

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY:  
THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF TEEN MOTHERS WHO GRADUATED FROM  
HIGH SCHOOL AND ATTENDED OR COMPLETED COLLEGE

by

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## ABSTRACT

CHRISTINE MARIA STROBLE. A phenomenological study: The lived experience of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college.  
(Under the direction of DR. GREG A. WIGGAN)

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to (1) explore the lived experience of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college and (2) discover the school factors that contributed to their academic success. The goal was that in discovering the “essence” of participants’ experience, findings might provide insight into how to increase the graduation rate for teen mothers. The research question that guided this study was the following: What is the lived experience of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college, and what are the school factors that contributed to their academic success? The findings revealed that the participants experienced (1) a feeling of accomplishment, (2) a struggle balancing school and work with being the best mother, (3) difficulty paying for daycare in college, (4) a dilemma deciding whether to go to a local college or to go away, (5) feeling judged for being a teen mother, (6) a lot of support, and (7) some non-support. The findings regarding the structure of the participants’ experience or how they graduated from high school and attended or completed college was (1) a supportive female family role model, (2) faith in God, (3) supportive school personnel (teachers, principal, school nurse), (4) teen parenting programs/classes that provided daycare assistance in high school and that extended through college, (5) their children (who motivated them), and (6) self-determination and/or wanting to redeem themselves. Based on these findings, there are implications for practice, research and public policy. One recommendation is

that schools partner with community resources to offer parenting programs that provide assistance with daycare and that extend through completion of college.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my greatest supporter, my mom, a teen mother.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### My Story

In phenomenological research, Moustakas (1994) recommends that at the onset of the study researchers should bracket, as much as possible, their own experiences. To bracket means to set aside by writing about one's own experiences and the context and situations that have influenced those experiences. I have both personal and professional interactions with teen mothers graduating from high school and attending or completing college. Personally, when I was a teen, one of my friends "Monica," became pregnant. She was 15 and in high school. I don't think there was ever a question of whether Monica was going to graduate from high school. Of course she would. Why wouldn't she? Just because she had a baby? In my mind, that was all the more reason for her to graduate. Monica's parents must have had the same mindset because not only did they help her with the baby while she was in high school, they kept her son for her while she went off to college at Clemson University. I believed that was a wise decision because the best way for Monica to position herself to provide for her child was to get an education.

Later as a high school teacher, I learned about the dropout rate for teen mothers, and I thought about Monica. She had made it, but so many others hadn't. Why? What was the difference? I suspected it was because Monica had support. Believing that support mattered, I started a support group for teen mothers at our school. Our first guest speaker was Dr. Lisa Cole (pseudonym), a former teen mother who graduated from high school and earned her Ph.D. in Sociology. Dr. Cole was a great role model because she had not allowed a teen pregnancy to stop her from earning her degree. She stated, "While teen pregnancy should never be worn as a badge of honor, neither is it a death sentence.

You can recover.” She recovered and excelled. I concluded that if current pregnant and parenting teens could see a former teen mother, like Dr. Cole, then they might be inspired. Also, too often we hear of teen mothers who did not recover—who dropped out of school. Where are the success stories? We need to hear more of the stories of those who graduated high school and college, in hopes of learning from their experiences what factors promoted their success.

These experiences created the context that led me to want to conduct a study on teen mothers. What I wanted to know was why and how those teen mothers who graduated did it. What were their experiences? I chose to conduct this study to answer this question and to give voice to those teen mothers who, in spite of the oppressive forces that they face in society and schools, illustrate what poet Maya Angelou said to her audience of oppressors: “Still I Rise.”

I brought this perspective to this study. Although every effort was made to ensure objectivity, this theme shaped the way I viewed and understood the data I collected and the way I interpreted my participants’ experiences.

### The Social Context of Teen Pregnancy

For the well-being of children, youth, and society, reducing teen pregnancy rates has been and should continue to be a national priority. In many instances, teen pregnancy brings substantial adverse consequences in its immediate and long-term impacts to teen mothers and their children (The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2010). For example, teen pregnancy and birth are significant contributors to high school dropout rates among teen girls. About 50% of teen mothers receive high school diplomas by 22 years of age, compared to approximately 90% of women who had not given birth

during adolescence; 2% of teen mothers earn college degrees by age 30 (Perper, Peterson & Manlove, 2010; “Why It Matters,” 2010). For teen girls aged 15 to 19 who become mothers and drop out of school, their educational level limits their future earnings potential. Teen pregnancy also impacts the children of teen mothers in the following ways:

- Children of teen mothers are 50% more likely to repeat a grade and drop out of high school;
- Children of teen mothers have more health problems but receive only half of the necessary care and treatment;
- The sons of teen mothers are 2.7 times more likely to be incarcerated; and
- Children of unmarried, high school dropout teen mothers are 10 times more likely to live in poverty, (Hoffman & Maynard, 2008; “Fast Facts: Unique Needs of Children,” n.d.; “Why It Matters,” 2010).

These outcomes of teen pregnancy “remain for the teen mother and her child even after adjusting for those factors that increased the teenager’s risk for pregnancy; such as, growing up in poverty, having parents with low levels of education, growing up in a single-parent family, and having low attachment to and performance in school” (CDC, 2010, para. 2).

In response to these outcomes, the CDC (2010) has made preventing teen pregnancy one of its “ top six priorities, a ‘winnable battle’ in public health and paramount importance to health and quality of life for our youth” (para. 3). Furthermore, teen pregnancy costs U.S. taxpayers nearly \$11 billion per year for increased health care and foster care, increased incarceration rates among children of teen parents, and lost tax

revenue because of lower educational attainment and income among teen mothers (Hoffman & Maynard, 2008; “Counting It Up,” 2011). These adverse consequences for teen mothers, their children, and society are reasons why continued efforts to reduce teen pregnancy rates are so critical.

Since the late 1950s, initiatives to reduce teen pregnancy rates in the United States have for the most part been successful (Hamilton & Ventura, 2010). Initially, from 1940 to 1957, the teen birth rate increased 78% to a record high of 96.3 per 1,000 for women between the ages of 15 to 19 in 1957. From the end of the 1950s through the mid-1980s, the teen birth rate steadily declined. The rate then increased 24% between 1986 and 1991, but between 1991 and 2005, the teen birth rate decreased 34% to a record low of 40.5 per 1,000 women aged 15 to 19 in 2005. According to Boonstra (2002), researchers at the Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI) analyzed the reasons behind this decline and concluded that the decrease between 1988 and 1995 was due to increased abstinence, changes in the behavior of sexually experienced teens (they were having sex less), and increased contraceptive use with more effective methods such as the injectable contraceptive [Depo-Provera] and the contraceptive implant [Norplant], which were introduced to the U.S. markets in the early 1990s.

After a consistent decline, teen pregnancy rates increased 5% between 2005 and 2007 (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2010). However, since 2007, the teen birth rate has been on a steady decline. In fact, teen pregnancy rates dropped 25 percent from 2007 through 2011 to a record low of 31.3 per 1,000 women aged 15 to 19 (Hamilton, et al., 2012). This rate in 2011 was the lowest ever reported in the seven decades since consistent teen birth rates have been available (Hamilton, et al., 2012). The reasons for

the decline are (1) strong pregnancy prevention messages directed to teenagers, (2) increased use of contraception at first initiation of sex, and (3) the use of dual methods of contraception (condoms and hormonal methods) by sexually active teens (Hamilton & Ventura, 2012).

Additionally, teen birth rates are down across all ethnicities (CDC, 2010).

Historically, teen pregnancy has disproportionately affected Latina, Black, American Indian, and socioeconomically disadvantaged teens. The CDC reports the following:

Non-Hispanic black youth, Hispanic/Latino youth, American Indian/Alaska Native youth, and socioeconomically disadvantaged youth of any race or ethnicity experience the highest rates of teen pregnancy and childbirth. Together black and Hispanic youth comprised 57% of U.S. teen births in 2011. (Hamilton, Martin & Ventura, 2011, para 2).

The reasons for the disparity are that “social, economic and cultural barriers limit the ability of youth of color to receive accurate and adequate information on preventing HIV, STIs and unintended pregnancy” (“The Facts: Youth of Color,” 2010, para. 1). To remedy this problem, the organization Advocates for Youth proposes that “it is important to promote programs that seek to make structural and social changes and lessen risky sexual behaviors by encouraging condom use, delay in sexual initiation, [and] partner reduction” (“The Facts: Youth of Color,” 2010, para. 1). As it stands, however, the birth rate for Latina teens in 2010 was 56 births per 1,000 Latina teens, and the birth rate for non-Hispanic Black teens in 2010 was 52 births per 1,000 non-Hispanic Black teens (“Fast Fact: Teen Pregnancy and Childbearing,” 2012). While rates for both Latina and

non-Hispanic Black teens are still high, they are decreasing. Therefore, across the board, teen pregnancy rates are declining.

The decline in teen pregnancy rates is important. Fewer teens across all ethnicities aged 15 to 19 are having children. The social cost of teen pregnancy has been dramatically reduced, and while this is all noteworthy progress, it is important to acknowledge that each year almost 750,000 teens between ages 15 to 19 become pregnant, with 367,752 giving birth in 2010 (“Fact on American Teens’ Sexual,” 2012; Hamilton & Ventura, 2012). The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (“Why It Matters,” 2010) reports that almost 50 % of teen mothers will leave high school without obtaining a diploma. This group of dropouts consists of over 150,000 teen mothers who are disproportionately Black, Latina, and socioeconomically disadvantaged young women.

The high school dropout rate among this school-aged population is a serious problem. Educators and scholars who seek ways to reduce the dropout rate question whether schools are doing all they can to help teen mothers graduate from high school and attend college. Fine (1991) and Wolf (1999) argue that schools can do a lot more. In fact, these two researchers propose that schools are pushing teen mothers out of school. Fine (1991), in her ethnographic study of dropouts in an urban school, states the following:

Although it is no longer legal to dismiss a student on the basis of her pregnancy or marital status, it is nevertheless commonplace--in fact, typical--for a pregnant teen to dropout because of social pressures, inability to schedule classes, feelings of rejection, absence of day care, or health problems (p. 77).



Wolf (1999) supports Fine's (1991) argument by explaining that, on a daily basis, teen mothers are discriminated against because of their pregnancy or parenting status. Wolf reports

- Teen mothers are forced into separate alternative schools which often lack a rigorous academic curriculum equivalent to their traditional high school;
- They are not allowed to remain or to return to their traditional high school;
- Teen mothers are failed because of excessive absences due to days missed due to the birth and/or illness of their children;
- They are required to stay out of school for a specific period of time due to childbirth; and
- They are restricted from certain courses (gym) and extracurricular activities (i. e. the Honor Society) (para. 1).

Behavior such as this is all illegal. Additionally, schools treat teen mothers differently than they do teen fathers. For example, schools require teen mothers to attend parenting classes but do not require teen fathers to do so, and schools restrict female parents from certain activities and do not restrict male parents (Wolf, 1999).

Furthermore, to illustrate that teen mothers often lack support from schools, *Education Week* published an article in June 2012 arguing that the promise of Title IX of the Education Amendment Act of 1972 is unmet for pregnant and parenting students (Shah, 2012). Title IX, mostly known for its application to female students in sports, also applies to pregnant and parenting teens; the law states that any agency receiving federal funds shall not discriminate against a student based on her pregnancy status ("Title IX Protections," 2012). Shah (2012) explains that, while access to schooling for teen

mothers has improved since the passage of Title IX, data from 2006 show that 51% of teen mothers have high school diplomas. This graduation rate for teen mothers is compared to about 90% for women who did not have a teen birth (“Why It Matters,” 2010). According to Shah (2012), experts argue that one reason for this high dropout rate among teen mothers is that too often teen mothers are deprived of equal opportunities, in part because of educators’ ignorance regarding Title IX’s application to this group of students. “The lack of knowledge surrounding pregnant students means that in many cases the promise of the law is not being filled” (Shah, 2012, para. 7). The answer to ensuring the rights of teen mothers as students is a call for data (Shah, 2012). Erin Prangle, Associate Director for Government Relations of the American Association of Women in Washington, DC, and others are pushing the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights to collect data about teen mothers and how schools serve them (Shah, 2012).

Additionally, U. S. Representatives Jaren Polis (D-CO) and Judy Chu (D-CA) have introduced the *Pregnant and Parenting Students Access to Education Act*, a comprehensive legislation to improve high school graduation rates and access to postsecondary educational and career opportunities for teen mothers. The National Women’s Law Center (2011) reports that the *Pregnant and Parenting Students Access to Education Act* enables states to “(1) create a plan for educating teen mothers, (2) provide professional development and technical assistance to school districts, (3) coordinate services with other state agencies, and (4) disseminate information, among other activities” (para. 1). The goal is that this act will create national/state policies on how schools educate teen mothers, give states and school districts additional support, and

increase interaction between agencies who must work together in supporting these students.

Perhaps another reason why schools are not graduating more teen mothers is that school administrators and teachers are at a loss for how best to serve teen mothers (Pillow, 2004). National Public Radio (NPR) reports that, in some schools like Roosevelt High School in Los Angeles' predominantly Latino/Latina Boyle Heights neighborhood where health officials have deemed this campus a teen pregnancy "hot spot," school officials have sought outside help (Gonzalez, 2012). In this Latino/Latina community, the teen pregnancy rate is two to three times higher than in other L.A. neighborhoods, and it has been so high for so long that the school has teamed up with Planned Parenthood to operate an on-campus clinic. This high pregnancy rate in this school illustrates that, while the overall teen pregnancy rates are declining, they are still very high in Latino/Latina communities, and school administrators are in need of resources to help educate this population ("Facts on American Teens Sexual," 2012; Gonzalez, 2012; Hamilton & Ventura, 2012).

In summary, the first step for researchers, policy makers, and educators who want to see more teen mothers graduate is to ensure that schools are in compliance with Title IX. The next step is to investigate the educational experiences of teen mothers who achieved academic success. Understanding the school factors that helped these teen mothers graduate and attend college might provide high schools with knowledge to help future teen mothers graduate from high school and attend college.

As it stands, there is limited research about the educational experiences of teen mothers and even fewer studies that focus on the education of teen mothers who

graduated from high school and attended college. Few studies address teen pregnancy from an educational perspective. Pillow (2004), one of the leading researchers in the area of educating teen mothers, makes the following argument:

While teen pregnancy has been understood as having implications for education, teen pregnancy has not been situated as an educational policy issue. Despite the amount of attention teen pregnancy receives, education research is scarce, school data on teen mothers is often absent or out of date, [and] teen pregnancy is repeatedly situated as a psychological, health or social welfare issue and not an educational issue (p. 4)

Pillow (2006) continues to point out that, between 1972 and 2002, *Educational Researcher*, a premier education research journal, did not publish any articles on the education of teen mothers, “a silence echoed by other major educational journals” (p. 60). Pillow argues that, until teen pregnancy is studied and researched as an educational issue, pregnant/parenting students will not receive the education they are entitled to and deserve.

Finally, Lutrell (2003) argues that more studies are needed that address the negative discourse of the typical pregnant teenager as uninterested in school:

In terms of the dominant image that gets evoked, the “pregnant teenager” is seen as a black, urban, poor female who is more than likely herself the daughter of a teenage mother. She is probably failing in school, has low self-esteem, sees no future for herself, and now must deal with the untimely end of her youth and face the harsh realities and responsibilities of adulthood. Research about this group . . .

must engage in, and respond to, these dominant discourses and representations of the ‘pregnant teenager’” (p. 4).

This proposed study seeks to present a different perspective by exploring the lived experiences of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college.

Many teen mothers face a cycle of school failure. However, less is known about teen mothers of color who completed high school and attended college. Wyner, Bridgeland, and Dilulio (2007) report the following:

There are millions of students who are overcoming challenging socioeconomic circumstances to excel academically. They defy the stereotype that poverty precludes high academic performance and that lower-income and low academic achievement are inextricably linked (p. 4).

Included in this group of students overcoming a low socioeconomic status to achieve academically are teen mothers. Their stories are rarely heard.

#### Statement of the Problem

The high dropout rate among pregnant and parenting teens is a serious problem, and little educational research is available on the school processes that promote the success of these students. In fact, few studies investigate teen pregnancy from an educational perspective. Pillow (2004) argues that, “while teen pregnancy has been understood as having implications for education,. . . teen pregnancy is repeatedly situated as a psychological, health or social welfare issue and not an educational issue (p. 4). Consequently, teachers and administrators are at a loss for how to best serve this population (Pillow, 2004). *Education Week* (Shah, 2012) notes that experts argue that the

answer to this problem is a call for data and they are encouraging the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights to collect data about teen mothers and how schools serve them (Shah, 2012).

Of the literature that addresses teen pregnancy from an educational viewpoint, three have studied the subject of educating teen mothers in traditional high school settings versus in separate, segregated buildings so that they do not influence other teen girls (Kelly, 2000; Luttrell, 2003; Pillow, 2004). Additionally, Pillow (2004, 2006) has written on the lack of educational policy concerning teen mothers. The lack of educational policy research prohibits teen mothers from receiving the type of education they are entitled to under Title IX of the Education Amendment Act of 1972 (Pillow, 2006). Still other studies have explored the disparaging stereotypes and images of teen mothers (Kelly, 2000; Luttrell, 2003). Two recent studies have described how parenthood affected teen girls' views of schooling, with an overwhelming consensus among the participants that having a child dramatically increased their desire for an education (SmithBattle, 2007; Zachary, 2005). Demands from home and lack of school policies and effective practices create challenges that negatively affect teen mothers' desires to remain in school (SmithBattle, 2007). Of all the participants in these recent studies, some were on track to graduate; however, most had either earned a General Equivalency Degree (GED) or were currently enrolled in a GED program (SmithBattle, 2007; Zachary, 2005).

Additional studies are needed that explore the lived experiences of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended college. Such studies are critical to uncovering the school factors that promote the academic achievement of this population. Awareness regarding the school effects that contribute to these students' academic

success will ultimately equip practitioners with knowledge about best practices and policies that have the potential for improving the educational outcomes of teen mothers. In addition, studies that explore the experiences of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended college are crucial to offering a different perspective to the dominant discourse of the pregnant teen.

#### Purpose of the Proposed Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to (1) explore the lived experience of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college and (2) discover the factors that contributed to their academic success. The goal was that in discovering the “essence” of participants’ experience, findings might provide insight into how to increase the graduation rate for teen mothers.

#### The Research Question

The research question that guided this study was the following: What is the lived experience of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college, and what are the factors that contributed to their academic success?

#### Significance of the Study

This proposed research is significant because (1) it helps add to the body of research and literature in the field on teen mothers and their education, (2) it may also help improve teacher practices by revealing to teachers and school administrators best strategies for better serving this population, and (3) it may provide information that could potentially improve the lives of future teen mothers, their children and society in general by increasing teen mothers’ educational attainment and subsequent future employment and earnings potential.

First, this research has the potential to add to the scholarly research and literature in the field. As previously mentioned, there is a need for additional research examining school processes that help promote achievement among teen mothers. Shah's (2012) article in *Education Week*, "Title IX Promise Unmet for Pregnant Students," supports future research on how schools treat teen mothers. Shah (2012) explains that experts argue that the answer to ensuring the rights of teen mothers as students is a call for data. This proposed study is a step in that direction by collecting data about teen mothers' educational experiences and how schools serve them.

Second, this research is significant because this study may help improve instructional practice by providing teachers and school administrators with best practices for better serving this population. If high schools hope to increase the graduation rate for these students, they must find ways to engage teen mothers. Hearing the voices of teen mom graduates about what helped them achieve academically might offer schools valuable information.

Finally, this research may provide information that has the potential to improve the lives of future teen mothers, their children, and society by increasing teen mothers' educational attainment as well as employment and earnings potential. Billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars might be saved if more teen mothers graduate from high school and attend college because their increased education will impact their employment and earnings which will indirectly affect the lives of their children. These changes will reduce costs associated with children of teen mothers, thus benefitting society.

#### Definition of Terms

In the context of this study, the following terms are used and operationalized:



<i>Teen Mom</i>	a teen girl who gave birth between the age of 15 to 19
<i>Academic achievement</i>	
<i>/Success</i>	graduated from high school by age 19 and enrolled in a two or four year college or university by age 20
<i>Lower-income</i>	from a low-income or working-class background
<i>Inclusion</i>	a teen mother who attended and graduated from her traditional high school and not an alternative for teen mothers
<i>Critical Black Feminism</i>	a theoretical framework that argues that Black women and women of color experience race, class, and gender oppression and seek to resist this oppression
<i>Lived experience of graduating from high school and attending or completing college</i>	participants' experiences in graduating from high school and attending or completing college and how they were able to do so.
<i>Phenomenological study</i>	a study that describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experience of a concept or a phenomenon.

### Summary

In conclusion, this chapter provided an introduction to the social context of teen pregnancy, a statement of problem, the purpose for and significance of the study. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature pertaining to teen mothers' educational experiences.

Chapter 3 explains the theoretical framework, the research design, sampling selection, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, and Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings as related to the theoretical framework. Chapter 5 also includes Implications for Action and Recommendations for Further Research

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to (1) explore the lived experience of teen mothers who graduate from high school and attended or completed college and (2) discover the school factors that contributed to their academic success. The goal was that in discovering the “essence” of participants’ experience, findings might provide insight into how to increase the graduation rate for teen mothers.

### Research Question

The research question that guided this study was as follows: What is the lived experience of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college, and what are the factors that contributed to their academic success?

### Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature on teen pregnancy and education and is organized around five emerging themes:

1. Inclusive schooling versus separate facilities for teen mothers
2. Educational policy for teen mothers
3. Title IX of the Education Amendment Act of 1972
4. Disparaging images of teen mothers
5. Teen mothers’ renewed interest in education

Pillow (2006) argues that “a cursory search on teen pregnancy will generate a plethora of research about teen pregnancy and teen parenting from psychological, sociological, health, public policy and social welfare viewpoint” (p. 60). Several researchers (Campbell, 1968; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn & Morgan, 1987; Luker, 1996, Williams, 1998) have studied teen pregnancy from these perspectives. Campbell (1968),

who was one of the earliest researchers to study teen pregnancy, reached the following conclusion:

The girl who has an illegitimate child at the age of 16 suddenly has 90 percent of her life's script written for her. She will probably dropout of school; even if someone else in her family helps to take care of the baby, she will probably not be able to find a steady job that pays enough to provide for herself and her child; she may feel impelled to marry someone she might not otherwise have chosen. Her life choices are few and most of them are bad (p. 238).

In contrast, Furstenberg et al. (1987) argued that "Campbell's observation was really a conjecture since almost no data were available at that time to substantiate his claim about the deleterious consequences of early parenthood" (p. 6).

In the middle to late 1960s, Furstenberg et al. (1987) also conducted a landmark study (known as the Baltimore study) tracing the life histories of approximately 300 primarily Black urban teenage mothers and their children. The 15-year follow up provided some good and bad news about the life outcomes for the teen mothers in the study. Furstenberg et al. explained that "the popular belief that early childbearing is an almost certain route to dropping out of school, subsequent unwanted births, and economic dependency is greatly oversimplified, if not seriously distorted" (p. 46). Furstenberg et al. highlight that a substantial majority of the teen mothers in their study completed high school, found regular employment, and even if they had at some point been on welfare, eventually managed to escape dependence on public assistance. However, they conclude that even if the stereotype of teen mothers in later life is exaggerated, "it is not wholly wrong. Many teenage mothers manage to break out of the seemingly inevitable cycle of

poverty, but the majority did not make out as well as they probably would have had they been able to postpone parenthood.” (Furstenberg et al., 1987, p. 47). Furstenberg et al. conclude that their own findings “lend some credibility to the belief that the life course remains to some degree fluid and flexible, but also suggest that there are definite limits as to how much room early childbearers have in which to manipulate their circumstances in life” (p. 47).

A few other particularly important findings resulted from the Baltimore study. Furstenberg et al. (1987) found that, while teen pregnancy lowered the women’s likelihood of economic success and increased their likelihood of having a large family, the teen mothers “who had more economically secure and better-educated parents were more likely to succeed—perhaps as a result of receiving a greater amount of direct aid and having other family resources available” (p. 142). Additionally, teen mothers who had been doing well in school and who had high educational goals at the time of their first birth were much more likely than others to be successful later in life (Furstenberg et al., 1987).

Furstenberg et al. (1987) note that in the decades following the late 1960s and 1970s several other researchers (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1981; Chilman, 1983; Furstenberg et al., 1981; Hofferth & Hayes, 1987; McAnarney & Schreider, 1984; Moore & Burt, 1982) analyzed the impact of teen pregnancy on the life chances of teen mothers and their children. However, Pillow (2006) states that there is limited research within the arena of education. Pillow’s claim is supported by that fact that between 1972 and 2002, major education research journals failed to publish any articles on the education of teen mothers (Pillow, 2006). This lack of research from an educational perspective is even

more surprising considering that under Title IX, passed in 1972 and implemented in 1975, public schools were specifically charged with providing equal educational opportunity and access to teen mothers (Pillow, 2006). This silence, Pillow argues, is not neutral but is indicative of public schools' ambivalence about whether teen mothers deserve an education.

Regardless, however, of whether school administrators believe teen mothers deserve an education or not, schools have been charged to educate these students (Pillow, 2004). What is needed now is research that focuses on the school experiences of these students to determine how schools are serving them. In the area of education, some scholars have studied teen pregnancy.

#### Inclusive Schooling versus Separate Facilities

One of the major uncertainties that emerged from the literature on educating teen mothers was whether or not these students should be educated in traditional high schools or in separate, alternative schools. Two researchers have conducted studies related to this issue (Kelly, 2000; Lutrell, 2003). Kelly (2000) devotes her entire ethnographic research to exploring how two British Columbia schools—City School and Town School, both large public secondary schools with mostly working-class and poor students—sought to integrate teen mothers into traditional high school settings.

Kelly (2000) explains that the reason she conducted an investigation regarding inclusion was because pregnant and parenting teen girls were routinely expelled from U.S. and Canadian public schools prior to the 1970s. Then in 1972, with the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendment Act, this practice became illegal and inclusive schooling was mandatory in the United States. Many Canadian schools such as those in

British Columbia made similar changes and “moved from a policy of formal exclusion to formal inclusion of pregnant and mothering students in the early 1970s” (p. 11).

However, Kelly argues that, despite the move away from expulsion of teen mothers, most of these students continued to receive their education in self-contained programs, within separate classes in traditional public high schools, or in alternative schools that combine childcare, counseling, parenting classes and other health and social services. Few traditional schools offered adequate support, especially an on-site daycare, which would enable teen mothers to attend and participate fully in the public school.

One of the major strengths of Kelly’s (2000) work is that it focuses on the schools’ response to teen mothers. From her work, readers gain a better understanding of how two schools sought to integrate teen mothers. Readers also learn about the “local struggles to make the institutions of schooling more inclusive” (pp. 7-8). Kelly details the efforts of teachers and administrators at City and Town schools to promote inclusion of teen mothers. Some of the strategies used to foster integration included (1) creating community buy-in, (2) fighting for visibility such as the politics of location, (3) building political support within the school, (4) monitoring student attendance and progress, (5) providing support and accommodation, and (6) using teen mothers as role models. Along with discussing each strategy, Kelly (2000) offers the pros and cons of each.

Similar to Kelly’s (2000) work, researcher Lutrell (2003) produced an ethnographic study of the Piedmont Program for Pregnant Teens, known as PPPT, a public alternative school/program for pregnant teens in the U.S. which provides a glimpse of what schooling is like for teen mothers at a separate, stand alone program. The difference between Kelly’s (2000) work and Lutrell’s (2003) is that Kelly examined how

two British Columbia high schools sought to include teen mothers and Lutrell's research focused on lessons to be learned from an alternative school's program. Lutrell does so by offering a glimpse of the girls' everyday experience of schooling at this separate, segregated program.

The strength of Lutrell's (2003) work is that the reader is able to hear the teen mothers' perceptions of themselves. Lutrell asks each teen mother to do three tasks: first, to "perform" their pregnancy stories; second, to make a "Who am I?" collage using pictures from their favorite magazines; and third, to make a collaborative book of self-portraits with written descriptions (Lutrell, 2003, p. 41). The result was that "the girls crafted responses that shed light on their multiple worlds—worlds of childhood, womanhood, motherhood, heterosexual romance and consumerism— and that highlight their growing awareness of how race, class and gender inequities shape their participation in and aspirations about these worlds" (Lutrell, 2003, p. 45).

#### Educational Policy for Teen Mothers

Following closely behind the works of Kelly (2000) and Lutrell (2003), Pillow (2004, 2006) addressed schooling for teen mothers from the perspective of educational policy. Pillow (2004) explained that while she intended to write a book of narratives based on teen mothers' school experiences, a necessary and important project, her research was less about the stories of pregnant and parenting students and more on an analysis of the politics of education for teen mothers and "a specific look at how such discourses impact and delimit educational policy and practice for the pregnant/mothering student" (p. 3).



Using Title IX as an analytical lens, Pillow (2004) specifically explored how lack of information, research, and processes regarding the education of pregnant/parenting students was impacting public education. Pillow further argued that these absences, which are not neutral, constructed discourses that affect the provision of education to pregnant/parenting students. She contends that, while public education has been given the mandate to educate teen mothers, there is much debate over (1) how to do educate them, (2) where to provide their education, and (3) what type of education teen mothers need or deserve. Pillow concludes that, even though Title IX guarantees, each teen mother an education equal to her peers and specifies that practices of separation and exclusion are illegal, studies reveal that discriminatory school practices continue. Pillow (2004) hypothesizes that until teen pregnancy is addressed as an educational issue, pregnant/parenting students will not receive the education they are entitled to and deserve.

Pillow's (2004, 2006) work builds on the work of Kelly (2000) and Lutrell (2003), and the strength of her work is that it covers so much ground regarding the political aspect of education for teen mothers. She describes the demographic shifts and political movements that have shaped teen mothers' access to education. Pillow (2004) highlights that, ironically, teen pregnancy emerged as a significant social problem at a time when teen birth rates were actually declining in the 1970s. She also notes that emerging concern for White teen mothers is what generated momentum for Title IX which defined their education as an entitlement. However, when the political spotlight turned to Black teen mothers in the mid-1980s, education as an entitlement was outweighed by concerns over poverty and welfare dependence. What then overshadowed

equitable access to education was promoting teen mothers' economic self-sufficiency, and this concern was reinforced in 1996 when the welfare reform bill (The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act [PRWORA]) mandated that teen mothers attend school or lose welfare benefits. Pillow argues that "although Title IX guarantees equal education to all teen mothers there is evidence that schools treat teen mothers differently by race, treating some young mothers as entitled to an education and other teen mothers as responsible to society for their mistakes" (p.13).

#### Title IX of the Education Amendment Act of 1972

The issues raised by Pillow (2004) regarding the treatment of teen mothers suggest that there should be continued discussion on the implementation of Title IX of the Education Amendment Act of 1972. Title IX is a federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex—including pregnancy, parenting, and all related conditions such as abortion—in educational programs and activities that get federal funding ("Fact Sheet: Title IX 40 Years," 2012). Pillow explains:

[A] recipient [of federal funding] shall not discriminate against any student, or exclude any student from its education program or activity, including any class or extracurricular activity, on the basis of the students' pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, termination of pregnancy or recovery from, unless the student requests voluntarily to participate in separate portions of the program. (Pillow, 2004, p. 61).

"Furthermore Title IX requires that any separate facility set up for teen mothers must be voluntary and it must also be 'comparable to that offered to nonpregnant teens'" (Pillow, 2004, p. 61). Title IX also provides specific language regarding the handling of absences

for teen mothers, noting that teen mothers must be treated the same as any students with a medical condition or disability. This groundbreaking legislation guaranteed teen mother equal access to schooling and mandated that schools provide pregnant and parenting teens an education equal to her peers.

Prior to Title IX, it was common practice for schools to dismiss pregnant teens, exclude them from educational courses, and prohibit them from participating in extracurricular activities (Pillow, 2004). The grounds for the school's decision was that the pregnant teen would "contaminate" other students (Pillow, 2004, p. 56). After the passage of Title IX, passed in 1972 and effective July 12, 1975, this discriminatory behavior of denying teen mothers an education and excluding them from courses and extracurricular activities became illegal. With the passage of Title IX, schools became legally responsible for providing pregnant and parenting teens an education equal to their non-parenting peers. This new legislation meant schools could not expel teen mothers once they were pregnant and showing pregnancy. Schools could not exclude them from activities such as gym or the Honor Society (Pillow, 2004). As a result, teen mothers began graduating from high school in record numbers. Upchurch and McCarthy (1989) explained that between the 1950s and 1980s, the high school completion rate of teen mothers nearly tripled—from 19% in 1958 to 56% in 1986. Title IX legislation has been viewed as being largely responsible for this increase in the number of teen mothers graduating from high school. However, the rise in graduation rates has not continued. In fact, it has declined. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies ("Why It Matters," 2010) reports that overall about half (51%) of teen mothers have a high school diploma compared to 89% of women who did not have a teen birth.

In July 2012, Title IX celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary and in response to this celebration, *Education Week* (Shah, 2012) published an article titled “Title IX Unmet for Pregnant and Parenting Teens,” explaining that, while progress has been made, education for pregnant and parenting teens needs much improvement.

#### Disparaging Images of Teen Mothers

A fourth theme that emerged in the literature was the disparaging images of teen mothers. Kelly (2000) and Lutrell (2003) propose that negative images of teen mothers are a social problem. Kelly (2000) outlines how teen mothers are “culturally devalued” and “unequal participants in creating culture” (p. 7). She details the various negative stereotypes attached to the “teen mother” such as “stupid sluts,” “children having children,” “teen rebel,” “the girl nobody loved,” “welfare moms,” “dropouts” and “neglectful mothers.” Kelly critiques the stereotypes and cites research that offers a more complex picture of teen mothers and the different contexts of their lives. Then she discusses the media images of teen mothers, highlighting the stereotypes and stigmas teen mothers face. These images either make these teen mothers unworthy of public support or type-casted as incompetent mothers. These images, Kelly notes, are pregnant with meaning. For people concerned about the changing family structures and gender relations and sexual “permissiveness,” teen mothers represent teen girls’ sexuality out of control. For those worried about the breakdown of traditional lines of authority, the teen mother represents rebellion against parents and other adults. For those anxious about globalization, teen mothers represent dropouts who refuse to compete yet expect the welfare system to support their “poor choices” (Kelly, 2000, p. 25). For those grieved

about poverty and child abuse, teen mothers represent both the cause and the consequence (Kelly, 2000).

Likewise, Lutrell (2003) addressed the negative discourse surrounding teen mothers: “My point is not to provide an account of the politics of teenage pregnancy. Rather, my goal is to consider what we can learn . . . about the layers of social and psychological forces at work in the education and/or miseducation of pregnant teenagers” (p. XVII). Lutrell provided a description of the girls’ everyday experiences in light of the negative images about teen pregnancy.

#### A Renewed Interest in Education

This was the last theme that emerged in the literature on educating teen mothers. Researchers like SmithBattle (2007) and Zachary (2005) have addressed the influence of motherhood on the teen mother’s attitude toward schooling. SmithBattle (2007) and Zachary (2005) examined how pregnant teens experience school and how their beliefs about school were affected by their pregnancy and parenthood. SmithBattle conducted a longitudinal study examining teen mothers’ descriptions of being students before and after giving birth and the impact of parenting on their educational goals and school progress. Regardless of their school status prior to pregnancy, the anticipation of parenting led the teens to reevaluate their priorities and motivated them to remain in or return to school. The transformed meaning and significance of school in the lives of these teens was apparent in improved grades, in their resolve to graduate, and in their new interest in attending college. However, SmithBattle found that “their renewed commitment to school was often thwarted by competing work demands, family responsibilities, and school policies and practices” (p. 348).

Like SmithBattle (2007), Zachary (2005) used a grounded theory approach to analyze the perspective of nine young mothers in a teen parents' program and determine how these women reflected on their educational experiences both before and after their pregnancies. Zachary's study investigated how having a child may have affected teen mothers' self-understanding, particularly as it related to their schooling. Her findings revealed that having a child substantially influenced the teen mothers' perspectives of both their schooling and their future. While each participant stated that her pregnancy initially led her to drop out of school, the participants as a whole argued that "having a child increased their interest in their education and pushed them to see how education would help them provide a better future for their children, increase their employment opportunities, and help them get off public assistance (Zachary, 2005, p. 2566).

The strength of these two recent studies is that their focus is on the educational experiences of teen mothers. What is known based on these studies is that (1) motherhood was a turning point that pushed teen mothers to see how education would help them provide better for their children, increase their employment opportunities, and get off welfare, (2) schools undermined teen mothers' renewed interest in education with practices and policies that overlooked their desire to be good students and mothers and the complexity of their lives, and (3) schools missed a critical opportunity to reengage teen mothers and promote their educational attainment. Suggestions for future research included studying teen mothers' views of agency in promoting their own school success.

#### Summary

In conclusion, this chapter provided an overview of the literature that has been written on teen pregnancy and education. Some themes that emerged from the literature are as follows:

1. Inclusive schooling versus separate facilities for teen mothers
2. Educational policy for teen mothers
3. Title IX of the Education Amendment Act of 1972
4. Disparaging images of teen mothers
5. Teen mothers' renewed interest in education

While there has been some research conducted on teen mothers, there still remains a need for additional studies that examine the experiences of teen mothers who graduated and the factors that contributed to their academic success. The next chapter provides a description of the methods and procedures that were used for conducting this study.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Considering the high dropout rate among pregnant and parenting teens and the limited research that focuses on teen pregnancy from an educational perspective, this study sought to (1) explore the lived experience of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college and (2) discover the school factors that contributed to their academic success. The goal was to discover the “essence” of participants’ experience which in turn might provide insight into how to increase the graduation rate for teen mothers.

### The Research Question

The research question that guided this study was the following: What is the lived experience of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college, and what are the school factors that contributed to their academic success?

This chapter provides an overview of the methods and procedures for conducting this study. To begin, the theoretical framework, Critical Black Feminism, is explained. Next, the design of the study, population and sample selection, data collection, and data analysis are discussed. The chapter ends with limitations of the study and a summary.

### Theoretical Framework: Critical Black Feminism

The theoretical framework that guided this study was Critical Black Feminism (CBF). Critical Black feminism combines the theoretical perspectives of critical theory and black feminism. When synthesized, this framework helps locate the students and explains their experiences in relation to race, class, and gender.

### Critical Theory



Critical theory (CT) is a theoretical framework “concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class and gender” (Creswell, 2007, p. 27). It seeks “not just to study and understand society but rather to critique and change society” (Patton, 1999, p.131). CT is sometimes referred to as a Neo-Marxian theory because it extends the economic analysis of conflict theory. Conflict theory views the workings of society as a class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat over the modes of production, scarce resources, and opportunity. CT extends this economic analysis by examining other sources of oppression in society such as culture, e.g. race, class (Gramsci) and language (Habermas).

deMarrais and LeCompte (1999) explain that the development of CT began with The Frankfurt School, which refers to a group of social theorists and philosophers who worked in Germany at the Institute for Social Research (1923-1950), which was connected to the University of Frankfurt. The Frankfurt school “was critical of the economic determinism of Marxism because the latter ignored the influence of culture in the perpetuation of inequality and oppression” (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, p. 29).

Two concepts central to CT are *hegemony* and *human agency* (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). Hegemony is the universalizing of interest of one cultural group over the other; Antonio Gramsci used this term to describe the process by which the culture and social norms of the ruling party maintain control over subordinate groups in social institutions (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). Critical theorists view schools as a social institution where power struggles between the dominant group and the subordinate group take place. Critical theorists argue that hegemony is reinforced in schools “by means of academic selection, socioeconomic stratification, and government regulation of curricular

and pedagogical modes, dominant, white male, and middle- or upper class cultural standards are imposed on children” (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, p. 31). For critical theorists, however, all hope is not lost in the face of oppression. They see emancipation and liberation as possible because of the existence of human agency, which is when individuals act to resist sources of oppression. One of Antonio Gramsci’s “most important contributions was his notion of the individual as an active rather than a passive agent, even in the face of extremely oppressive conditions” (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, p. 29). Jurgen Habermas and Michael Foucault have also greatly contributed to critical theory in education (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). These critical theorists are both concerned with knowledge and power. Finally, Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, translated the “notions of agency and power into strategies useful for educators” (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, p. 30). One of Freire’s central beliefs was that teachers must respect the knowledge and culture that students bring with them to the classroom.

With critical theorists focusing on “the construction of oppression and how individuals can emancipate themselves from it” (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, p27), Black Feminism helps to analyze the intersection of race and gender as it relates to oppression.

### Black Feminism

Feminism is “both a theory of women’s position in society and a political statement focused on gaining equal rights and opportunities for women and changing existing power relations between men and women” (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, p. 35). There are a range of feminist theoretical frameworks including liberal feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism, and poststructural feminism. The framework that

guided this study was Black Feminism which argues that Black women and women of color's experiences and position in society and institutions are very different than White women (Collins, 2000). Black feminism argues that woven together are racism, class oppression and sexism (Collins, 2000). This intersectionality of oppression constitutes what Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins (2000) refers to as a matrix of domination. Collins (2000) argues that Black women and women of color constitute an oppressed group based on race, class and gender and "as long as Black women's subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender and sexuality and nation persists, Black feminism as an activist response to that oppression will remain needed" (p. 22). The purpose of Black feminist thought is "to resist oppression, both its practices and the ideas that justify it" (Collins, 2000, p. 22). Furthermore, "as a critical social theory, Black feminist thought aims to empower African American women within the context of social injustices sustained by intersecting oppressions" (Collins, 2000, p. 22). Black Feminism is also known as womanism, a term coined by Alice Walker (Collins, 2000). Alice Walker's argument was that Black women face a different and more intense kind of oppression than that of White women.

#### Critical Black Feminist' View of Schooling

In schools in the U.S., the dominant culture is that of White middle class male (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999 ). As a result, teen mothers in general face oppression within this social institution in terms of their gender and class. Black teen mothers face an even greater oppression in terms of their race, gender, and class. In fact, before the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendment Act, it was common place for teen mothers to be dismissed after they began to show as the result of pregnancy. Even though

this behavior is now illegal, Fine (1991) and Wolf (1999) argue that it is still very common for a teen to drop out because of societal pressure. This leads to another concern: the high dropout rate of teen mothers. Fine argues that, when students drop out in large numbers, the problem must be studied from a structural perspective. The structural organization of schools is such that teen mothers and even more so Black teen mothers are marginalized. Thus, Critical Black Feminism which seeks to resist the race, class, and gender oppression that Black teen mothers face was used to address the data from this study.

## Methods

### Research Design

All research methods can be classified into three broad categories: quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods (Roberts, 2010). Each category has a variety of designs or strategies of inquiry with their own protocol for collecting and analyzing data.

The research undertaken for this study was qualitative. Qualitative research was chosen because the study sought to understand how the participants—teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college—described their experiences of academic achievement. Strauss and Corbin (1990) in Creswell (2007) offer five reasons for doing qualitative research, one being “to uncover and understand what lies behind any phenomenon about which little is yet known” (p. 143). Little is known about the lived experience of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended/completed college.

Qualitative research has specific designs: grounded theory, narrative, ethnography, case study, or phenomenology. The specific design for this study was

phenomenology. A phenomenological study “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon.” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). The researcher conducting a phenomenological study focuses on describing what all the participants had in common as they experienced a phenomenon. Creswell (2007) notes that the basic purpose of a phenomenological study is to “reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 58). Thus, in this type of qualitative approach, the researcher identifies a phenomenon. In this case, the phenomenon was the human experience of graduating from high school and attending or completing college. The researcher then collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a composite description of “what” they experienced and “how” they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

There are two approaches to phenomenology: hermeneutic phenomenology and empirical, transcendental, or psychological phenomenology. For this study, Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental or psychological phenomenology was chosen because this approach “is focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of the participants.” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). The procedure for conducting this type of phenomenological study, described by Moustakas (1994) is outlined below:

1. Identify a phenomenon,
2. Bracket out one’s experiences,
3. Collect data from several persons who have experienced the phenomenon,
4. Analyze the data by reducing the information to significant statements or quotes and combining the statements into themes,

5. Following that, the researcher develops a textural description consisting of what participants' experienced, a structural description of how they experienced it and combines the textural and structural descriptions to convey the overall essence of the experience.

A phenomenological study is best suited for investigations where it is important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). This shared understanding could be used to develop practices and policies and to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon under investigation. In this case, the study sought to (1) explore what teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college had in common, and (2) develop better practices and policies to help reduce the dropout rate for this population.

Qualitative research, inclusive of all designs, also has defining characteristics (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009):

- (1) Focus on Meaning and Understanding—Qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they ascribe to their experiences,
- (2) Natural Setting—Qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field where the participants experience the issue or problem; they do not bring individuals into a lab,
- (3) Researcher as key instrument—the researchers are the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. They may use a protocol—an instrument of collecting data—but the researcher is the one who actually gathers the information,

- (4) Inductive data analysis—The researchers build their theme, patterns, categories from the bottom up, by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information, and
- (5) Rich Description—the product of a qualitative study is rich in words and pictures rather than numbers.

Merriam (2009) also argues that all qualitative research has an underlying philosophy and, because that philosophy is phenomenology, it can be confusing because phenomenology is also one of the qualitative designs: “Because the philosophy of phenomenology also underlies qualitative research, some assume that all qualitative research is phenomenological” (Merriam, 2009, p. 24). In one sense, Merriam notes, all qualitative research is phenomenological, but phenomenology is both a school of philosophy and a type of qualitative research. For this study the qualitative design was phenomenology.

#### Population and Sample/Participants

The population for this study consisted of Black teen mothers who graduated from the high schools in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. These states were chosen because of their location and diversity. The actual number per state of Black teen mothers who graduated high school and attended/completed college was unknown as schools keep limited data on teen mothers. As a result of not knowing the total population, the exact number of sample participants could not be predicted. Polkinghorne (1989) recommends that the researcher interview from 5 to 25 individuals who have all experienced the same phenomenon. As such, it was reasonable to conclude that 10 participants might be located for the sample used in this study.

In selecting the sample, there were two strategies available: probability and non-probability (Merriam, 2009). Non-probability is the method generally used in qualitative research and will be the type used in this study. The most common form of non-probability sampling is purposeful or purposive. Merriam (2009) notes that “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). There are different types of purposeful sampling: unique, maximum variation, convenience, and snowball or chain sampling. This study used snowball, chain, or network purposeful sampling to recruit participants.

To begin purposive sampling, a selection criterion was established. The criteria used to select participants for this study included the following: (1) a Black teen girl who became a mother between the age of 15 to 19, (2) graduated from high school by age 19, (3) enrolled in a two-or four-year college or university by age 20, and (4) is still enrolled in or has graduated from a college or university. This criteria was used because: (1) teen pregnancy disproportionately affects Black [who were the focus of this study], Latina, and socioeconomically disadvantaged teen girls; (2) the dominant discourse of the typical pregnant teen is that she is uninterested in school (Lutrell, 2003); and (3) this study sought to explore the lived experience of teen mothers who achieved academic success. Discovering the school processes that contributed to their success may help other teen mothers graduate.

To find participants, four “gatekeepers” who work with teen mothers were approached. These “gatekeepers” had access to teen mothers who fit the criteria for the study. A flyer was created about the study and emailed to the gatekeepers who in turn



emailed it to the teen mothers with whom they had contact. From there, those who were interested in participating contacted me. Participants who contacted me were asked if they knew other young ladies who met the criteria. Snowball sampling was continued until 10 interested Black teen mothers were located.

### Instrumentation

The instrument used to collect data for this study were semi-structured interviews. Merriam (2009) notes that “in all forms of qualitative research, some and occasionally all of the data are collected through interviews” (p. 87). Merriam further argues that to get to the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of the phenomenon under investigation, the phenomenological interview is the primary method of data collection. Henceforth, data for this study was collected using a phenomenological interview. The phenomenological interview requires that, prior to interviewing the participants, the researcher explore his or her own experiences with the phenomenon, “in part to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints and assumptions” (Merriam, 2009, p. 25). Moustakas (1994) calls this process *Epoche*, “a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment. In the *Epoche*, the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and phenomena are revisited freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego” (p. 33). Merriam (2009) notes that these prejudices and assumptions are then “bracketed or temporarily set aside so that we can examine consciousness itself” (pp. 25-26). I “bracketed” my bias and wrote about it the Role of the Researcher in the Introduction to this study.

Creswell (2007) suggests that in the phenomenological interview, participants be asked broad general questions:

1. What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon (graduating from high school and attending or completing college)?
2. What factors or situations have typically influenced or affected your experience of the phenomenon (graduating from high school and attending or completing college)?

Creswell (2007) also states that “other open-ended questions may also be asked, but these two, especially focus attention on gathering data that will lead to a textural description and a structural description of the experiences, ultimately provide an understanding of the common experience of the participants” (p.61).

For this phenomenological interview, an interview protocol was developed based on (1) the two broad interview questions, and (2) the pilot study. The two broad interview questions provided data that contributed to describing the “essence” of participants’ experience with graduating from high school and attending or completing college. The pilot study helped to inform what needed to be altered or added to the interview protocol.

During an Advanced Qualitative Research Methods class, I conducted a pilot study with two Black teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended college. Both were college students at a local colleges and universities in the Southeast. From these two interviews, the interview protocol was adjusted to make sure the questions which were directly related to the two broad general questions were added, and from transcribing both interviews, changes that needed to be made were addressed. For example, it was suggested that I should wait for the participants to fully answer questions

before commenting or moving on to the next question. The pilot study additionally provided information as to the time commitment involved in transcribing forty-minute interviews.

Furthermore, Creswell (2007) states that often in phenomenological studies, data collection consists of in-depth interviews and multiple interviews with participants to. To help triangulate the data, two separate interviews were conducted with each participant. Merriam (2009) argues that “the key to getting good data from interviewing is to ask good questions . . . . Pilot interviews are crucial for trying your questions” (p. 95). Many of the questions on the interview protocol were refined through pilot testing.

#### Data Collection

After approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board, data were collected from December 2012 through February 2013. Three sources were employed to collect data: multiple interviews, observation notes, and college transcripts.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at a location convenient to the participants. I met some participants in their homes; others I met at their local libraries. The first interviews lasted approximately 55 minutes and followed the Interview Protocol. After the first interview, each participant were given a twenty-five dollar gift card to Wal-Mart. The second interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes. Some were conducted in person, others by phone. Prior to the second interview, participants were provided a copy of the transcript from the initial interview and given a chance to ask questions. The purpose of this second interview was to provide an opportunity for member checking, to gather college transcripts and to allow participants to make final comments or ask questions. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim

using pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants. Media files were stored in Dropbox, on a flash drive and on a laptop which required a password for access. Data were then transcribed electronically and saved in Dropbox over a network that required a password for access.

To ensure internal validity, the following strategies were employed:

- Triangulation of data – Data was collected through multiple interviews, observation notes, and college transcripts.
- Member checking/Respondent Validation – Preliminary analysis from the first interview was taken back to the participants to validate the data.
- Peer examination/Peer Review – A colleague “scan[ned] some of the raw data and assess[ed] whether the findings are plausible based on the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 220).

#### Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were then analyzed using the steps prescribed by Moustakas (1994):

1. Identify significant statements made by the participants to the two primary interview questions.
  - a. What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon (graduating from high school and attending or completing college)?
  - b. What factors and situations have typically influenced or affected your experience of the phenomenon (graduating from high school and attending or completing college)?

Then to build on this, go through the data (i.e. the interview transcripts) and highlight significant statements, sentences or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) calls this step horizontalization.

2. Next, from the significant statements, develop clusters of meaning, into themes.
3. The significant statements and themes were then used to write a description of what the participants experienced. Moustakas (1994) calls this the textual description.
4. Then write a description of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. This is called the imaginative variation or structural description.
5. From the textual and structural descriptions, write a composite description of the “essence” of the participants’ experience.

#### Limitations of the Study

The major limitation of this study is that the findings are not generalizable, meaning that the findings for this small population cannot be extended to the larger population. However, though the findings are not generalizable, they do provide greater insight into a phenomenon for which little is known, and they add valuable knowledge to the field and literature on teen mothers. In this sense, although not generalizable, there is value in the research.

#### Summary

In conclusion, this chapter provided a description of methods and procedures used to carry out this study. Qualitative research and the phenomenological design were discussed and a rationale for the design was provided. Next, the population and

sample/participants were described. A detailed description of data collection through the phenomenological interview was offered as well as information on internal validity.

Finally, data analysis and limitations were discusse

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to (1) explore the lived experience of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college and (2) discover the school factors that contributed to their academic success. The goal was that in discovering the “essence” of participants’ experience, findings might provide insight into how to increase the graduation rate for teen mothers.

### The Research Question

The research question that guided this study was the following: What is the lived experience of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college, and what are the school factors that contributed to their academic success?

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided this study was Critical Black Feminism as discussed in Chapter 3. This theoretical perspective examines the interaction of race, class, and gender oppression and seeks to resist such oppression.

This chapter provides the results of the interviews conducted with ten teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college. It begins with the following:

1. A profile overview (Table 1) of the ten participants.
2. A narrative describing each participant.
3. An abbreviated list of significant statements.

4. Themes that emerged in significant statements from primary interview question #1: What have you experienced in graduating from high school and attending or completing college?
5. A textural description of what participants experienced in graduating from high school and attending or completing college.
6. Findings that emerged from significant statements from primary interview question #2: What factors or situations contributed to your graduating from high school and attending college?
7. A structural description of how participants graduated from high school and attended or completed college.
8. A composite description of the “essence” of the teen mothers’ lived experience.



Table 1: Profile Overview of Participants

Pseudonyms	Age at birth of child	Age now	College Classification
1. Kelly	16	20	Junior
2. Xiomara	17	22	Junior
3. Alger	17	20	Sophomore
4. Toni	18	24	Graduate– Bachelors of Arts
5. Mannazjai	18	30	Sophomore
6. M. Theresa	15	33	Sophomore
7. Diane	18	28	Junior
8. Laura	18	27	Graduate – Doctor of Pharmacy
9. Renee	17	20	Sophomore
10. Quincy	15	18	Freshman

### Narratives of Participants

#### Kelly

Kelly is a 20 year-old, energetic, confident, African American female who, as a 15 year old cheerleader in high school, became pregnant by her former boyfriend, a star athlete. Kelly describes herself as a go-getter and says that she always knew she was going to graduate high school. She had good grades and wasn't a bad child; "I just happened to have a baby." Kelly graduated from high school on time and immediately enrolled in a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in the Carolinas. During her first two years in college, she lived away from her family and

daughter; however, now as a junior, she keeps her daughter with her in the town where she attends college and works as a political activist.

#### Xiomara

Xiomara is a 22 year old slender, model-like, devoted mother of a little girl. She is sensitive and physically stunning. A student at her traditional high school when she got pregnant, Xiomara transferred to the nontraditional high school for pregnant and parenting teens, a decision she regrets. She says, "I was smarter than that." Even though she graduated salutatorian from the nontraditional school, she wishes she had gone back to her traditional high school. After graduation, Xiomara enrolled in the local community college and, at the time of our interview, she had just received her acceptance letter to a local four-year university.

#### Alger

The first thing I noticed about Alger was how well styled her hair looked and, as we settled into our interview, she revealed that after high school she had enrolled in cosmetology school and earned her cosmetology license. After cosmetology school, Alger enrolled in the local community college, and at the time of our interview was a sophomore.

#### Toni

Toni is a 24 year-old professional, well-dressed, African American female who attended a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). She did not decide until the summer after high school where she was going to college. She took a tour of colleges and fell in love with an HBCU in the Carolinas. Immediately, she called her mom and over the phone began gathering the required information for

financial aid. Toni explains that there was no question regarding who was going to keep the baby. Her mom was insistent: She would keep the baby until Toni graduated from college. Toni struggled with being away from her son, feeling that she had abandoned him, but her mother assured her saying, “No, this is beneficial for him.” Toni successfully completed college, and she is planning to enroll in graduate school.

#### Mannazjai

Mannazjai is a 30-year old African American mother of three. When she became pregnant in high school, Mannazjai was the only pregnant teen in her high school. She spoke of the support she received from teachers and administrators which helped her graduate from high school. After graduation, Mannazjai enrolled in the local community college. Because of life circumstances and the birth of her second and third children, Mannazjai has had to stop and start college several times. Today, she is still enrolled in a local community college.

#### M. Theresa

M. Theresa is a 33 year-old African American female who became pregnant at age 14 while in 8<sup>th</sup> grade in junior high school. She gave birth to her daughter 2 months after beginning ninth grade. M. Theresa was 15 years old. She heard about my study from an email she received at her community college. Immediately she contacted me to express her interest in participating and we met at the public library to conduct our interview. M. Theresa says that the support from her mother is how she finished high school, but in college, she felt she was on her own. After graduating from high school, M. Theresa enrolled in the local community college. Currently she is still enrolled.

### Diane

Diane is a 28 year-old, African American female who gave birth when she was 18. Diane graduated from high school and received an acceptance letter from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; however, she did not want to leave her child behind so she enrolled in a local community college. Today Diane is a junior at a local four year university.

### Laura

Laura is a 27 year-old African American female who always wanted to be a pharmacist. Becoming pregnant her senior year in high school did not stop her. After giving birth to her daughter, Laura graduated high school and immediately enrolled in the local community college. After two years, Laura transferred from the community college to a four-year university fifty miles from her home. After finishing college, she enrolled in pharmacy school, and just a few months before our interview, she graduated with her Doctor of Pharmacy degree. Today Laura and her daughter live in the southeast of the U.S, and she works as a pharmacist.

### Renee

Renee is a 20 year-old African American female who became pregnant at age 16, graduated from high school on time, and then enrolled in a local community college. Renee spoke of how helpful the parenting classes in high school were. It was because the leaders in the parenting classes believed in her and her peers that she decided she was going to college.

## Quincy

Quincy is an 18 year-old African American female who gave birth at age 15.

Through the help of her grandmother and parenting classes, Quincy graduated from high school on time and is completing her first year in college. She attends the local community college.

### An Abbreviated List of significant statements

Table 1 below displays an abbreviated list of significant statements made by participants in response to the two primary interview questions as well as other closely related questions:

Table 1: An Abbreviated List of Significant Statements

I achieved my ultimate goal, so I would say that I was very successful as far as going to college and completing it, and even completing it in a timely matter, so very successful in that part.
I experienced success because even though I got pregnant in high school, I didn't let my pregnancy stop me or hold me back,
I feel very accomplished, and being that now I'm working in my field, I'm like, "This exactly what I needed to do." And all those fears and doubts that I had were necessary because they were temporary. And now this is a long-term, being that I graduated from college, now I'm able to live a normal life with my child.
It [graduating from college] definitely means a lot. And so when I say that I have a child - you know some people - because they'll ask, "How old's your son?" And when I say, "Six." They go, "Well, how old are you?" I say, "Well, Twenty-four." So you do the math in your head, and it's not anything daunting for me because I still did everything I was supposed to do.
I still went to school, I was able to finish school on-time. I was going to finish early, and I did what I had to do. Now I'm taking care of what I have to do. If not, I would possibly feel some kind of weight if I knew that I was struggling or knew that I hadn't properly prepared myself to care for him, but there's no shame here.
I feel great. I feel accomplished. I really do, because it definitely could have been worse and I wouldn't have made it and I would have had a GED and not a diploma. I think that's a huge accomplishment. . .
It means a lot to me, just because I was one of the few in my family that did graduate. My mom didn't graduate from high school. She had to go to job corps. She didn't graduate, my older sister didn't graduate. She went to job corps as well, so as far as immediate family, I was really the only one that really, really finished high school.

My sister's going to be the second one, my younger sister.
I would say it's sometimes a struggle, just because of being a single mother and having to go to school, go to work, and then also being a mother. It does become overwhelming at times,
It's [the struggle] definitely time management and it's also just putting your best foot forward on your worst day. I think that's the main thing, time management and just being able to – because when you're raising a child, you want to be able to teach them and spend time with them, just be the best mother. That is a huge struggle for me.
And then the struggle was more internal for me.
When I got to pharmacy school, it was a struggle.
I feel like I get support from my family, even though they're not up there with me and they don't help me financially. I feel like they still support me.
I experienced support because on those days that I felt that I couldn't do it, my grandmother was there for me, and she said, “You go on. You go, don't give up, just keep going.”
I've had tremendous support. Like, I thank God every day for my support system that I have, and my mom especially. She helps me out so much. Especially if I'm in school. Now if I'm at work, she sometimes will say no. But she won't say no if I have class.
[nonsupport] Because, at the end of the day, I'm on my own.
I think I did have that help, and that's how I was able to keep going. I don't think that anybody's going to wake up and say, “Oh it's fine!” You're going to have that within yourself, when there's a life-altering situation going on. You now have a child. Regardless of what kind of help, you're going to have your own internal things that you deal with on a day-to-day. Even somebody that doesn't have a child, they're still dealing with their own situations. So the support that I had was necessary for me between the family support, the support at school, the programs that are geared specifically toward teenage mothers - the support that I would've needed, I had.
My mother is definitely there for me to talk to, but when it comes to financials, I totally financed everything for myself. I don't have anyone that I can call to say, “Do you have it this week?” because if I don't have it, then it doesn't get done. I don't [get child support], not at all.
But my mom looked at me, and she gave me the option. She said, “Baby, if you want to go off to college, I'll take care of him, and you go off to college.” But I couldn't do it. It's like as soon as I had my child, it was like a mother-son bond. I mean, I couldn't put everything I messed up, and I shouldn't put my mistake on you. But she gave me that option. She gave me that option, and I just told her, “I don't see myself coming back from college and someone I had that's calling me by my first name.”
And I've had—when I was pregnant—I had all kinds of people looking at me like, “Oh, she's pregnant? She's only fifteen, and she's pregnant? Oh, that's not nice. That's not cute.” And I even had some elderly people—like, older people—looking at me. And they say—they look at me weird, with they head turned, and they eyes squinting like, “Well, why is she pregnant?” I could tell they were judging me. . . . I—a lot of eyes, a lot of heads would turn, and they would look at me, and they could

see that I was pregnant, and at the time, my grandmother was angry with me because I was the only grandchild, and I was—I'm the only child, mother and father. So they expected so much from me, and to find out that I was pregnant, it was like, "Oh, oh." Like disgust. And so, it hurt me, and I was saying to myself, "I'm going to prove all of you wrong. I'm going to prove all of you wrong, because—just because I'm pregnant does not mean I have to stop living my life." It doesn't mean that I'm not going to make the good grades that I was making, or I'm not going to be successful and go to college, and make the big mega-bucks that I've always wanted to do. And I've always wanted to be a forensic—I always wanted to study forensic science because I want to work in a morgue, or the crime scenes—anywhere I can cut open a body is what I want to do. So I want to set my goals for that, and just because I had a child does not mean I have to stop it. And I had support, so—

I really have a feeling like if it wasn't for her [my mom], to be honest with you, I don't think I would have finished high school. She [her mother] got pregnant at 16 and she had to get her GED, and she said, "You know, you're not going to go that route." Yes, she said, "You know, you might be pregnant, but you're not going to get your GED, you're going to get your high school diploma." And she just, you know, pushed me every day. "You okay? You feeling okay? Go ahead and go to school. Get it out the way. God's got something for you. Just get up and go." She really pushed me. If I didn't have that support system, I don't think I would have finished high school.

A lot of people thought I wasn't going to do it [graduate] because, "Oh, she got pregnant, you know. She's playing around in school." But actually, when I got pregnant, that's when I took high school more seriously. After I got pregnant, when I thought I was pregnant with my little girl, I took my high school classes—I took them seriously because I felt like, "I'm about to have a baby and I want her to know no matter what you go through, you can still make it. She [my daughter] helped me make it because she helps me push myself. I look at her, and I'll be like, "I want something better for her. And I also want her to know when she got older, she would be like, 'Well my momma did it all and she had me even at a young age.'"

Yeah, in a way because I—my family—well, my dad's side of the family—they always put me on a pedestal. And even on my mom's side of the family, they always put me on a pedestal just because I was different from them, and because I was so smart, and because I always got straight A's. They always put me up there, so then I felt like—when I got pregnant—like everybody just—I guess looked at me a different type of way, like I was looked at like I was one of them. And I know—I want to cry. But I know that I'm like the same—the same Xiomara that they're used to—but I care a lot about what my family thinks about me, and I just feel like I let them down so much by getting pregnant, and I just ruined their whole perception of me. I want to get that back. I want them to look at me the same way. Yeah, I feel like at my college graduation is when they're going to say, "She really did it. She really didn't let this hold her back."

## Themes

From the list of significant statements from primary interview question #1 and other closely related interview questions, the following themes emerged:

1. A feeling of accomplishment,
2. A struggle balancing school and work with being the best mother,
3. Difficulty paying for daycare in college,
4. A dilemma deciding whether to go to a local college or to go away,
5. Feeling judged for being a teen mother,
6. A lot of support, and
7. Some non-support

### Theme 1: A feeling of accomplishment

The primary finding that emerged regarding what participants experienced in graduating from high school and attending or completing college was a feeling of accomplishment. The first major interview question I asked participants was “What have you experienced in graduating from high school and attending or completing college? Success, Struggle, Support Non-support? All the above? None of the above?” All the participants experienced a feeling of success or accomplishment. Kelly responded that she had experienced “All the above,” meaning success, struggle, support, and nonsupport. She went on to elaborate on experiencing success:

Okay, I experienced success because I continue to do well in college. My GPA right now, overall, is a 3.0. My GPA for this last semester was a 3.5 – well, fall 2012 semester, a 3.5. I'm going to become successful, and I feel like I'm on the right path to becoming successful, so success.



Later and from the interview protocol, I asked Kelly: How do you feel now, about graduating from high school? She replied: I'm glad I graduated from high school. I look at that as a step up point in my life. I feel regular, nothing really sticks out.” When I asked “What does it mean to you, to be a high school graduate,” she responded:

It means a lot, because I know it can take you a lot of places. There's a lot of limitations if you don't have a high school GED or graduated from high school, so it's a lot.

I asked Kelly two additional questions about college: “How do you feel now about attending college and what does it mean to you to be enrolled in college? She responded:

I'm glad I chose to attend college. I'm glad I chose the college that I attend now. I was going to transfer. I know this is off-topic, but I was going to transfer this last past year, after my sophomore year, to the University of Greelyville (UNG-pseudonym), so I could be closer to my daughter, because she was still here, in Greelyville (pseudonym). I got accepted and everything, but then I found out they only accepted 19 credits out of 66 credits. I was like, “No, I can't do it. . . ”

It means a lot to me, because like I said, I'm going to be successful. I feel like I'm on the path to being successful right now, but it means a lot to me. I look at myself not so much as a student but more as like a scholar.

Likewise when I asked Alger how she feels now about graduating from high school and what does it mean to be a high school graduate, she replied:

I feel great. I feel accomplished. I really do, because it definitely could have been worse and I wouldn't have made it and I would have had a GED and not a diploma. I think that's a huge accomplishment. . .

It means a lot to me, just because I was one of the few in my family that did graduate.

My mom didn't graduate from high school. She had to go to job corps. She didn't graduate, my older sister didn't graduate. She went to job corps as well, so as far as immediate family, I was really the only one that really, really finished high school. My sister's going to be the second one, my younger sister.

Regarding how she feels about attending college, Alger stated:

I feel as though it's going to benefit me in the long run. It does get difficult to me. Sometimes I just want to say, "You know what?" But it definitely does get difficult and it's a huge challenge, but it will definitely help me in the long run, as far as job stability and just doing something that I love. I love helping people.

Mannazjai stated that she experienced success:

The success is I'm determined that I'm going to finish college with the same attitude that I had in the very beginning, when I was in high school. I always wanted to finish high school and attend college, and I feel that that's still my motivation, and that's what actually kept me doing it.

Another participant, Toni said that she experienced success, struggle and support:

"Success, first, was graduating high school. At this point, now, I'm graduating with a child. So I already completed the first step." I continued to ask her how she feels now about graduating from high school and she replied:

I feel pretty normal. I'm glad I didn't allow myself to stop at that point because I was so close to the end. I had him November of my senior year. There was only a couple months left to go, like what else - I don't even know what else I would

have possibly done other than go ahead and graduate.

I then asked Toni, a college graduate, what does it mean to her to be a high school graduate and she replied: “It seems typical. Now, the college grad is something that I would feel more proud of.”

Here’s how Toni feels about graduating from college:

I feel very accomplished, and being that now I'm working in my field, I'm like, “This exactly what I needed to do.” And all those fears and doubts that I had were necessary because they were temporary. And now this is a long-term, being that I graduated from college, now I'm able to live a normal life with my child.

It definitely means a lot. And so when I say that I have a child - you know some people - because they'll ask, “How old's your son?” And when I say, “Six.” They go, “Well, how old are you?” I say, “Well, Twenty-four.” So you do the math in your head, and it's not anything daunting for me because I still did everything I was supposed to do.

I still went to school, I was able to finish school on-time. I was going to finish early, and I did what I had to do. Now I'm taking care of what I have to do. If not, I would possibly feel some kind of weight if I knew that I was struggling or knew that I hadn't properly prepared myself to care for him, but there's no shame here.

Diane also experienced success:

Success-wise, I would definitely have to say that I did attend Youngstown Community College (pseudonym). I went through the CCE, the Continuing Education. I'm a certified nursing assistant, certified phlebotomist, and a certified EKG technician.

I went through a program and did all three of those to try to give me some kind of base, so when I do a popular job, that I've got more than one talent. I want to be kind of flexible when it comes to working, and I'm fortunate enough to be in a family business that runs an assisted living facility.

When I asked Laura what she experienced, she replied: success, struggle and support. She experienced success because as she stated:

I achieved my ultimate goal, so I would say that I was very successful as far as going to college and completing it, and even completing it in a timely matter, so very successful in that part.

Laura, like Toni, a college graduate—Laura is actually a pharmacist-- was asked what it means to be a high school graduate, she responded:

I mean, I think most people are high school graduates, so it's just expected to me, for people to graduate high school, if nothing else. It's just something you do.

Later, regarding how she feels now, about graduating from college, Laura stated:

Just great. I'm glad that I was able to accomplish one of my goals in life, and family matters as well, even with being a young mother and having a child throughout my whole time in college. I had her. I've been in college her whole life, basically.

Finally, Renee says she experienced success:

I experienced success because even though I got pregnant in high school, I didn't let my pregnancy stop me or hold me back.

I asked how she feels about being a high school graduate, she replied:

I feel great, even though I wish I would have studied more, did my work. But I

felt great that I made it through high school with a child.

Regarding what it means to be a high school graduate, Renee stated:

It means a lot to me. It means a lot to me because when my daughter gets older, I want to be able to tell her, “No matter what, I made it. I graduated on time. I didn't let pregnancy stop me. It motivated me.

I asked Renee how she feels now about attending college, and she replied:

It feels good to say that I'm enrolled in college, and even though I have a child, I feel happy to say, “Yes, I'm in college, and I'm in the medical field. I'm getting into the medical field.”

I continued to ask what does it mean to you to be enrolled in college, and she replied:

It means everything. It's more a motivation for me too because I see myself in the future. I don't want to struggle.

Getting my education and getting in the medical field, it will help me have a better job, where I won't have to work two jobs to try to make it. I can work one and be happy.

Quincy too says that she experienced success: “I've experienced success just because I was able to graduate, which was a blessing.” I asked Quincy how she feels now about graduating from high school and she responded:

I feel successful, I feel great. I feel like I did something that a lot of parents don't do, and it makes me feel good. And it makes you look good. It makes you look wonderful because people get so excited when you tell them that you graduated from high school as a teenage parent. So it makes you feel good. It—I mean, it's speechless. Like, I can barely get it out of how wonderful I feel just because I

graduated.

And so what does it mean to you to be a high school graduate?

Oh man. I feel I got—I mean, it means—I don't know, because I feel like I just accomplished something, and the thing is, you have people that tell you, “You'll never do it. You'll never do it.” And now I'm looking back at them like, “Ha. I told you so.” So, I mean, it makes you feel good. And it means a lot to me.

Xiomara, a junior in college, says she experienced success:

I feel successful because I'm doing it

Just because I'm doing it. Even though my GPA is not what I want it to be, or what it could be if I had time to apply myself, I still feel successful because I'm still in school and I'm still working.

How do you feel now about graduating from high school?

I feel great about graduating high school. I feel like it just opened the door to a lot of other doors, so.

And what does it mean to you to be a high school graduate?

It means that I can be a college graduate one day.

Later, again I asked Xiomara how she feels now about attending college. She responded:

I feel great about attending college because I know that it's going to open up doors for us in the future, and I feel that all the people who are disappointed and are let down, I feel like some way this would make—

Yeah, like reaffirm me and let them know that even though I did make a mistake—not saying Logan (pseudonym) is a mistake, but teenage pregnancy was a mistake—that I'm still the same Xiomara that y'all are used to. I'm still smart,

I'm still going to finish school like y'all expected me to from the beginning, so. Overall the participants experienced a feeling of success and accomplishment in graduating from high school and attending college.

Theme 2: A struggle balancing school and work with being the best mother

Another theme that emerged regarding what participants experienced was a struggle balancing school and work with being the best mother.

Kelly stated why she experienced a struggle:

Because this last semester, fall 2012, at first, my mom was keeping my daughter up in Greelyville with her, but now my daughter is with me, and she's been with me this last past semester, with me working for Obama, keeping my grades up and everything. She's been up here with me

I asked Kelly if she received assistance with daycare and or gets child support and she responded:

No, I pay for it [daycare]. Mostly, I've been paying for it with the money I was getting for Obama. Some of the money, I saved up from my refund check.

Yes, so it's [paying for daycare] a struggle. That's the struggle part.

No, I don't get child support at all.

I wanted to get a voucher, but I'm told that the waiting list is three years long.

When I was living in Greelyville, I got on the waiting list, but thankfully, because I was able to keep my grades up, that's how I first met Susan (pseudonym, Program Manager for Joyful Passage Parenting Program). Since I was keeping my grades up, they were able to pay for the daycare, but the state had cut that off of the list, so now they're not able to pay for the daycare. Now I have to do that by

myself, and I'm still on the wait list in Greelyville. My daughter is four years old, and she turns five next October.

Yes, and I'm still on the waiting list for Greelyville. I've been on the waiting list since I was pregnant, fifteen. I'm twenty now, five years.

Toni explained that her struggle was more internal feeling that she had abandoned her son:

And then the struggle was more internal for me.

The struggle was more internal for me because it's my reality. And yes, I'm doing this, but in the back of my mind it's like, "How am I doing this?" Literally. I don't - how am I still waking up every day, going to school, having a child at this point?

Yes. High school. I was a teen mom, so even if I didn't want that to show on the outside that I was struggling, it was a struggle for me. Almost still a disappointment in myself, but this is my reality, this is what I'm going to have to do at this point. Everything that I was or wanted to be had changed at this point, so everything went smoothly, but inside, I didn't know what the next step was for me. I didn't know how my college experience was going to be. I just hoped for the best, and I had so much support even if I wanted to crawl up in a ball, I couldn't.

Mannazjai too experienced a struggle:

The struggle is having the children and having to raise them by myself. That's hard, but at the same time, I look at them with me waking them up and getting them on to school and then asking me every day, "Mama, do you have to go to school? Mama, do you have homework?" that's motivation, because I believe that I'm setting an example for them, so that they'll, in return, be doing it for themselves.



Likewise, M. Theresa said she experienced struggle:

I'd say it was a struggle. It was a struggle.

Just the day-to-day duties of being a mom, being a student, working. It was a struggle. It was hard to balance all of that. It was rough. It was hard.

Diane explained her struggle balancing school, work, and being a mother:

The struggle comes with just daily with kids—just having kids. For a minute I was struggling with my son in school because he was just—I mean, I guess he was being a boy.

And I mean, being a boy, they have a mind of their own. He speaks his mind, and don't hold his tone which I'm still working on for him today, but he's getting better. He's growing up to be a good little young man. I have to really give it to him.

Laura said she too struggled balancing school and parenting:

When I got to pharmacy school, it was a struggle. The rest, getting my undergraduate degree, it was a struggle at times also, because when I moved to finish up at the four-year college, I was only fifty miles away from home, but still. I needed someone to watch my daughter at one point in time, which just so happened that I remember when I was trying to look for apartments to move there, I was looking for daycares as well, and I really couldn't find the daycares that I was looking for. I had a list of daycares and for some reason, I could not find any of them except for this one, which it just so happened that the woman that ran the daycare, she ended up watching my daughter for me sometimes, when I needed her, some evenings when I was working late. She would just take my

daughter home with her after school and she would stay over there until I got off work. She helped out quite a bit.

Quincy

I would say struggle because there were sometimes I felt myself wondering, “Should I even try? Should I even push myself to do this? Is it worth it?”

Xiomara said that her struggle was as follows:

Time management, mostly. Just trying to—like just the balance of having a full-time job and having a child and going to school full-time and not wanting to burden anybody with Logan (her daughter- pseudonym) all the time. Just that type of struggle, and not having time to study, and having to sacrifice like, “Do I want to study tonight, or do I want to go to sleep? Do I want to go to class today or do I want to go to work? Because they want me to work.” Stuff like that.

It's [not working, and just going to college full-time] not an option.

Likewise, Alger stated her struggle was finding the time to balance the many hats she has to wear:

I would say it's sometimes a struggle, just because of being a single mother and having to go to school, go to work, and then also being a mother.

It does become overwhelming at times . . .

It's [the struggle] putting your best foot forward on your worst day. I think that's the main thing, time management and just being able to – because when you're raising a child, you want to be able to teach them and spend time with them, just be the best mother. That is a huge struggle for me.

Renee said that she faced a similar struggle in high school:

Trying to get enough sleep, and trying to manage my time with school and her. That's one reason I'm happy my mom was there because when I tried to do my homework, she was helping me by holding my child. But then it's just going to sleep, because they go to sleep so late, they've got to wake up so early, and it was just a struggle. My mother. On my school nights, if my little girl's still up past ten, she'll take her from me, and she'll say, "I'm going to try to put her to bed. You've got to go to bed because I've got to get up early in the morning."

### Theme 3: Difficulty paying for daycare in college

Participants also experienced a struggle paying for daycare while in college.

Kelly stated why she struggled to pay for childcare because the State cut off the funding and she doesn't receive child support:

No, I pay for it [daycare]. Mostly, I've been paying for it with the money I was getting for Obama. Some of the money, I saved up from my refund check.

Yes, so it's [paying for daycare] a struggle. That's the struggle part.

No, I don't get child support at all.

I wanted to get a voucher, but I'm told that the waiting list is three years long.

When I was living in Greelyville, I got on the waiting list, but thankfully, because I was able to keep my grades up, that's how I first met Susan (pseudonym, Program Manager for Joyful Passage Parenting Program). Since I was keeping my grades up, they were able to pay for the daycare, but the state had cut that off of the list, so now they're not able to pay for the daycare. Now I have to do that by myself, and I'm still on the wait list in Greelyville. My daughter is four years old, and she turns five next October.

Yes, and I'm still on the waiting list for Greelyville. I've been on the waiting list since I was pregnant, fifteen. I'm twenty now, five years.

Alger stated that she too doesn't get support and struggles paying for daycare while in college:

My mother is definitely there for me to talk to, but when it comes to financials, I totally financed everything for myself. I don't have anyone that I can call to say, "Do you have it this week?" because if I don't have it, then it doesn't get done.

I don't [get child support], not at all.

A full-time job. I pay for it [daycare].

A five-year waiting list [for child care vouchers].

The waiting list is crazy.

And I still have to get things, and then I still have to work. He has to go to daycare, but luckily he's in a home daycare, so the people that keep him have been keeping him since he's been six weeks. They're pretty much flexible with us, but the prices don't change.

[non-support] Exactly. I don't get any help from my son's father.

Theme 4: A dilemma deciding whether to go to a local college or to go away

Both Xiomara and Alger stated that going off to college and leaving their children was not an option for them. Alger wanted to go off to an HBCU, but couldn't find a college that would take both her and her son. She stated:

Well, I couldn't really find an actual university that would accept me and him, because leaving my child was never an option to me.

I know at Littletown State University (pseudonym for and HBCU) would also allow both of us, but I also wanted to be around family, because I knew I would have to work as well. I would still need help, not just from myself, but someone to actually keep him while I get these things accomplished. I had to stay, stay in Greelyville (pseudonym), where I graduated high school was the best.

I would have preferred to leave. I would have loved to have left, but staying here was the best.

When I say leaving him was not an option, just because I don't feel like I should put him off on my mother, because she didn't have him. It's not her responsibility to keep him every day or basically take care of him, while I'm off at school. These are my decisions, so he needs to be with me. My mother wouldn't allow that, anyway.

Toni did go off to college (an HBCU) but she stated that she struggled being away from her son. She felt that she was abandoning him:

So she [my mom] was definitely there. Her and my dad were instrumental in raising him, and what I didn't understand at that point - I felt - what's the word? I felt like I was abandoning him.

. . .Yes, and going on through the years, the four years that I was there, I used to talk to my mother a lot about that. And she would bring me back, said, "No, this is beneficial for him."

And jumping ahead, after I finished school, my son was now four going on five. I asked him, I said, "Do you know that mommy went off to school?" And he said, "No." So everything that I feared didn't even come true.

Everything, and I said, "Wow, he doesn't even know." It was four years, and I was coming back and forth to school. I would come home on the weekend. I would bring him up there.

Toni went on to explained how she still supported her son while she was away and how she made time to spend with him:

So, I would come back - you know, your first year, you're not supposed to drive, but based on the GPA that I had, I was able to drive my second semester of my freshman year, so I would come back at least every other weekend.

On longer breaks, I would come home for that time or bring him up there because I had an apartment. After my sophomore year, I got an apartment, stayed off-campus.

One other participant feared that if she went off to college, her child might not know her by name. For Toni, that wasn't the case because her mother insisted that her grandson know his mother.

She [my mother] never did, and that was her big thing, that she wanted him to know who his mother was.

She said, "I'm your Nana, but this is who your mother is." And definitely because she knew that I was struggling with that, she definitely -

The fact that I was leaving my son, I want him to know that I'm his mother. I'm not abandoning him. I'm actually doing this for him so I can finish and say, "And now, we're on our own."

So she was definitely in that. I would talk to him a lot on the phone. And he - children don't really like to be on the phone, but -

Yeah, “Hey, okay, bye!” So yeah, I would call and talk to him and still try and play that mommy role, and grandmother spoils the children, so no. I was a little more the disciplinarian at that point, “No, this is what I said.” So it was still smooth, I just had the internal things to deal with.

Mannazjai stated that her parents were willing to let her go away to college but she felt she needed to stay home because she created her situation:

My parents had told me that if I wanted to go away to school, they would raise my child, but I felt that, because I put myself in that situation, I should stay at home and take care of her, and then attend school at a community college, instead of going off to a university. I was excited to be going to school, but I was a little set back and hurt because I wasn't able to go to university, and that's what I wanted to do.

Quincy talked about not being able to go to her first choice in colleges:

I kept good grades in school, so therefore I got the Life Scholarship, which paid for my college. I—the college I go to now wasn't the original college that I was going to go to.

The original college is Crenshaw Methodist University (pseudonym).

I didn't want to move so far away from my child just yet, and it was a lot cheaper just to go to Meredith Community College (pseudonym) my first two years so I can build up more scholarships and then move my last two years to Crenshaw Methodist University, which makes it perfect because your first two years of college is just your prerequisites. And so my last two years will be all my labs, biology, and stuff like that. So I mean, it made it perfectly. It's okay.

Also, Diane struggled in making this decision:

I was accepted into UNC-Chapel Hill. When I found that out, it was during the summertime. I was six-seven months pregnant, and I just cried. I just cried, cried, cried, cried, cried. That was my ultimate dream to be off at college, not near my parents or my brothers or—you know, just wow, you know.

After I eventually graduated, I caught that class—it was my English class that I was doing real bad in, so I mean, I got extra help and I was doing extra credit to try to get my A up so I can graduate with my high GPA, and I got that mail, and I just cried. I cried because I felt like, “I don't have a career anymore. I have to stay home and keep a baby, and everybody else—all my other friends—go off to college.”

But my mom looked at me, and she gave me the option. She said, “Baby, if you want to go off to college, I'll take care of him, and you go off to college.” But I couldn't do it. It's like as soon as I had my child, it was like a mother-son bond. I mean, I couldn't put everything I messed up, and I shouldn't put my mistake on you. But she gave me that option. She gave me that option, and I just told her, “I don't see myself coming back from college and someone I had that's calling me by my first name.”

Theme 5: Feeling judged for being a teen mother

Participants felt judged for being a teen mother. When I asked Quincy about high school she signed, “Whoo,” and went to explain that the following:

And I've had—when I was pregnant—I had all kinds of people looking at me like, “Oh, she's pregnant? She's only fifteen, and she's pregnant? Oh, that's not nice.



That's not cute.” And I even had some elderly people—like, older people—looking at me. And they say—they look at me weird, with they head turned, and they eyes squinting like, “Well, why is she pregnant?” I could tell they were judging me. . . .

I—a lot of eyes, a lot of heads would turn, and they would look at me, and they could see that I was pregnant, and at the time, my grandmother was angry with me because I was the only grandchild, and I was—I'm the only child, mother and father. So they expected so much from me, and to find out that I was pregnant, it was like, “Oh, oh.” Like disgust. And so, it hurt me, and I was saying to myself, “I'm going to prove all of you wrong. I'm going to prove all of you wrong, because—just because I'm pregnant does not mean I have to stop living my life.” It doesn't mean that I'm not going to make the good grades that I was making, or I'm not going to be successful and go to college, and make the big mega-bucks that I've always wanted to do. And I've always wanted to be a forensic—I always wanted to study forensic science because I want to work in a morgue, or the crime scenes—anywhere I can cut open a body is what I want to do. So I want to set my goals for that, and just because I had a child does not mean I have to stop it. And I had support, so—

M. Theresa too said that she felt judged:

High school was really rough, because that was a combination of all of junior high schools together. . .

Being a teenage mom, you were looked at differently, versus junior high school, it was more personal because mostly everybody I knew, one way

or another. High school was a wide variety of girls. . .

I felt like I was judged, because a lot of girls didn't know me and know my drive, I guess I could say. You could say that the girls that I had went to junior high school with, they knew that I was in this relationship with him, because we dated all the way through junior high school, high school, and then after high school.

Then, when I asked Alger what kind of challenges, if any, did she face on a typical day in high school? She responded a lot of negative people, including a teacher she felt was judging her:

In a typical day, I would just face a lot of negative people, just because of everything I had going on. People would say I wasn't spending enough time with Malachi (her son- pseudonym) and I wasn't going to be able to do it, just a lot of negative comments, based off what I did in the day and how I accomplished what I had to accomplish, a lot of negative comments and a lot of naysayers, they say. It was family members, it was people at school. I even had a teacher that I felt like she was so rough on me, not because she was pushing me but because she didn't want me to make it.

I felt like she was definitely judging me, but she didn't say anything in particular. I could just tell by her actions. I felt like I could look at my friend's tests, and her tests wouldn't be better than mine, and I'm looking at mine, and we almost had the exact same answers.

I'm not saying that I wanted her to show pity on me, but I felt like my test was very similar, and I would go to her about it and she was like, "Well, that's not negotiable, and my grades are final." She was very, very difficult for no reason.

Yes [I feel this teacher was difficult because I was a teen mom], because I do remember. This same teacher was trying to convince another girl that I need to actually get an abortion.

She was saying how kids stop your future. She was a very negative person.

Diane shared that she went to her high school prom but she felt judged:

Oh yeah. I mean, I still went to prom. I still went to prom, but I had to do another dress because the dress that I had didn't fit anymore, so I had to do another. And it was hard for me to go to prom.

Just because everybody looked at you differently.

I just felt out of place, like, "Oh my gosh, look at her." I mean, it just hurt me to know that people you've been going to school all your life with turn their back on you as soon as you make a mistake, but I mean, I was always taught you should never judge a book by its cover. And my last semester in high school was the hardest out of my twelve years of going to school.

With everybody just judging me. I got treated differently instantly.

I mean, just instantly. Here being the most popular girl in school, and just get treated like trash at the end of the day, and it's just like, "Wow." You know? It's to the point I didn't want to go to school anymore. I wanted to just lay in the bed and cry because I didn't understand what happened to my life.

And It just changed overnight. My whole life changed overnight.

Again, a theme that emerged is that participants felt judged for being teen mothers.

## Theme 6: A lot of support

The next theme that emerged is that participants experienced a lot of support. Kelly stated:

I feel like I get support from my family, even though they're not up there with me and they don't help me financially. I feel like they still support me.

Yes, emotionally, spiritually. They pray for me, they pray with me. Also, I have a little mentor up at school. She doesn't attend my school, but she's a little bit older than me, and we attend the same church. She's spiritually there for me. It's helping me a lot, her being there for me, spiritually.

Likewise Alger responded:

when I say support, my mom does support. Some people don't, so that's why I would say all of them. I have my mom and my immediate family that does support.

Toni says she experienced lots of support:

Yes. High school. I was a teen mom, so even if I didn't want that to show on the outside that I was struggling, it was a struggle for me. Almost still a disappointment in myself, but this is my reality, this is what I'm going to have to do at this point. Everything that I was or wanted to be had changed at this point, so everything went smoothly, but inside, I didn't know what the next step was for me. I didn't know how my college experience was going to be. I just hoped for the best, and I had so much support even if I wanted to crawl up in a ball, I couldn't.

I think I did have that help, and that's how I was able to keep going. I don't think that anybody's going to wake up and say, "Oh it's fine!" You're going to have that within yourself, when there's a life-altering situation going on. You now have a child. Regardless of what kind of help, you're going to have your own internal things that you deal with on a day-to-day. Even somebody that doesn't have a child, they're still dealing with their own situations. So the support that I had was necessary for me between the family support, the support at school, the programs that are geared specifically toward teenage mothers - the support that I would've needed, I had.

Mannazjai says she experienced support:

My mom and my brothers are very supportive. As long as I'm in school, they said they're willing to help me, even though it's taken me a little longer than expected, but they said as long as I'm doing something with myself, they'll help me as far as with my bills and with my children, as much as I need it.

Likewise Diane experienced support:

And the support, you know, my support never stopped. My mom has—and my father—has been very supportive. They help me with my kids, just everything. They help me with my kids. They help me if I don't have the funds for daycare, then, "Alright, well, we'll look out."

Laura too experienced lots of support:

Yes, and then I've had a lot of support, just family support, people helping out with my daughter, just encouragement along the way from friends, family, co-workers, other pharmacies who would say how proud of me they were, just little

things along the way from other people, just great encouragement, encouraging people.

Renee too had support:

I created support because my mom was there for me all the way. When there was only—I thought I had nobody there, but she was my support, and my daughter drove me to make it through high school.

Quincy responded:

I experienced support because on those days that I felt that I couldn't do it, my grandmother was there for me, and she said, "You go on. You go, don't give up, just keep going."

So—and also support, because my child's not in daycare.

Support. He's not in daycare, so therefore my mother, my grandmother, his mother, and his—my child's father, and his mother—they all support me because they watch him while I'm in school. It depends on who—you know—he goes with them.

Xiomara said that she had tremendous support:

I've had tremendous support. Like, I thank God every day for my support system that I have, and my mom especially. She helps me out so much. Especially if I'm in school. Now if I'm at work, she sometimes will say no. But she won't say no if I have class.

Logan (pseudonym for her daughter), right. And she will—as far as entertainment goes, she'll do it if she feels like it, but she's never said no to me if I have class.

And I have my boyfriend who's—he especially helps me. Like, I took a night

class this semester. He'd go get her and bring her home, feed her. I have him, I had my grandmother before she decided that she wanted to move to the beach. My grandfather retired, and they moved to their house at the beach. So I don't have her, but she gets Logan sometimes and keeps her for like a long period of time. So that gives me a long break when she does get her. But I have her. And I kind of had my stepmom before all of the events took place, she would get Logan. So, yeah, I have a great support system.

#### Theme 7: Some non-support

The last theme that emerged regarding what participants experienced was non-support. The non-support was mainly from a financial standpoint. Kelly stated she experienced non-support “Because, at the end of the day, I'm on my own.” When I asked her if that is how she really feels, she stated:

Yeah, and that's really how it is. I know my mom was watching my daughter for me the first two years I was in college, up here in Greelyville (pseudonym), but now she's unable to, but that's not why I feel like I don't have support. I just feel like nobody's here for me financially, to help me out or nothing. Nobody's there, but like, “Oh, here's twenty dollars I'll send to you,” and it's like, I really don't understand, because I'm not here at home no more, so that's extra money. My daughter's not here at home no more, so that's extra money, but then my mom and my dad, he's never even there, but my dad, they'll ask him, like, “When you coming home? You going to come home?” They'll ask me to come home each week, and I'm like, “I'm not coming home.”

Because if you're not paying for me to come home, I'm not about to waste my money that I've got to pay for my daycare, and then my daughter be not in daycare, and then I've got to go to class with her. No.

I feel like my mom, she's not really in a position, because she has three kids, me and my brothers, and she had them by my father. Whenever they were married, they got separated, but I feel like she's not able to, because I know she's struggling with bills and stuff, but then again, I feel like it's a choice. Like I said, we're not there anymore, but then my dad, it's definitely a choice. Every time we call him and talk to him, "Oh, I don't have no money. Oh, I'll have to see." You never have money, but you have a new wife, you have two jobs, and you have three kids and a grandchild, but you never have money, never.

I just feel like I'm doing it all – well, I am doing it all by myself.

Alger stated that she too doesn't get support:

My mother is definitely there for me to talk to, but when it comes to financials, I totally financed everything for myself. I don't have anyone that I can call to say, "Do you have it this week?" because if I don't have it, then it doesn't get done.

I don't [get child support], not at all.

A full-time job. I pay for it [daycare].

A five-year waiting list [ for child care vouchers].

The waiting list is crazy.

And I still have to get things, and then I still have to work. He has to go to daycare, but luckily he's in a home daycare, so the people that keep him have



been keeping him since he's been six weeks. They're pretty much flexible with us, but the prices don't change.

[non-support] Exactly. I don't get any help from my son's father

Quincy said that she too experienced non-support:

And I say non-support because sometimes I just feel that there's no one there for me. Not all the time, but just sometimes I feel like there's a—always a battle I have to fight on my own.

And, I mean, there's nothing wrong with that because you can't always depend on someone to be there for you, and I believe everyone goes through it a certain part of time, when they just figure, “Why is nobody here to help me?” And they're in a box, and they're screaming out, but nobody's there.

Well, I mean, it's frustrating, so especially emotionally. Ever since I've had my child, I've become more emotional just because life is hard. It's much harder than it used to be, it is. But I'm kind of thankful for the non-support sometimes. I think I am because it's making me stronger. I don't look to my mother or my grandmother or anyone else of that sort to help me with everything. I've learned to be independent, and to go after things on my own, and I have a family member that's 22, and she's in college as well, and she still turns to her mother for her mother to go to the bookstore to get her books for college. And things like—just something as simple as that—no one goes with me to help myself register for my next classes. No one's definitely not there for me to go down to my bookstore to help me purchase my books for school.

Actually, no [I don't wish I had the support], I don't because I don't want to be that baby-fied, so it's not that—that's not an issue for me at all. So the non-support, it pushes you. It does. It makes you stronger.

I mean, I have [experienced non-support in other ways].

I'm trying to see how I should word it. Okay, I'm going to take it back to my mother. Sometimes she shows me non-support.

Because my mom, she still drinks. She doesn't do any more drugs. She stopped that when I was in middle school, so she doesn't do drugs anymore, but she drinks. And she claims that she's not an alcoholic, but to me, when you drink and you can't control it, you're an alcoholic. She doesn't drink every day. It's mostly on the weekends, or when I'm not in school, or something like that, but the days that I do have school, she sometimes drinks. And, of course, I don't want my child to be around her if she's not in her right state of mind. So to me that's non-support, because she's not supportive that I have school, and I need someone to watch my child because he's not in daycare.

#### Textual Description

The next step in Moustakas' (1994) data analysis process is to write a textual description of “what” participants' experienced based on the themes that emerged from the first primary interview question. The following statement summarizes what participants experienced as they graduated from high school and attended or completed college: Participants experienced a feeling of accomplishment. They felt successful because, even after having children, they still graduated from high school on time and attended or completed college. Laura stated the she achieved her ultimate goal of being a

pharmacist and did it in a timely manner. Xiomara said she feels successful because she's making progress. Her grades might not be where she wants them to be, but she is still in school. Participants also experienced struggles. They struggled balancing school and work with being the best mother. During college, they experienced difficulty paying for childcare because the waitlist for childcare resources was so long and because they did not receive child support from the fathers of their children. Making the decision to going away to college or stay local was a dilemma. These participants also experienced feeling judged for being teen mothers. They were judged by their teachers, their peers, and their families. Participants also experienced support and non-support. The support as well as the non-support made them stronger and helped them graduate from high school on time and attend or complete college.

### Themes

From the list of significant statements regarding primary interview question #2 and other closely related interview questions, these are the findings which emerged

1. A supportive female, family role model,
2. Faith in God,
3. Supportive School personnel (teachers, principals, school nurse),
4. Teen parenting programs/classes that provided daycare assistance in high school and that extended through college,
5. Their children (who motivated them), and
6. Self-determination and/or wanting to redeem themselves

Finding 1: A supportive female family role model

Regarding the structure of how participants were able to graduate and attend or complete college, I asked who or what helped them overcome their daily challenges and the most common response was a positive female family member. For Kelly, along with faith in God, it was her mother:

Jesus. I'm really religious, so I know he's stopped me from doing some things I would want to do, think about doing. My mom also, she would be like, "Don't worry about that girl, don't worry about that thing." My mom, she would tell me stuff that I know now. She would try to tell me when I was younger, but I really wasn't trying to listen.

Yeah, like, "You deserve better than that," stuff like that, all that stuff. It'd really go out one ear, but she was always there, telling me, "Don't let that stuff bother you."

Xiomara said that she had support, especially from her mom:

I've had tremendous support. Like, I thank God every day for my support system that I have, and my mom especially. She helps me out so much.

Especially if I'm in school. Now if I'm at work, she sometimes will say no [about keeping Logan]. But she won't say no if I have class.

And she will—as far as entertainment goes, she'll do it if she feels like it, but she's never said no to me if I have class. And I have my boyfriend who's—he especially helps me. Like, I took a night class this semester. He'd go get her and bring her home, feed her. I have him, I had my grandmother before she decided that she wanted to move to the beach.

When I asked M. Theresa what situations or people, be it good or bad, affected her graduating from high school and attending college, she responded:

Good or bad? Good would be my mom. Most definitely, I have to give credit to his parents as well, as far as their efforts to make sure I graduated from high school. College was a lot different. I really didn't have a lot support in college, because I think at that time, my mom was pretty much wore out, and she's like, "Okay, you're an adult now." Most of the responsibilities definitely were pushed on me, which I was not used to.

She [my mother] said, "You've got a curve ball thrown at you, but you're still going to hit that ball."

And she [my mother] just told me—she just gave me the strength every day. At the end of the day, you die for you. You don't die for nobody else. That's a sin.

And just take it, and just grow with it. Just move on, try to push yourself forward every day, because at the end of the day, you can still be that person you want to be.

Diane, who was accepted to UNC-Chapel Hill and her mom offered to keep her child so she could go off to college, says that it was definitely the support of her mother that helped her:

I really have a feeling like if it wasn't for her [my mom], to be honest with you, I don't think I would have finished high school. She [her mother] got pregnant at 16 and she had to get her GED, and she said, "You know, you're not going to go that route."

Yes, she said, “You know, you might be pregnant, but you're not going to get your GED, you're going to get your high school diploma.” And she just, you know, pushed me every day. “You okay? You feeling okay? Go ahead and go to school. Get it out the way. God's got something for you. Just get up and go.” She really pushed me.

If I didn't have that support system, I don't think I would have finished high school.

For Toni, her mom was supportive by keeping her son while she was away at college. Alger stated that her mom was also supportive and Quincy said that if she was giving out awards, she would have to give one to her grandmother:

I wanted—if I was handing out awards, I would give the all-star award to my grandmother.

I really would. She's been there for me no matter how upset she's been when she first found out I was pregnant until today, me sitting in this seat. She's provided everything for me. If I needed it, it was there. If my child needed it, it was there.

And she pushed me. She was the reason why I never gave up. She always tell me, “You give up, then you getting out my house.”

So, I didn't want to go back home. Of course, there's no way in the world I wanted to go back home, so in order for me to keep going, it was all her. “Don't come in my house with any Fs, don't come in my house with any Ds. If the class is too hard, you can C your way out, but you're not going to D and F your way out.”

So that was always her motto, and even for her—she even went back to school because I was in school. She told me that if she can go back to school and pass some classes, I can stay in school and pass my classes. So she went back to school to take the algebra class, just so that I—she can be supportive of me, and, you know, her point was, “If I can do it, you can do it.”

#### Finding 2: Faith and God

Several participants had a strong belief in God. Their faith helped them overcome their struggles and graduate. Kelly stated:

I did it mostly by God, just having faith in him. I've always been a go-getter, so I'm not going to stop something without completing it. I definitely knew I was going to graduate from high school. My mom, my dad, nobody's ever had to be like, “Make good grades.”

I've never been the bad child. I just happened to have a child, so God, Susan (pseudonym for program manager), the whole Joyful Passage Parenting Program people, Lisa (pseudonym for program director), they helped me. They made it so your grades have to be up. If your grades aren't up, you're kicked out of the program, your child's not getting daycare, stuff like that.

I applied to be in their college program, the CollegeMom program, because I was in the LEAD program as well, when I was in high school with them, and that's for the teenage mothers that are in Joyful Passage Parenting Program, but they're like the leaders, so I was in that program.

Likewise I asked Xiomara, who or what—people or school rules or policies or practices—helped you overcome your daily challenges? Xiomara replied, “God.” She continued:

I don't know. I just feel like—I look back now and I look at how things were after Logan actually got here, and I don't know how I did it. I really don't know how I did it. I totally understand why people drop out when they have a child.

Like, I wanted to so many times. I would stop and be like, “Gosh, this is so tiring. I'm sleepy. I'm tired. I just want a day where I don't have to do anything.” Or, “It would be so much easier if I just had to take care of Logan and didn't have to worry about school.” I came close so many times, but luckily I got pregnant towards the end of my eleventh grade year, and it's like it would be foolish for me to drop out when I only have a few more months left.

Alger stated she graduated partially through her faith in God: When I asked her if she attended church, she responded:

Definitely. I probably couldn't have did it if I didn't go to church.

It [my church family] was very, very opening arms to me, just because I didn't feel like people were staring me. Everyone knew I was young, just because I even did some of the choir member's hair, so everybody knew my age, so when I walked in and pregnant, they already knew. I felt like I wasn't judged and I was just welcomed with open arms.

Finding 3: Supportive school personnel (teachers, principals, school nurse)



Another finding regarding the structure of participants' success was that they had supportive teachers. Laura remembers an incident from high school where her English teacher was supportive of her as a pregnant teen:

My English teacher, she was actually a Black woman. I guess she found out [I was pregnancy], of course, people talking.

I remember one time we were in class, and this other Black guy, he said something. Somebody was saying something, and he made a comment. He basically said I wasn't too smart. I was stupid, I got pregnant, or something like that. The English teacher, I guess she heard it, but she was like, "Laura, come outside, I need to talk to you."

I guess somebody had told her, or she figured out some way, but she was like – I remember a few things that she said. She was like, "You are so smart. You should be a doctor," and I'm thinking, "No, I don't want to be a doctor." Like a medical doctor, I don't want to be a doctor.

She was like, "You really are. You could do whatever you wanted. You are so smart," just very encouraging words that she said, and asking me, actually, was I in the top ten. I told her the little situation, that I'm not going to be in it or whatever, but yes, she was pretty nice.

She cared . . .

In high school, M. Theresa remembers the Black teachers being supportive of her as a teen mom but not so much the White teacher:

More so on the Caucasian teachers, I don't feel like were very supportive of me, as a student, versus the Black teachers, what I had been used to, going to Waverly

Hill Elementary School (pseudonym), which was predominantly black, and McKnight Middle School (pseudonym). My Black teachers were more supportive and more understanding.

With the White teachers, it was a challenge because I think that they expected me to want more, I guess, time, and sometimes I think that I did. I would say, “Well, I didn't finish my assignment, because this is that other,” just different things that I would go to them about, as far as my work, and I didn't get a lot of support.

Likewise, Xiomara, Alger, and Mannazjai also remembered supportive teachers. Xiomara remembers her ninth grade English teacher, a first-year teacher, being very supportive of her as a pregnant teen. Xiomara stated:

When I found out I was pregnant, I think he [my ninth grade English teacher] was one of the first people I told. . .

I think—did I tell him before I told my dad? I think I did. . .

Yeah, he was very supportive. . . .

He told me like whatever decision I made and he was going to support me. And he was there for me the whole time I was pregnant. Even when I stopped going to City Heights High School (pseudonym), he was still there for me. . .

We texted. He would take me out and stuff because if I tell him I have a craving for something, he would come get me and take me out. And then when she was born, he would come get both of us and take us for ice cream and stuff. And he still remembers—he takes me every birthday that she has, he takes me. Every birthday that I have—like, he still remembers our birthdays. Yeah, he was great.

He taught English. Actually, he was my ninth grade English teacher, and that was his first year teaching.

Xiomara stated that this teacher's support really made a difference. For Alger, the supportive teacher was her cheerleading coach whom she respect:

Her name is significant to me because it was a very inspirational cheerleading coach that I had. She was a big part of my life, and even when I got pregnant, she was such a part of my life and still is, to this day, very inspirational.

Kelly stated that, along with the parenting program and their assistance with daycare, she got support from the school nurse.

That helped me, being able to have a daycare, a place for my child to go while I was in school. Also, the nurse's office. It really helped me a lot.

Just because you can just go to the nurse and just talk to the nurse about being a teen mom or just to have little pregnancy tests.

For Toni, the support of her teachers kept her going:

Support of teachers because a lot of them knew me before, so they knew how strong I was before, and they said, "Don't let this stop you."

You know, a lot of them had their own situations and the stories that they had.

And that was another thing that some of the teachers shared with me their struggles, and it almost - there were some teachers that I sat there and cried with because the woman that you are, you wouldn't know your struggle.

Some of them weren't about having a child. It was their own life growing up, and that was like, "Wow, never let your circumstance determine the outcome." So yeah, it was definitely beneficial for me.

When I asked Mannazjai what situations or people, be it good or bad, affected her graduating high school and attending college, she stated alongside self-motivation, it was support from teachers and her principal:

I graduated from high school with the motivation to actually want to. With me being the only one that was pregnant through that time, my principal was even very supportive with me. He said that he wouldn't rush me with my exams or anything, to take my time. He would still allow me to walk with my class, because that's what I wanted to do.

It just might have took me a little longer in that semester to do it. He [the principal] was supportive with that. The students were supportive, because anything that I needed, they would assist me with carrying my book bag and making sure that I did make it to school and from school. The teachers, they would give me a little leeway as far as the time schedule and for making it to class. They gave me the extra time to get to class, so I wouldn't be tardy.

In summary, one of the major findings in how participants graduated from high school and attended or enrolled in college was having supportive school personnel, in particular supportive teachers.

Finding 4: Teen parenting programs/classes that provided daycare assistance in high school and that extended through college

Another primary finding in the structure of how these teen mothers graduated from high school and attended or completed college was the importance of teen parenting programs/classes. Toni stated:

With the same support of my family, teachers, and these adolescent parenting programs because - the programs specifically - because everyone in the room is just like you. Now you no longer feel alone. You no longer are wondering, by yourself, how you're going to do it because they would often bring other girls who were like two steps ahead.

When you see somebody that's just like you, that played basketball just like you, that was very popular just like you, and now they have a child, and now they're in college, and now they're about to graduate. You say, "Well, if she can do it, why can't I?" Why would I crawl up and say, "Now I can't do it." Because I'm looking at somebody that has, and that is, and that will.

Kelly stated that her parenting program helped her:

I did it mostly by God, just having faith in him. I've always been a go-getter, so I'm not going to stop something without completing it. I definitely knew I was going to graduate from high school. My mom, my dad, nobody's ever had to be like, "Make good grades."

I've never been the bad child. I just happened to have a child, so God, Susan (Program Manager for Joyful Passage Parenting Program), the whole Joyful Passage Parenting Program people, Lisa (Program Director), they helped me. They made it so your grades have to be up. If your grades aren't up, you're kicked out of the program, your child's not getting daycare, stuff like that.

I applied to be in their college program, the CollegeMom program, because I was in the LEAD program as well, when I was in high school with them, and that's for the teenage mothers that are in Joyful Passage Parenting Program, but they're like the leaders, so I was in that program.

Likewise Alger was involved in a parenting program that provided assistance with daycare:

Well, the school didn't have a program, but I did find out about an outside program, called the Joyful Passage Parenting Program.

It actually helped me with daycare, so I could finish school.

Basically what they would do, they actually provided me with a voucher until I graduated, so that was a help, just to cut down some finances as far as me, because I wasn't working as much, and just at Taco Bell just wasn't enough. That helped me provide daycare, so I probably wouldn't have been able to graduate, if it wasn't for that program.

Alger stated there was no one to keep her son, so without this program and the childcare assistance they provided, she probably wouldn't have graduated or "I probably would have had to go to an alternative school that had a daycare."

Likewise, Xiomara stated,

Oh, Joyful Passage Parenting Program (pseudonym) was the greatest program that ever existed.

Joyful Passage Parenting Program helps you to stay in school by any means necessary. When I say, "By any means necessary"--

No, that's not their motto, but that's what they do. It's their not non-profit organization, and when I say, "By any means necessary," that means they paid for my car to get repaired. When I was going through a few months and I didn't have a job, they let me come file papers in their office and paid me ten dollars an hour. When something happened with my financial aid, they paid my tuition.

They gave me a laptop—a new laptop—because I had the highest GPA in the program.

They did every—Christmas rolls around, they give you gift cards to go Christmas shopping. They have meetings every week where they'll come get you. They'll send like a Lincoln Towncar to come get you and your child and bring you to this meeting.

At the meeting, they have childcare so you don't have to be bothered with your child, and it's like an informational meeting—all different types of stuff like budgeting, how to finance, going to college—like just so much stuff. When my daycare got cut off, they paid for her to go to daycare. They're going to keep you in school. They don't care what they have to do. By any means necessary.

Likewise Renee attended parenting classes and they helped her: When I asked her: What situations or people affected her graduating from high school, she responded:

I was in parenting class.

No, it wasn't required, but they just feel that teen mothers should go to the classes, and it helps them to talk about their pregnancy, what they're going through, and they help you talk about college. Want you to get into it, and that's when I started thinking about college, when they was telling me about it.

Yes. There was one that's offered toward the morning, or you could pick one after school—you go to Sunny Village Community Center (pseudonym), and they have an afternoon class.

And you go there, and they have parenting class. A group of girls come in, and give us some snacks. Basically, we just talk about what we're going through, what we're facing while we're in high school, and where do we plan on going when we get out of high school, and when they said “College would be a great start,” and, “There's not a lot of single mothers that's in college, but I believe y'all can do it.” And they talked about the future of our child. That's when I decided, “I think I'm going to go to college.”

I took it [the parenting class] during school, but I didn't want it to affect my grades, so I started taking it after school in the afternoon.

It was helpful because it also—they said that, “If you stay in school, they keep helping you.” So it makes it seem like, “Okay, if I go to school, I'll still have the help.

They'll help you with if your baby needs pampers. If you need a daycare, they'll help your child be in daycare as long as you was in school. They was helping, and I thought like that's a push right there for girls to keep going on in college and stuff.

#### Finding 5: Their children (who motivated them)

Seven out of ten participants stated to their children motivated them to finish school. They stayed in school because they wanted to be positive role models and set a



good example for their children. When I asked Kelly if she stayed in school to be a role model for daughter, she replied:

Yeah, because I want the very best for her. I know if I want the very best for and I want to give her the best, then I've got to do the best I can do.

Likewise Xiomara, wanted to give up on school, but looking at her daughter motivated her to keep going too:

Like, I wanted to so many times. I would stop and be like, “Gosh, this is so tiring. I'm sleepy. I'm tired. I just want a day where I don't have to do anything.” Or, “It would be so much easier if I just had to take care of Logan and didn't have to worry about school.” I came close so many times, but luckily I got pregnant towards the end of my eleventh grade year, and it's like it would be foolish for me to dropout when I only have a few more months left.

Just looking at Logan and knowing—like, I have so many different types of people in my family, and some of those people—I look at them and I'm like—not that I don't love them, but it's like I'm not going to be like that. I'm not going to live like that. I want more. Like, I want better for my child.

Also, Xiomara stated that the challenge of time management was her greatest obstacle because:

I knew that I had no choice between—most college students have a choice between just being a full-time college student, or maybe having a part-time job for spending money, but I never had that option.

I have to work full-time, and I feel like I have to go to college. And of course, I have to raise my child, so that's just the only challenge I have. It's just I feel like I don't have options. Everything I do in my life is mandatory.

It makes me feel strained and pulled in all different types of way, on one side. But on the other side, at the end of the day, I look at myself and I'm proud of myself because I feel like I did it. I'm doing it all by myself, and I'm proud of myself.

And I feel like Logan's going to be proud when she grows up and I tell her about everything I did for her.

Likewise Mannazjai stated her children inspire her to continue school:

“having the children and having to raise them by myself. . . That's hard, but at the same time, I look at them with me waking them up and getting them on to school and then asking me every day, “Mama, do you have to go to school? Mama, do you have homework?” that's motivation, because I believe that I'm setting an example for them, so that they'll, in return, be doing it for themselves.

For Renee, having her daughter caused her to take school more serious than before her pregnancy:

A lot of people thought I wasn't going to do it [graduate] because, “Oh, she got pregnant, you know. She's playing around in school.” But actually, when I got pregnant, that's when I took high school more seriously.

After I got pregnant, when I thought I was pregnant with my little girl, I took my high school classes—I took them seriously because I felt like, “I'm about to have a baby and I want her to know no matter what you go through, you can still make it.

She [my daughter] helped me make it because she helps me push myself. I look at her, and I'll be like, "I want something better for her. And I also want her to know when she got older, she would be like, 'Well my momma did it all and she had me even at a young age.'"

Likewise, Quincy's daughter motivated her too:

Me having my child was—it made me look forward to doing things even though I had my outside issues. . . .

It [having my child] made me want to be successful because now, it wasn't just me living my life for me. It was me living my life for me and my child. . . .

These young mothers were motivated and inspired to remain in school by their children. They wanted to set a good example for them.

Finding 6: Self Determination and/or wanting to redeem themselves

Finally the structure of how these participants experienced graduating from high school and attending or completing college was by self-determination and/or wanting to redeem themselves. Kelly stated:

I've always been a go-getter, so I'm not going to stop something without completing it. I definitely knew I was going to graduate from high school. My mom, my dad, nobody's ever had to be like, "Make good grades."

I've never been the bad child. I just happened to have a child . . . .

Alger stated that she was determined not to be a statistic:

I guess just continuing, just keep going. School definitely was a motivation for me, because I didn't want to be a statistic, so I kept going.

When I asked Quincy: How do you feel now about graduating from high school? And so what does it mean to you to be a high school graduate, she responded:

I feel successful, I feel great. I feel like I did something that a lot of parents don't do, and it makes me feel good. And it makes you look good. It makes you look wonderful because people get so excited when you tell them that you graduated from high school as a teenage parent. So it makes you feel good. It—I mean, it's speechless. Like, I can barely get it out of how wonderful I feel just because I graduated.

Oh man. I feel I got—I mean, it means—I don't know, because I feel like I just accomplished something, and the thing is, you have people that tell you, “You'll never do it. You'll never do it.” And now I'm looking back at them like, “Ha. I told you so.” So, I mean, it makes you feel good. And it means a lot to me.

When I asked Mannazjai what situations or people, be it good or bad, affected her graduating high school and attending college, she stated it was self-motivation and support from teachers and her principal: “I graduated from high school with the motivation to actually want to.”

Sensing that Xiomara felt she had disappointed her family, I asked her if having a child hurt her self-esteem? Xiomara responded:

Yeah, in a way because I—my family—well, my dad's side of the family—they always put me on a pedestal. And even on my mom's side of the family, they always put me on a pedestal just because I was different from them, and because I was so smart, and because I always got straight A's.

They always put me up there, so then I felt like—when I got pregnant—like

everybody just—I guess looked at me a different type of way, like I was looked at like I was one of them. And I know—I want to cry.

But I know that I'm like the same—the same Xiomara that they're used to—but I care a lot about what my family thinks about me, and I just feel like I let them down so much by getting pregnant, and I just ruined their whole perception of me. I want to get that back. I want them to look at me the same way.

Yeah, I feel like at my college graduation is when they're going to say, “She really did it. She really didn't let this hold her back.”

In conclusion, I asked Xiomara what does it mean to be enrolled in college, and she responded:

It means a lot. It means that my daughter can have a great future, you know? I feel like I wasn't there, and her life starting out the way it did—I feel like I'm going to make it right, eventually, when I graduate from college and have a career, and able to—not support her, because I'm supporting her now—but I want to give her everything that she wants, not just everything that she needs. So, I think it means that—it means getting my family's perception of me back.

#### Structural Description

Moustakas (1994) recommends that the next step is for the researcher to write a description of “how” participants’ experienced the phenomenon based on the themes that emerged. In summary, the structure of how participants graduated from high school and attended or completed college was that they had a supportive female family role model. This was mainly a mother or grandmother who encouraged and pushed them to keep going when they wanted to give up. They also had faith in God. Another aspect of the

structure of how they achieved success was that they had supportive school personnel, especially their teachers. Laura spoke of how, when one of her classmates said she was not too smart because she got pregnant, it was her English teacher who reaffirmed her humanity. Another major finding in how participants graduated and attended or completed college was that they participated in teen parenting programs/classes that provided daycare assistance in high school and that extended through college. Participants stressed the difference the teen parenting programs/classes made. Participants spoke of how they were motivated and inspired by their children, and they achieved because of self-determination and wanting to redeem themselves. Alger stated she did not want to be a statistic. Xiomara stated that she wanted her family to see she as still the same person. Additionally participants remained in their traditional high school as opposed to going to an alternative school for teen mothers. Only 1 of the ten participants went to the alternative school, a decision she regretted. Participants also either attended a local community college first and then transferred to a four-year university or if they went off to a four your university, their mothers kept the children. These were the findings for the structure of participants' experience or how participants graduated from high school and attended or completed college.

#### The "Essence"

The final step in Moustakas' (1994) data analysis process is to combine the textural and structural descriptions to describe the "essence" of the phenomenon. The "essence" of participants' experience of graduating from high school and attending or completing college consists of what they experienced (the textural description) and how they experienced it (the structural description). Participants experienced a feeling of

accomplishment. They also experienced struggle. They struggled balancing school and work with being the best mother. During college, they experienced difficulty paying for childcare because the waitlist for childcare resources was so long and because they did not receive child support from the fathers of their children. They experienced a dilemma deciding whether to go away to college or to stay local. These participants also experienced feeling judged for being teen mothers. They were judged by their teachers, their peers, and their family. Participants also experienced support and non-support. The support as well as the non-support made them stronger and helped them graduate from high school on time and attend or complete college. Their matrix of support included a supportive female, family role model. They had faith in God. They had the support of teen parenting programs/classes that provided daycare assistance in high school and that extended through college. Participants were motivated and inspired by their children, and they achieved because of self-determination and wanting to redeem themselves. Most of them started at a community college and transferred to a four-year university. For those who went off to a four year university, their mothers kept their children. This is the “essence” of these teen mothers lived experience of graduating from high school and attending or completing college.

### Summary

In conclusion, this chapter provided a narrative of the participants, a description of each theme and the findings that contributed to participants’ success. Also included was the textural and structural descriptions and a composite description of the “essence” of their experience. The next chapter provides a discussion of the findings from a Critical

Black Feminist perspective. Chapter 5 also include implications for actions and recommendations for further research.



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to (1) explore the lived experience of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college and (2) discover the school factors that contributed to their success. The goal was that in discovering the “essence” of participants’ experience, findings might provide insight into how to increase the graduation rate for teen mothers. The research question that guided this study was the following: What is the lived experience of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college, and what are the school factors that contributed to their success? The answer to the research question is that participants experienced a feeling of accomplishment; faced struggles, challenges and dilemmas; but received a lot of support and ultimately overcame their struggles because of support from family, community, and school. The school factors that contributed to their success were (1) teen parenting programs/classes that provided childcare assistance and that extended through college, and (2) supportive school personnel, especially teachers.

School leaders interested in eliminating the disparity in achievement for lower-income minority students should care about these findings. Educators who are interested in reducing the dropout rate among teen mothers should care about these findings. These results are going to not only help fill a gap in the literature but also help schools better serve pregnant and parenting teens. What can be done with this information is to use it to make changes in how schools are currently serving pregnant and parenting teens.

### Implications for Practice

One of the major findings regarding the structure of participants' experience is that they succeeded because of teen parenting programs that provided assistance with daycare and that extended through college. Another major finding was that their success was made possible because of supportive school personnel (primarily supportive teachers). This structure of support is critical because teen mothers face a structure of domination in society and in schools. Black teen mothers face even greater oppression.

### Hegemonic Forces and Matrix of Domination

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de Black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womanfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.

—Zora Neal Hurston, 1937, p. 16

Based on this quote by Zora Neal Hurston, Collins (2000) begins her discussion on the role of Black women in society. Nanny, an elderly African-American woman in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, explains Black women's "place" to her granddaughter. Nanny knows that being treated as "mules uh de world" epitomizes Black women's oppression. Black women's oppression exists because they live in a patriarchal society that is white male dominated. Thus, being Black and in this case a teen mother places these participants in the center of oppression because on their race, class, and gender. They are not White women, who have White privilege, and who have very different experiences than Black women (Collins, 2000). They are not a part of the middle or upper class, and they are not males. Thus, these Black teen mothers face an

intersectionality of oppressive conditions based on race, class, gender, and their status as teen mothers.

#### Agency - Individual and Structural (Matrices of Support)

Critical Black Feminism (CBF) seeks to resist this intersectionality of oppression. It seeks to empower Black women. CBF argues that, because of individual and structural agency, these Black teen mothers were able to find freedom to assert their humanity. Through individual agency, the Black teen mothers in this study were able to overcome their oppressive conditions to succeed in spite of the matrix of domination. There also existed agency in a structural sense in the form of (1) a positive female family role model, (2) faith in God, (3) supportive school personnel, (4) teen parenting programs/classes, and (5) their children, who helped to form a matrix of support for these mothers. This matrix of support served to propel these women to overcome the hegemonic forces at play in school and the matrix of domination they faced. They were able to beat the odds because of their individual agency and because of the structural agency in place to support them.

Based on the findings that teen parenting programs and supportive teachers played a major role in helping teen mothers navigate through the matrix of domination, the following recommendations are made:

1. That schools provide professional development to teachers—emphasizing the role that they can play in helping teen mothers graduate from high school and attend college,
2. That schools train teachers on how to foster agency in teen mothers.

3. That schools provide teen parenting programs that provide assistance with daycare and that extend through completion of college,
4. That the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Education intervene on behalf of teen mothers to ensure that schools and districts are taking every measure possible to help these students graduate.
5. That the federal government review and make policy changes regarding child care assistance to teen mothers enrolled in college.

#### Implications for Public Policy

One of the themes that emerged from what participants experienced was that they struggled paying for childcare while in college. Another theme that emerged was that they struggled balancing school, work, and parenting. Both of these challenges have implications for a need for policy changes related to childcare assistance vouchers for teen mothers enrolled in college.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research include the following:

1. Conduct phenomenological studies on the lived experience of Latina participants, and
2. Conduct additional studies on the lived experience of teen mothers who graduated high school and enrolled or completed college to support or add strength to my findings.

Additionally, based on what we know about teen mom dropouts and their children living in poverty, I recommend that future research focus on the educational

experiences of children of teen mom high school graduates to compare their outcomes to those children of teen mom high school drop outs.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the “essence” of what teen mothers experienced in graduating from high school and attending is that they experienced a feeling of accomplishment, faced struggles, challenges and dilemmas, but received a lot of support and ultimately overcame their struggles because of support from family, community and school. Educators interested in reducing the dropout rate among teen mothers can learn from these findings. Schools must provide greater support to teen mothers. A starting place is to provide (1) teen parenting programs/classes that provide childcare assistance and that extend through college, and (2) supportive teachers. According to Critical Black Feminist theory, these Black teen mothers faced several forms of oppression from the hegemonic forces at play in society and schools; however, because of the matrices of structural support that surrounded them (teen parenting programs and supportive teachers especially), and their own sense of agency, they were able to demonstrate what poet Maya Angelou said to her audience of oppressors: “Still I Rise.”

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### Purpose of the Proposed Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to (1) explore the lived experience of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college and (2) discover the school factors that contributed to their academic success. The goal was that in discovering the “essence” of participants’ experience, findings might provide insight into how to increase the graduation rate for teen mothers.

### The Research Question

The research question that guided this study was the following: What is the lived experience of teen mothers who graduated from high school and attended or completed college, and what are the school factors that contributed to their academic success?

### Background/Demographic Questions:

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. How many children do you have?
4. At what age did you become a mother for the first time? Second time?
5. Were there other teen mothers in your immediate family? Were they supportive? (intergenerational question)
6. When did you graduate from high school?
7. Did you graduate from a traditional high school or the separate school for teen mothers?
8. When did you begin college?
9. What college do/did you attend?
10. What is your classification this semester in college
11. How do you pay for college?
12. How do you support your family while in college?

### General Questions

Moustakas (1994) recommends asking 2 broad, general questions:

1. What have you experienced in terms of graduating from high school and attending college?
2. What situations or factors have affected your graduating from high school and attending college?

### High School

#### *Questions about their high school experience in general.*

1. Tell me about a typical day in high school.
2. What challenges did you face in a typical day?
3. Who or what (people, school rules, policies and practices) helped you overcome your daily challenges?
4. What were some of the things in school that helped you as a teen mother?
5. Did your school have any programs for teen mothers? If, so, what were they, and how did they work?
6. Were the teachers supportive for the most part?

#### Question about Feelings

1. How do you feel now about graduating from high school?
2. What does it mean to you to be a high school graduate?

### Transition to College

1. Tell me about the process of how you got to go to college?
2. What challenges did you face in going to college?
3. Who or what (people, school rules, policies and practices) helped you overcome the challenges you faced in going to college?
4. How well prepared were you for college?
5. What do you wish your high school had done differently?
6. Were there any support systems at the college/university?
7. What were some of the things in college that helped you as a teen mother?
8. Did your college have any programs for teen mothers? If, so, what were they, and how did they work?
9. Were the professors supportive for the most part?
10. Have you graduated from college?
11. How are you currently doing in college?
12. What are some of your current challenges with schools?

#### Questions about feelings

13. How do you feel now about going to college?
14. What does it mean to you to be in college (or a college graduate)?

### Hypothetical Questions

1. Suppose a school teacher or principal asked you to tell him/her what they could do to help more of their teen mothers graduate from high school and attend college. What would you tell the school teacher or principal to do?
2. What if you could talk to a teen mother who is still in high school and would like to graduate and attend college, but she is thinking of just dropping out of high school. What would you say to her?