is because IPA requires rich data, and participants need to be able to share their experiences in-depth (Smith et al., 2022). ○ Therefore, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews are often a preferred method for IPA researchers (Smith et al., 2022). ○ I would be keen to supplement the interviews with additional methods. For example, if a participant is currently supporting a pregnant student/young mother, I would consider asking them to keep an anonymous diary log, reflecting on their experiences.
Data Analysis	○ Descriptive Statistics ○ Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) to analyse the interview data.	○ Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to analyse the qualitative data. I could also conduct a cross-case synthesis if using more	There are seven recognised steps to IPA analysis (Smith et al, 2022): 1. Reading and Re-Reading the First Case 2. Exploratory Noting

		than one case (depends on recruitment).	3. Constructing Experiential Statements 4. Searching for Connections Across Experiential Statements 5. Naming the Personal Experiential Themes AND Consolidating and Organising them in a table 6. Continuing the Individual Analysis of other cases (repeating the process). 7. Working with personal experiential themes to develop group experiential themes across cases.
Feasibility	○ The topic of this research might not be pressing for secondary school staff, so will they be motivated to complete the questionnaire? ○ Phase 2 is dependent on secondary school staff completing a questionnaire. ○ By making the project national, I am opening the pool of participants. However, it is unlikely my research will generate nationally representative results and insights about what secondary schools are doing to support	○ This project requires me to find a secondary school that has recent experience supporting a pregnant student/young mother. Then, I need to see whether the secondary school wants to take part in the research. ○ This research design excludes teachers from other schools who might have more extensive experience. ○ Overall, I think this method could limit the scope of what I might find out since I am only looking at one school.	○ In IPA studies, the sample size is small (Smith et al., 2022). This might inadvertently assist with my participant recruitment, as I am only aiming to recruit a maximum of ten participants (Smith et al., 2022). ○ In the literature it is unclear <i>who</i> within secondary schools, is responsible for supporting pregnant pupils. This means inclusion criteria would need to be broad, to avoid overlooking potentially relevant participants, which contradicts

	pregnant students/young mothers.		the purpose of an IPA study (Smith et al., 2022).
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Appendix 18- Gatekeeper Emails

Dear [Gatekeeper Name]

My name is Lily Norris, and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East Anglia. I am currently undertaking a research project for my doctoral thesis and sharing my recruitment poster to secondary and further education settings nationally.

I am seeking your permission to act as a 'gatekeeper' for my research project. If agreeable, all this would include is: sharing my recruitment poster with your staff via an email.

The research is exploring staff perspectives on supporting pregnant teenagers and young mothers. To participate in this research, staff must have experience supporting pregnant girls and young mothers. However, this experience did not have to occur in your setting. Participation is anonymous and entirely voluntary, and there are no incentives to taking part.

Through this research, I hope to amplify the voices of education staff on teenage pregnancy, early motherhood, and education, and identify areas where Educational Psychologists could better support. This project is being supervised by Andrea Honess, who is a qualified EP and co-programme director of the UEA Doctorate in Educational Psychology.

If you would be willing to act as a gatekeeper for this project, please email me back at REDACTED to confirm your agreement to act as a gatekeeper or to request further details.

Thank you for your time, and I appreciate your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,
Lily
Trainee Educational Psychologist