SILENCE NO MORE: A TRANSFORMATIVE TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY INVESTIGATING THE EXPERIENCES OF TEEN MOTHERS WHO GO TO COLLEGE IN THE RURAL SOUTHEAST

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SILENCE NO MORE: A TRANSFORMATIVE TRANSCENDENTAL
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY INVESTIGATING THE EXPERIENCES OF TEEN
MOTHERS WHO GO TO COLLEGE IN THE RURAL SOUTHEAST

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School
of Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree
of Doctorate of Philosophy in
Curriculum and Instruction

by
Angela Marie Wilson Rogers
May 2010

Accepted by:
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Dr. Brent Igo
Dr. Megan Che
Dr. Robert Green
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ABSTRACT

According to ethnographer Kristin Luker (1996) “most poignantly, in the vast majority of cases, giving birth while still a teenager is a pledge of hope, an acted-out wish that the lives of the next generation will be better than those of the current generation, that this young mother can give her child something that she never had.” Unfortunately, teen pregnancy prevention rhetoric, which often perpetuates the negative socially constructed image of teenage mothers, frequently focuses on the economic costs that teen pregnancy is reported to have. Not enough research has been devoted to the individual experiences of teen mothers, in particular teen mothers who go to college. This dissertation will use a transformative transcendental phenomenological approach to examine the experiences of teenaged mothers who go to college in the rural Southeastern United States, It will attempt to answer the question, “What does it mean to be a teen mother who goes to college in a rural setting?” The author will identify themes that emerged from phenomenological interviews in which teen mothers who went on to two and four-year colleges share their experiences.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the following people:

• To my husband, Brian Rogers, whose patience and understanding while I was completing this work was invaluable;

• To my daughter, Anna Rogers, whose belief in me was (and has always been) one of my greatest sources of motivation;

• To my son, Matthew Rogers, who stayed awake with me on many long writing nights, just to talk to me from time to time and keep me going when I wasn’t sure I would be able to, who made me laugh sometimes, just to relieve the stress;

• To my mom, Brenda Wilson, and to my mother-in-law, Sue Rogers, who babysat for me while I was getting my undergraduate degree;

• To my dad, Harvey Wilson, who taught me what dedication, personal sacrifice, and hard work mean for the people that one loves;

• To my father-in-law, Charles Rogers, who spent a lot of time keeping my old cars running throughout this long process;

• To Eloise Struther Wyly, whose generous last will and testament made it possible for me to go to college;

• And to the memory of my great-grandmother, “Mama Miller,” whose blood flows in my veins, giving me strength.
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I would like to extend my gratitude to the following individuals, whose guidance and feedback made this dissertation possible. These individuals have made the memories my experiences as a graduate student at Clemson University something that I will always treasure.

First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Suzanne Rosenblith, who spent countless hours reading and commenting on the various drafts of this dissertation, pointing me to new sources that would strengthen my arguments, and giving me encouragement when the tasks at hand seemed insurmountable. I hope that I one day have the opportunity to be the kind of mentor that she has been – allowing me to explore my unique vision for what this dissertation might look like while keeping me grounded enough in tradition to create something that will hopefully effect change.

I would also like to thank my other committee members – Dr. Brent Igo, whose qualitative research class first inspired me to do this work and whose expertise in the method of phenomenology was absolutely essential throughout this entire process; Dr. Megan Che, whose constructive feedback helped me deepen and strengthen my critical analyses and whose insistence that I strive for better understandings of the theoretical underpinnings of my work has helped me become a much better researcher and writer; Dr. Bob Green, whose classes on the history of education inspired me to look at the historical social construction of the teen mother and whose encouragement and supportive nature were always more appreciated than he likely ever realized; and Dr.
Michelle Martin, my outside reader who is the model for the kind of professor I would someday like to be, who has inspired me both in the classroom and as a researcher.

Even though they were not on my committee a number of other individuals were instrumental parts of the completion of this work. I would like to thank my Master’s project chair, Dr. Sean Williams, who met with me for coffee a few times during this process and inspired me to merge all that I have studied; without his encouragement, I am not sure the critical feminist Burkean lens used in this dissertation would exist in the way that it now does. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Rachelle Washington, who read my dissertation and gave me extensive feedback, even though she is not on my committee. I would also like to thank Dr. David Reinking and Dr. Donald Leu, who have been role models for me in the field of educational research.

Finally, I would like to thank my good friends, Dr. Jacqueline Malloy and Dr. Katherine Robbins. Both gave me wonderful advice about how to navigate through this stressful but rewarding experience and helped me remember there is indeed a light at the end of the tunnel – and it’s not always a train.
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“Waiting for the one – the day that never comes / When you stand up to feel the warmth / But the sunshine never comes…” Metallica, “The Day That Never Comes”

CHAPTER 1: THE DAY THAT NEVER COMES

It is 2001, almost Valentine’s Day. I am in the middle of my second semester of graduate school, sitting on the cold asphalt tile floor outside a professor’s office. She is already late, and even though the purpose of our meeting is to discuss a draft of a research proposal I am writing as an assignment for her class, I am eager to talk with her about a research project she described to us one day in class. She and a small group of graduate students in my master’s program are working on a project seeking to get more families with children who qualify for food stamps to actually apply for them. She is trying to help the many eligible families who do not get the assistance they need.

It is forty-five minutes passed my scheduled meeting time with this professor, and I decide she must not be coming. Perhaps she has forgotten. Too excited to wait to talk with her about her research and how I would like to volunteer to help, I decide to draft a note to her to explain.

When I begin writing, my story spills eagerly onto the paper… I got pregnant when I was almost eighteen. I had a full scholarship to Clemson University; so paying for my college education was not a problem. However, I did not have the financial means to buy food or housing. So, my boyfriend and I got married, moved into a government apartment, and applied for various forms of government help, food stamps included. I know that my professor does not have any assistantships to offer me. I am willing to help her with this project for free. I know this audience, and I know why they
do not apply for food stamps. I know why they might not take the pamphlets the
graduate students are trying to distribute in the areas where these needy families live.

“It is about respect and trust,” I think to myself, but I do not write that on my
note. I want to tell her about that in person…

It is a week later, and I have received an email from the professor’s secretary
explaining that she was sick and could not attend our meeting the previous week. I am
waiting on the same cold floor now, and it is already around fifteen minutes after our
rescheduled meeting was supposed to begin.

Finally, my professor arrives, arms full of books, looking flustered. She offers no
apology for being late today or for missing our meeting last week. Nonetheless, I sit
down in the chair across from her desk, optimistic that our conversation will go well. Her
work is important. I want to help.

“Your attachment did not open,” she says coldly. “Your proposal draft is now
over a week late.”

“I’m sorry,” I stammer, taken aback by her tone. “If I had known it didn’t open, I
would have brought a hard copy with me today. I didn’t know it was late.” At that time,
my family had just gotten its first computer. I did yet not know about Microsoft Works
files not opening in Microsoft Word. My technological literacy was still limited at that
point because my income had not yet afforded me the chance to learn about which
computer programs can read which file extensions. As with so many other forms of
literacy that I would realize I would need to function in the world of people with power, I
would later dedicate myself to developing my technological literacy beyond that of most people in the academy, so that no one could ever question my abilities there again.

“You should have brought a hard copy to this meeting anyway. Smart students are always prepared. Of course, I cannot give you credit for the draft now,” my professor continues to admonish me.

“I understand,” I lie, not understanding at all. If I had known the attachment did not open, I would have brought a hard copy to her office the previous week. I was at the original meeting, on time, thinking my attachment had gotten to her earlier so that she would have already had time to read it.

“I cannot offer you any feedback on your project since you failed to give me a draft,” she continues.

“Okay,” I offer meekly. I am not sure what to say now. I decide the draft is a lost cause and try to bring up the food stamps research. “Did you read the note that I left for you?”

“Yes, yes I did,” she smirks, pulling my note from her desk. “I don’t think you need to worry about my research.”

“Well, you see,” I offer, “I have experience in that area. You don’t have to pay me; I’m willing to help for free.”

She laughs sarcastically. “Yes, you DO have experience in that area. But what you need to be asking yourself right now is whether or not you belong in this program or even in graduate school for that matter! If you can’t submit a simple draft on time, you don’t have time to help me with my research! I don’t see how you are even going to
make it out of my class, much less this program!” And then she adds, emphatically, “You really need to ask yourself *if you actually belong here.*”

I am stunned beyond words, so I just sit there, motionless, while she stares at me. How could an email attachment not opening indicate I am not able to handle graduate school? My eyes fill with tears, but I am determined not to let her see them. I look down to avoid her glare, seeing my note on her desk. The words “pregnant” and “food stamps” jump out at me. A realization begins to form in my mind, one that has been on the verge of forming for many, many years.

It is a small program, this master’s program in which I am enrolled. She should be aware that this is my second semester. She should be aware that I took four 800-level seminars the previous semester, doing extremely well in all of them. She should be able to infer after reading my note that I am not a quitter and words like hers will not dissuade me at all.

This is not the first time that I have heard words like these…

“You got a Wyly Scholarship? Oh, I guess you thought you were smart, huh?” I can still hear the Medicaid worker, who had graduated from my high school. “Well, I guess that’s one scholarship down the drain.”

“We can’t take your Wyly away because of the wording of Ms. Wyly’s will,” said my high school principal and chair of my scholarship committee, while my mom cradled my newborn daughter out in the hall of the high school where I had graduated with high honors. Even though I had already graduated and was in college, he still had some control over my life as the chair of the scholarship committee. “If it were up to me, we
would take it away immediately! I don’t know how you made these grades with *all you did* this semester. But I guarantee you things will change now that you have to stay up all night taking care of a baby. When your grades slip, your scholarship is gone!"

I know these words. These words my professor is saying to me are not at all new.

I get up to leave this professor’s office and see the same look on her face that I saw from one of my high school English teachers when I ran into her in town, my belly swollen full as my daughter’s birth drew near.

**I am no longer a person to her.**

I walk out without saying goodbye, deciding immediately that I will not write the proposal I had originally drafted for her class. I will write a proposal investigating some corporate topic about which I have no passion, the same kind of topic that everyone else in the class will use. I will pass, and she will not stop me. But I will not give her any writing that has my passion in it.

As I walk to my car, I hear her words again and again as the angry, shocked tears flow freely down my cheeks. Ask myself if I belong in graduate school? Why? Why would I not belong in graduate school? I continue to review all those other words, words like hers.

“Listen, you really will be wasting your time if you sign up for those classes at Clemson,” echo the words of the health department doctor during a prenatal visit when I was pregnant with my second child, during my senior year of college. “There’s no way you can manage all this. You *should have been more careful*, and you might have still graduated from college. But it’s too late now.” He would not listen as I told him this
was my second pregnancy, and I had already gone to Clemson during my freshmen year while pregnant the first time. I already knew how to manage being pregnant and going to school.

I remember how I got a new doctor then – a regular, non-health department doctor who would accept Medicaid. But his wife/office manager was not happy about me being a patient at her office. “We get pennies on the dollar for taking care of you!” she scolded me as we sat in the waiting room, while she filled out my paperwork for me, apparently assuming I would not be literate enough to do it myself. “I want you to understand that if you miss an appointment without giving us 24 hours notice, you WILL pay the full cost of the appointment. If you don’t, we’ll take you to court!”

I remember how the other women in the waiting room, women older and more secure, stared disapprovingly at me, and how guilty I felt for having the audacity to expect a regular doctor to take care of me when I was poor. I knew then that I would not tell my new doctor I was in college. I would just go to the appointments and stay healthy, and I would keep my education a secret until it was too late for him or his wife to try to discourage me from finishing.

All these years later, I, the graduate student, am almost to my car now, and I suddenly stop. Something new dawns on me, as I revisit all these terrible memories. I had actually believed back then that once I got a college degree, the scarlet letter would be removed from my chest, that I would be a whole person in other people’s eyes again, that I would have proven I was more than a statistic.
I pause to touch the letter on my chest, hearing my professor’s words, feeling how they have opened all these old wounds that never really healed anyway, and it suddenly hits me – *the teen mother stigma will always be with me.*

**********

It is now 2010, and I have journeyed much further along the educational path that I had re-started in 2001. This dissertation will complete my Ph.D., thus proving my master’s degree professor, my high school principal, my social workers, the graduate school professor who accused me of being unworthy of graduate school, and many other doubtful people along the way wrong. However, while at the moment I just described, proving my own worth might have been a goal, it is certainly not the goal of this dissertation. I accepted long ago that my worth comes from my own opinion of myself, and even if I never see the day in which some people can look past the fact that I became pregnant at seventeen, I can be content with who I am and what I have accomplished regardless of anyone else’s opinion of me.

As I fought my way out of the class that this professor had decided I could not handle, ironically, at the same time that she learned about my past, my thoughts drifted to something I had read in one of the four 800-level seminars I had taken the previous semester. The professor who had accused me of being unworthy of being in graduate school after finding out that I had been a teenaged mother did not know that I had read Paolo Freire, but she nonetheless pushed me over the edge into the *prise de conscience* that has shaped my life ever since.
This dissertation will explore experiences of other teen mothers who go to college in the rural Southeast, experiences that may bear some similarities to the experiences I just described. I have come to the conclusion that there is no topic I would wish to research more than these women’s lives and their educational experiences; I would like to uncover the stories of these women, women who have been, for the most part, ignored by the media and society. I will argue in this dissertation that the socially constructed image of teen mothers in the United States has impacted our educational opportunities, that it creates a situation for us in which people who should be there to help us meet our personal and educational goals actually discourage us from breaking the stereotypical limits of who we can become.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paolo Freire argued that dehumanization is one of the “central” problems that humans face (1970, p. 43). In this dissertation, I will argue that teen mothers are a dehumanized group in our society as a result of the negative stigma that has been assigned to us. Freire asserted, “as an individual perceives the extent of dehumanization, he or she may ask if humanization is a viable possibility” (p. 43). I believe that, through my experiences as a teen mother and through my subsequent and often clashing acculturation to the world of academia, I have realized how dehumanized I was at various points in my quest for education. I am aware of the dehumanization of other teen mothers around me as I witness how other people talk about them and how they treat them. I can attest to the fact that understanding dehumanization does, as Freire argued, lead to a search for humanization.
Freire wrote that, if the oppressed are to be liberated, then they “must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation in which they can transform” (p. 49). I write this dissertation to help my fellow teen mothers SEE the oppression and the dehumanization that keeps so many of our children and us in a cycle of poverty that seems impossible to break. My participants, women who were teen mothers who went on to college in rural areas, will know better than anyone else what transformation means for a teen mother; it is these mothers who have defied society’s expectations by pursuing an education. A study of their experiences can help us understand what it means to transform within the confines of the socially constructed boundaries of teen motherhood.

I write this dissertation for my fellow teen mothers because, like Freire, I believe that as a group, teen mothers are the only ones who can effectively fight for their own humanization and freedom from oppression. Freire stated

Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? Who suffers the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation? They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it. (p. 45)

Freire argued that the members of an oppressed group must join together to work towards liberation. He wrote “in order for the oppressed to unite, they must first cut the umbilical cord of magic and myth which binds them to the world of oppression” (p. 175).
I believe that the social construction of the teen mother is a myth that paints her in a variety of negative lights – a welfare queen, a fallen woman, a victim who must be rehabilitated, but overall, a myth that argues she will fail as a mother and as a person. It is a myth that argues she will, most unforgivably, prove a serious economic burden to her society. Minority mothers especially are constructed as economic burdens who have baby after baby to avoid having to go to work. While teen mothers often accept this myth, others in society with power over those mothers – teachers, principals, doctors, social workers, and even college professors – work, whether consciously or unconsciously, to ensure that the teen mother will accept the myth by reminding her of it at every available opportunity.

The experience of teenage motherhood gave me an acute sense of the dehumanization of other teen mothers, even before I had the academic words to name what I was witnessing. When I think about instances in which I was aware of the stigmatization of other teen mothers, I recall the art teacher who cornered me in the teacher’s lounge a few years after I had gotten my bachelor’s degree and was working as a French teacher in a public high school in a rural school in the Southeast. He was unhappy with me for giving a baby shower for a student who had maintained perfect attendance throughout her entire pregnancy. “You are encouraging her!” he shouted at me.

“Of course,” I replied, honestly believing that any teacher would want to encourage any student to stay in school. At that point in my life, my idealistic view of teachers had not completely meshed with the reality I was experiencing. While I heard
teachers make negative comments about some students, particularly low socioeconomic students, in the teachers’ lounge, I still wanted to believe that teachers were too honorable to feel negatively based on a sweeping generalization about certain groups of people.

“You are encouraging what she did! You are encouraging the rest of these kids to have sex too!” The art teacher’s anger was so strong that he shook as he yelled at me. I could not believe he was so mad at me for giving my student a baby shower. I could not make sense of it, or perhaps I was not yet willing to make sense of it because the truth of why he was making these statements was still too ugly for me to accept at that time.

The most ironic part of this encounter in the teachers’ lounge was that my colleague had no idea he was actually talking to a former teen mom, as he spoke so negatively about my pregnant student, implying that her pregnancy was as contagious as influenza.

The other teachers in the lounge said nothing. None of my pregnant student’s teachers had come to the shower I had thrown for her in my classroom. Several other students, including one male, had attended and brought with them diapers, blankets, bottles, and pacifiers. Yet, the teachers who should have championed this student who had maintained her grades and had perfect attendance despite the challenges she was facing were markedly absent from my public display of support for her.

“They don’t want me here,” my pregnant student had told me. Until the encounter with the art teacher, I had not been willing to consider the reasons why no one else but me seemed to have any positive words for the pregnant girls in our school. I had not wanted to face the reality that teachers, my own colleagues who had welcomed me so
warmly when I was first hired at the school, could simply assume that all teen mothers were bad and that they did not belong in school.

I write this dissertation for that student and for the many other women I have known who were alienated in our country’s educational system, treated like they were no longer human because they became mothers at a time deemed too young by our society. Freire argued that oppressed groups are routinely dehumanized, contributing to their powerlessness. Until I read Freire in my master’s program, I did not have a name for the way I had been treated by teachers, social workers, doctors, nurses, office managers, my principal, or any of the other people whom I looked to for encouragement as I pursued my lifelong goal of being the first person in my family to go to college. I had been angered and even motivated to succeed by their doubts and their active discouragement when I mentioned that I would not stop my pursuit of my bachelor’s degree. Yet, for some reason, I had assumed that I was alone in this situation. I had believed there was some unique quality about me that made people think I was not worthy of getting a college degree. After all, long before I became a teen mother, I knew what it meant to test into the honors track at school while living in a trailer and pronouncing words differently than the other students in my honors reading group. I can remember very distinctly in Kindergarten practicing in front of the mirror, teaching myself to pronounce words like “Daddy” and “string” in a new way, the way I would say those words at school, the way I needed to say them if I did not want people to laugh at me for being “white trash.”
I believed it was some trait that only I had, some inadequacy that I had inherited, some deficiency in myself that I had not yet discovered, that I had not yet known to correct. It had never occurred to me that socioeconomic status in general, not just my own socioeconomic status, could be a reason why I was treated the way that I was as a child. When this type of treatment was exacerbated by the fact that I was a teen mother, it seemed natural to me, almost as if I deserved it.

While I was unquestionably aware of the way that the receptionists and social workers treated the other girls in the waiting rooms at the health department or the social services office, I always attributed it to a prejudice against the poor or against minorities. Of course, our treatment was undeniably a prejudice related to our socioeconomic status, but it never occurred to me the patronizing or condescending ways in which we were treated might persist, even if we did a good job of raising our children and even if we worked hard enough to no longer need government assistance.

Until I was accused of not being worthy for graduate school by a professor who had just learned I had been a teen mother who was on food stamps for four years, AFTER I had read Paolo Freire, I did not put all the scenarios involving teen mothers I had witnessed side-by-side in my mind. It was the first time I had really connected the dots to see the distinct pattern of treatment of teen mothers.

As I left my professor’s office, my *prise de conscience*, that moment at which I knew without a doubt I did not deserve how I had been treated, I also realized that I was not alone. Other women were going through the same challenges I was facing then. Other women might still believe like I had believed up to that point – that if I only
worked hard enough, I might eventually win the respect of people like my professor or my health department doctor. They might feel as isolated as I had always felt in this rural setting, where the visibility of teen mothers in school is not as pronounced as it might be in an urban setting.

As I drove away from the parking lot that afternoon, knowing that it was a stigma I had fought all these years, not some personal fault that I could make up for with enough hard work and accomplishments, I began to realize the responsibility I had to other teen mothers who had not had the opportunity to read Freire. Freire had given me the words to name our treatment – dehumanization. As my graduate career continued, the works of other scholars, such as Michel Foucault, Henry Giroux, and Kenneth Burke, would equip me with more tools for understanding the treatment of teen mothers in the United States. The more I read, the more I knew I would spend my academic research career fighting the dehumanization of teen mothers. This dissertation is only the beginning of that fight.

Chapter Two of this dissertation will examine the social construction of the teenage mother in the United States, dating back to the Puritans’ arrival in North America. This negative image, generally accepted as truth by most Americans, portrays the teen mother as a leech, feeding off taxpayers, producing more children who will grow up to do the same. Rarely does the American public see an example of a successful teen mother who defies the dismal statistics by finishing high school, going to college, and taking good care of her child all the while. Even more uncommon in the American spotlight is the rural teen mother, too often neglected by statistical studies done in urban settings because of the larger samples that can only be found in large, city schools. The
heart of this study is to examine that rural teen mother who goes to college – the one who is so rarely presented by the American media, but who does exist in rural settings throughout this country. Specifically, this dissertation will examine what it means to be a teenage mother who goes to college in the rural Southeast. This phenomenological study will rest on a critical theory foundation and will have the goal of using the experiences of successful teen mothers as a means of showing all teen mothers fighting to stay in school that teen motherhood, while a “limiting situation,” is a situation in which the liberating transformation that Freire described can indeed occur (p. 49). I believe that the results of this transformative phenomenology can be used to “cut the umbilical cord” (p. 175) of the myth that we, as teen mothers, are destined to be unsuccessful people and permanent tax burdens to the citizens of the United States. I believe that uniting my own voice with the voices of these teen mothers who have gone to college is a crucial step for me as I begin my work aimed at the liberation of teen mothers from their negative social stigma. Specifically, studying the experiences of rural teen mothers is important because the intersection of our experiences and our geography is a place that has not yet been visited by researchers studying the phenomenon of teen motherhood.

Freire argued that in order for me to be successful in this endeavor, in order for me to achieve this “indispensable unity” with my fellow teen mothers who have gone to college, the “revolutionary process must be, from the beginning, cultural action”; he wrote that “the methods used to achieve the unity of the oppressed will depend on the latter’s historical and existential experiences within the social structure” (p. 175). Therefore, I shall now attempt in Chapter Two to elaborate on exactly that – the historical
stigmatization of the teen mother in the United States educational system, through the lenses of critical theory, rhetorical analysis, feminist theory, and Critical Race Theory.

Above all else, this dissertation is my attempt to shed light on the experiences of teen mothers who appear to want the best for their children and who believe that a good education is the best strategy by which they can give their children a good life. This dissertation is my attempt to dispel the myths surrounding this much-debated teen mother, so often thrown in the spotlight when it is politically advantageous for the dominant group’s social agenda. This dissertation is my attempt to give the rural teen mother a voice, to make her an agent in her own destiny.

Theoretical Lenses

The need for an examination of the experiences of teen mothers who go to college can be examined through a variety of perspectives. Clearly, the aforementioned discussion on Freire and Foucault shows that this work begs for a critical lens. However, it has been a challenge to determine exactly what type of critical lens should be used, particularly when my own experiences as a teen mother are a driving force behind this work. After a great deal of reading and an exploration of variety of theoretical lenses, I came to the conclusion that I could develop a special lens to use in this work by combining the four lenses of critical and CRITICAL RACE theory; feminist theory; and rhetorical theory.
“A Feminist Critical Burkian Lens”

As a lecturer of English and student of rhetorical theory, I am most fascinated by the words that are used by teen mothers to talk about their experiences, as well as the words that are used by others to talk about them. Therefore, as this type of analysis comes naturally to me, it made sense to use rhetorical theory as the main theoretical lens through which I should explore this research. The rhetorical lens that I will use to examine the intersection of teen motherhood and education comes from the work of rhetorician Kenneth Burke. However, because his work was primarily done before the 1970s and additional, more recent theoretical lenses can provide deeper insights into the rhetorical analysis of teenager motherhood in the United State, I will enhance what is revealed by the Burkian lens by filtering Burke’s theories through the additional lenses of feminist theory, critical theory, and CRITICAL RACE THEORY. I will call this modified Burkian lens a “feminist critical Burkian lens.”

Burkean Theory

According to rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1950), rhetoric can be defined as "the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or induce actions in other human agents" and “the most characteristic concern of rhetoric [is] the manipulation of men's beliefs for political ends.... the basic function of rhetoric [is] the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents” (p. 49). He went on to explain how words are used in the process of identification, which he argued, is an essential part of people’s rhetoric of motives. He argued that when humans share points of view about various components of society, such as groups of people, it helps human beings achieve
consubstantiality with other people. In other words, we can accept the attitudes and opinions of other people to achieve consubstantiality, helping us to feel as though we belong to some specific group in society (p. 21). He argued that identification can help various groups create a common identity, often through uniting against some common foe (2001). Teen mothers have been identified as a “foe” since the 1960s, when teen motherhood was identified as a deviant behavior that threatened the American people through increased taxes and a host of other social ills (Pillow, 2004), and this social construction of the teen mother will be discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Throughout history, one word that seems to especially invoke the idea of consubstantiality is the word “normal.” In other words, at various points in time, the idea of what is “normal” has helped groups of people identify whom they feel “belongs” to the group and who does not. According to Michel Foucault (1978; 1972), in order for a society to identify what is “normal,” it is necessary that they also identify what is “abnormal.” In essence, “normal” cannot exist without “abnormal.”

Another important rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke’s that warrants exploration in this study is his theory of terministic screens. According to Burke, “Men [sic] seek for vocabularies that are reflections of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are selections of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a deflection of reality” (2001, p. 1343). In other words, if we accept Burke’s assertion that rhetoric is most frequently used for political aims, then a selection of vocabularies that identify a particular item within a society are also a reflection of an individual’s attitude toward that item; and when that individual makes a selection of
words based on his or her individual thoughts on this item, he or she is deflecting attention away from other aspects that an observer might study in relation to the item. An excellent example might be the way that a television channel with a heavy bias toward the right or the left might discuss controversial issues in the public eye. When the ultra conservative Fox News analyst Bill O’Reilly discussed the pregnancy of pop star teen Jamie Lynn Spears, he argued, “Here the blame falls primarily on the parents of the girl” (MSNBC News). By beginning his discussion on the issue with a focus on who is to blame, O’Reilly immediately sheds light on his own attitude towards teen motherhood – that it is always a mistake for which someone needs to be blamed. His selection of words deflects attention away from other ideas that might be discussed – are Jamie Lynn and her baby healthy? Is Jamie Lynn happy about her impending motherhood? Will she finish her education? How will her pregnancy impact her career?

Meanwhile, when O’Reilly’s fellow conservative Sarah Palin announced the pregnancy of her teenage daughter Bristol, he made no mention of blame. Instead, O’Reilly argued that as long as taxpayers would not have to foot the bill for Bristol’s pregnancy, it was a “family issue” and the Palins should be left alone (MSNBC News). He might have easily made the same argument for the Spears family, which is most likely in just as good a financial situation as the Palin family. However, O’Reilly’s goal in his selection of language in this case was clearly based on his own conservative political agenda. By talking about privacy for the Palins, he avoided the discussion of parental blame that was his focus as he announced the Spears pregnancy. While the sheer incongruence that is evident in how O’Reilly handled the reporting of these two similar
situations cannot be denied, Burke would argue that this is a hypocrisy that we should expect due to O’Reilly’s strong conservative beliefs. He sees the two pregnancies through different terministic screens, which means that the way that he discusses them will certainly be different.

A third theory of Kenneth Burke’s that can offer valuable insight into the study of teen motherhood comes from another work, *On Symbols and Motives* (1989), in which Burke explores the relationship between language and the motives that guide a person’s actions. Burke believed that an analysis of motivation is an important part of a rhetorical analysis, and that discourses always exist within the rhetorical context of a dramatic scene that includes an act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. When discussing the importance of understanding this dramatic interpretation of the rhetorical context of a communication, Burke stated that "If action, then drama; if drama, then conflict; if conflict, then victimage” (1989, p. 280). In many ways, this is merely a rhetorician’s step-by-step model for examining what critical theorists, such as Foucault and Giroux, have discussed in terms of hegemonic theory, but Burke’s theory argues that language itself is an integral part of this hegemony, as well as a reflection of the motives that might cause individuals to act in ways that victimize certain groups of people; Burke simply gave us a method for looking specifically at discourse to understand motives. His dramatisic pentad, often referred to as dramatism (1968), is a critical technique in which one may ask five questions when analyzing a discourse in the attempt to understand the motivation of a speaker/writer. According to this theory, these questions center around the following dramatic concepts, which are:
1. **Act:** What is the action that occurred?

2. **Scene:** Where does the act take place?

3. **Agent:** Who is performing the action?

4. **Agency:** How does the agent act as he/she performs the action?

5. **Purpose:** Why is the agent acting this way? What is it that the agent wants to accomplish by doing this action? (p. 445-446)

The aforementioned Bill O’Reilly segments on teen motherhood are a good example of a dramatic situation that can be analyzed using Burke’s dramatism. The two acts involved can both be described as speaking publicly about two different families who are dealing with teen pregnancy. The scene is an extremely popular Fox News television show, a show that typically has an audience of staunch conservatives. The agent is Bill O’Reilly, an extremely conservative, right wing spokesperson, who often claims to be “fair and balanced” in his reporting. Agency is a particularly important issue in this analysis because the way that O’Reilly acted changed greatly from one scene to the next. In his discussion on the Jamie Lynn Spears pregnancy, O’Reilly was smug and condescending. His discourse was like that of a judge. He focused on where the blame should fall and decreed that blame for this teenage pregnancy certainly falls on the shoulders of the parents of Jamie Lynn Spears. However, his agency was much different when he reported on the Bristol Palin pregnancy. O’Reilly’s tone was no longer judgmental; in fact, he became quite sympathetic to the Palins, arguing that Bristol’s pregnancy was a personal issue and that the family had a right to its privacy. Finally, when we look at purpose, or why Mr. O’Reilly was behaving this way, his political agenda is obvious.
Teenage pregnancy itself takes a back seat to his goal of seeing Sarah Palin as Vice President. Even though he had no problem attacking the Spears family for Jamie Lynn’s pregnancy, because leveling a “fair and balanced” attack of the same nature on the Palin family would conflict with his political agenda, O’Reilly’s agency changes dramatically. This is only one example of how politics drive the public discussion of teen motherhood in the United States.

Teen pregnancy has been a highly politicized issue since the 1960s, and the language used by various political leaders has driven the social construction of the teen mother as a detriment to society (Pillow, 2004; Luker, 1996). Clearly, the use of Burke’s theories on how language can be used to contribute to this social construction is an important lens to use when examining the issue of teen motherhood. However, it is important to note Burke’s language in some of the aforementioned quotes and how his language reflects his own ideologies (an idea with which he would certainly not argue); when Burke describes various speakers, he uses the word “men.” This is most likely a reflection of the decade in which his work was published. In the 1970s, it was still acceptable to use the masculine form of words to refer to both men and women, even though it was a practice that clearly privileged men. According to Burke’s own theory of terministic screens, his selection of the word “men” reflected his own way of thinking – that men were the primary actors in the scenes he was describing.
Feminist scholars have argued that women\(^1\) simply view the world in ways that are simply different from how men view the world. For this reason, it is necessary to fine tune Burke’s theories by the additional lens of feminist theory.

**Feminist Theory**

Postmodern standpoint theory emerged from Marxist ideas and espouses the idea that human beings view the world from specific “standpoints,” and that these standpoints impact the ways that they socially construct the world around them. Moreover, people’s social status, ability, size, race, ethnicity, and social class impact their standpoint and, thus, their views of the world. More specifically, people without power in society see the world differently from those in the dominant class, who have power over the powerless without truly understanding and often without even considering their standpoints. Those without power often see the world in a much broader way than those with power because of the different ways in which they experience the world. A funnel can be used as a metaphor to describe how various people see the world. The most powerful view the world through the narrowest part of the tunnel, while the disempowered see the world through the largest part of the opening. This means the disempowered often see and understand things about how the world works that the powerful cannot see, much less understand; however, those in power do not need to

\(^1\) It should be noted that the term “women” is a broad term that encompasses people from a variety of backgrounds. Therefore, individuals within that large group view the world from very different perspectives, perspectives that differ from woman to woman.
examine the perspectives of the powerless to continue having power, despite the fact that understanding the standpoints of the disempowered might benefit society as a whole – including the privileged.

For example, if South Carolina’s Lieutenant Governor, Andre Bauer, could look through the largest part of the funnel at the reasons why people need welfare, he might understand why it is so difficult for a person to get off of public assistance. Bauer stated

My grandmother was not a highly educated woman, but she told me as a small child to quit feeding stray animals. You know why? Because they breed. You're facilitating the problem if you give an animal or a person ample food supply. They will reproduce, especially ones that don't think too much further than that. And so what you've got to do is you've got to curtail that type of behavior. They don't know any better. (Cary, 2010)

His comments likening the poor in South Carolina to stray animals who will only reproduce if fed were clearly driven by his myopic perspective on welfare. Could he look through the broader part of the funnel of perspective, he might actually think of productive strategies that could benefit the poor while saving tax dollars for the privileged. Unfortunately, the standpoints of those who have power within a society are deemed more valid than the standpoints of those people from marginalized groups (Mcann and Kim, 2003), so Bauer will likely never have to truly rethink his comments when the privileged, who have never likely even known a person on welfare, are looking through the same narrow-minded funnel at the problem.
Feminist standpoint theory suggests that standpoint is not “gender neutral [...]” because experience is gender specific” (On, B. 1993, p. 83), and women’s standpoints have been traditionally ignored by our society, or even subjected to the male standpoint because “the world as it is constituted by men stands in authority of that of woman” (Smith, D., 1987, p. 86). Therefore, we need research conducted specifically by women because they have been marginalized long enough to better see the oppressions within our society (Harding, 1991; Harstock, N., 1983, 1996, 1999; Smith, D., 1999). The section on the social construction of the teen mother in the United States, as well as the discussion of research on teen motherhood, shows that not only are teen mothers a marginalized group that exists in American culture, but that most research on them fails to recognize that many women, especially poor women, are essentially embedded in a culture of marginalization.

If we want to understand the challenges present in teen mothers’ efforts to pursue their educations beyond the high school diploma, then researchers such as Harding (1991), Harstock (1983, 1996), and Collins (1990) would argue that the best place to begin is by examining the phenomenon from the standpoint of these women. Some might argue that this approach might not present the whole picture because it privileges the perspective of teen mothers who cannot possibly be objective about the matter. In “Rethinking Feminist Epistemology: What Is ‘Strong Objectivity?’” (1993), Harding responds to two criticisms of feminist standpoint theory:

First, what are the causes of the immense proliferation of theoretical and empirically sound results of research […] that have
discovered what is not supposed to exist: rampant sexist and androcentric bias [...] Second, how can feminists create research that is for women in the sense that it provides less partial and distorted answers to questions that arise from women’s lives and are not only about those lives but also about the rest of nature and social relations. (p. 50)

Furthermore, she recognizes that in order to accept feminist standpoint research as valid, one must also accept that “socially situated knowledge” (p. 50) can exist. Critics of the theory try to argue that “real” knowledge cannot be socially situated and believe that knowledge is actually a set of assimilated experiences. However, Harding argued that feminists have provided a “logic” for how to conduct feminist standpoint research. She posited that researchers such as Dorothy Smith and Nancy Hartstock have shown us that we must begin our focus with the lives of marginalized groups and view what we might otherwise view as normal life as “problematic” (p. 50). By using qualitative research that begins with the standpoints of marginalized women, researchers can “generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives but also men’s lives and of the whole social order” because women are a marginalized group who “know what the marginalized can know,” which goes beyond simply provided information “for the use dominant groups in their projects of administering and managing the lives of marginalized people” (p. 56). It is important for this work to be done with the specific subset of teen mothers because teen motherhood is such a highly politicized phenomenon in which the women involved are often painted in a negative light. Many of the non-feminist studies on teen
motherhood that will be discussed later in this chapter can be described as ascribing to that goal – to help people in the dominant culture learn to manage and control teenaged mothers. Feminist standpoint theory is a theoretical lens that can allow researchers to look at the intersection of teenage motherhood and postsecondary education from the perspective of teen mothers who have actually gone to college and who have the socially situated knowledge that can help empower other teen mothers to manage their own lives and potentially be liberated from the control of the dominant culture. Harding argues that women must be “directors of their own agendas” (p. 67), and it is logical to believe that teen mothers who have gone to college would understand the idea of taking control of their own lives.

Critics of feminist standpoint theory argue that it is problematic because it makes the assumption that women in general can be grouped together into one standpoint. However, this is problematic because there are so many different sub-groups within the entire group of women. Black feminists, for example, argue that wave feminist theories often overlook the black feminist experience (Springer, 2000).

When it comes to the issue of studying teen motherhood using feminist standpoint theory, it is important to understand the complexities of the sub-groups that make up the entire group of teen mothers. For example, within the entire group of teen mothers exist teen mothers of various races. The age at which a teen mother becomes pregnant and gives birth is clearly a determining factor what she might experience as a teen mother. There are Black, White, Latina, Asian, Pacific Island, Native American, and other racial groups within the entire group of teen mothers. In many cases, teen mothers are multi-
racial, and each combination of races would yield its own subgroup within the entire group of teen mothers. There are heterosexual teen mothers, homosexual teen mothers, and bisexual teen mothers. There are teen mothers who live in rural areas and teen mothers who live in urban areas. There are teen mothers with different religious backgrounds. And finally, teen mothers come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. All of these factors contribute to a woman’s identity within the larger subgroup of teen mothers and the entire group of women. Clearly, the experiences of a Black, middle class, Southern Baptist teen mother in Wadley, Georgia would be vastly different from the experiences of a White, Catholic, lower middle class teen mother from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Standpoint theory recognizes the multiple standpoints within a group, such as the entire group of teen mothers, and this makes it a necessary lens to use in this work. However, there are other theoretical lenses that are especially useful when attempting to study these various standpoints. While standpoint theory itself merely recognizes that these varying standpoints exist, CRITICAL RACE THEORY and Critical Theory can help us understand the complexities of some of these standpoints.

**Critical Theory**

Critical theory is a philosophical movement that grew out of the Marxist theory regarding the hegemonic control of disempowered groups of people in society. While it is used in a variety of disciplines, it is especially applicable in the social sciences because it can be used to understand complex relationships between various groups of people in society. The idea that teen mothers are a marginalized group that are controlled by a more dominant group in society can also be examined through the lens of critical theory. As
will be discussed in the section of this chapter dealing with the social construction of the
teen mother, teen mothers are often portrayed as a delinquent group in our society. In
*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1970), Michel Foucault writes about the
identification of delinquents in society, or, in other words, those who deviate from the
accepted norm. He posited that the concept of delinquency could be applied to groups of
people other than criminals. He wrote that

> It is possible to divert this self-absorbed delinquency to forms of illegality
> that are less dangerous: maintained on the pressure of controls on the
> fringes of society, reduced to precarious conditions of existence, lacking
> links with the population that would be able to sustain it [...] delinquents
> inevitably fell back on a localized criminality, limited in its power to
> attack popular support, politically harmless and economically negligible.
> (p. 178)

In other words, Foucault believed that, like criminals, some groups in society may be
identified as “delinquent” and thus treated in the same way that criminals might be
treated. He argued that it is advantageous to the powerful people within a society to
identify those who step outside what is defined as “normal” and to name them as
delinquents because this enables society to “supervise” these people, people such as “the
unemployed, beggars, ‘bad characters’ of all kinds, which sometimes reach such
proportions [...] as to form formidable forces” (p. 178). It is in the best interest of those
in power to supervise these “delinquents” because if they do increase in number, they
might challenge the current distribution of power within society.
According to Henry Giroux, this hegemonic identification of specific groups in society as “delinquent” is likely perpetuated and legitimized as knowledge in the school setting (1981, p. 38). Critical theorists like Giroux have argued that schools themselves, which are both the settings in which teen mothers are frequently studied as well as one of the settings in which they can succeed or fail, are one context in which the social construction of the teen mother is created.

While the “Social Construction of the Teen Mother” section in Chapter 2 will provide a variety of examples regarding the hegemonic control of teen mothers by the dominant group in American society, a particularly powerful example to consider is the way that poor women receiving government assistance, such as W.I.C or Medicaid, are often pressured to use birth control that is controlled by a doctor instead of by the woman. Chapter 2 will discuss the specific example of Norplant, a five-year, surgically implanted form of birth control that had a plethora of harmful effects on the poor women who were encouraged to use it in the 1990s; however, there are other forms of birth control, such as the Depo Provera shots that keep women from getting pregnant for three months, that are currently used to take reproductive control away from poor women. The discourse surrounding why it is important to control these women centers on how much their children cost taxpayers, and while Burkean theory alone certainly sheds light on how the language used in these discussions reflects a great deal of prejudice against the poor, critical theory takes this understanding to a new level, showing us that this language is hegemonic in nature – that it is geared towards controlling and alienating these poor women.
Frequently, hegemonic discourse about the poor also involves hegemonic discourse about minorities. For example, as will be mentioned in Chapter 2, William Archer III once made the public statement that Latina women lack the “cultural knowledge that getting pregnant is a bad idea” (“News of the Weak”). While Burkean analysis is enhanced by the application of feminist theory and critical theory, when analyzing discourse such as this statement by William Archer III is best understood through the additional lens of CRITICAL RACE THEORY.

**CRITICAL RACE THEORY**

CRITICAL RACE THEORY is a movement that explores the relationship between various racial groups and the ways that race has often been overlooked in the study of history, education, and even social justice. Specifically, CRITICAL RACE THEORY seeks to shed light on the racism that is usually at the heart of the oppression of minorities in the United States. CRITICAL RACE THEORY is an important theoretical lens to explore in an examination of teen motherhood because many teenaged mothers also happen to be minorities, and studies most frequently report incredibly dismal statistics about educational attainment, health, socioeconomic status, and child-rearing when their participants are minority teen mothers. This may be a result of the socially constructed notion that emerged in the 1980s when Ronald Reagan coined the phrase “welfare queen” (Pillow, 2004), a concept that painted teen mothers as young black women who were having multiple children in order to receive larger welfare checks. However, it is important to note that middle class whites have often done this research, an issue that is problematic according to CRITICAL RACE THEORISTS.
While these scholars may have the best intentions in their work, their findings might not ask important questions, such as the ways in which racism may have played a role in the percentage of black teen mothers who fail to finish high school.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY was initially born in the legal studies discipline. According to Crenshaw et al. (1995), CRITICAL RACE THEORY embraces a movement of left scholars, most of them scholars of color, situated in law schools, whose work challenges the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally, in American society as a whole. (p. xiii)

The movement has made its way into social science research and philosophy through the work of such scholars as John Ogbu, who argued that it is impossible to make generalizations about all families simply by studying white families (1981, p. 413). Lerner (2001) argued that black women especially have been “denied their histories” (p. 45).

CRITICAL RACE THEORY researchers have also made clear that the issue of racism has in the past been missing from feminist theory, an issue that is of particular importance in this dissertation. bell hooks (2001) made the argument that even feminist scholars have been guilty of denying black woman a voice. She posited feminism in the United States has never emerged from the women who are most victimized by sexist oppression; women who are largely beaten down mentally, physically, and spiritually – women
who are powerless to change their condition in life. They are a silent majority. A mark of their victimization is that they accept their lot in life without visible question, without organized protest, without collective anger or rage. (p. 33)

While this particular quote might also apply to poor white women who have been left out of the feminist conversation, hooks went on to explain how it applies specifically to black women. She wrote that “past feminist refusal to draw attention to and attack racial hierarchies suppressed the link between race and class” (p. 34).

Springer (2002) further explored this idea of the lack of white feminist research’s exploration of racism when she argued that the model of first wave feminism is problematic because it fails to recognize that black women were feminists long before the 1960s. Black slave women fought against rape, forced impregnation, and being separated from their children while slaves, and this was prior to the “first wave.” It should be recognized that there were feminist actions during the antebellum period (p.4).

While many of the problems with first wave feminism and its intersection with race have been brought to the forefront by CRITICAL RACE THEORY scholars, such as hooks and Springer, their work is also important in that it sheds light on classism and the lack of a voice for all people in lower socio-economic brackets. hooks (2001) argued that “it is no accident that feminist struggle has been so easily co-opted to serve the interests of conservative and liberal feminists since feminism in the United States has so far been a bourgeois ideology” (p. 35) and that “the exclusionary practices of women who dominate
feminist discourse have made it practically impossible for new and varied theories to emerge” (p. 36).

With all of this in mind, it is important to note that researchers who study groups of people who are different from them are speaking from their own standpoints when they report their findings; it is quite possible that they might misrepresent their participants. This is the primary reason why I have elected to modernize the Burkean lens through the application of critical theory, feminist theory, and CRITICAL RACE THEORY. I believe that combining these lenses with my rhetorical analyses will help me get closer to adequately representing the voices of the women to whom I hope to give voice in this dissertation.

Ultimately, as will be shown in Chapter 2, the dominant group in the United States uses a dismal, hopeless narrative when constructing the teen mother. She is portrayed as a deviant who will be a tax burden for the rest of her life and who will produce children who will also live in poverty. It is not surprising that Andre Bauer’s statement reflecting on his aforementioned diatribe on the poor in South Carolina eventually turned to teen mothers. “Babies having babies…” he said, “…somebody’s got to talk about that” (Cary, 2010). He was defending his prior speech, arguing that public outcry over it was simply due to his lack of political correctness. As Chapter 2 will show, there is no shortage of public discourse about teenage motherhood, but Burke’s terministic screen theory helps us see that Bauer’s choice of the phrase, “babies having babies” when talking about welfare reveals that he naturally equates teen motherhood with welfare and that he believes teen mothers are “babies,” not just “kids”; “babies” are
helpless beings who rely completely on others for their care. His implication is that he believes his previous statement is correct – that the poor will continue to reproduce if the rich continue to support them. He also implies that teen mothers are inextricably linked to that welfare system, an idea that is commonly accepted throughout our country. By using the discourse of a hot political topic like teen motherhood, he can draw attention away from his previous analogy, which compared the poor to stray animals. He might also direct attention away from the ultimate way that our society controls strays – by euthanizing them, a disturbing part of his misplaced metaphor that has not been addressed in the public sphere.

Bauer’s discourse about teen mothers reflect the dominant narrative that has been accepted as truth by the citizens of the United States – that teen mothers always go on to be poor, to be neglectful of their children, and to rely on everyone else to take care of their needs. In reality, there are teen mothers in South Carolina, in other Southeastern States, and throughout the entire country who defy that stereotype in every conceivable way. It is time for an alternative narrative on teen motherhood to be heard. It is time for the public to see that the stigma associated with teen mothers may be, in large part, a myth, born in and kept alive through hegemonic discourse that has, since the Puritans landed in the new world, painted motherhood as an ideal that is only acceptable under very specific circumstances. According to the dominant group, ideal mothers are married, heterosexual, middle/upper class, (and quite possibly white) women; anything outside this socially constructed ideal is seen as deviant and a problem to society as a whole.
Laurel Gilbert, a teen mother with a Ph.D. described her feelings of alienation in the face of this negative social construction of the teen mother. The statistics change wherever I look for numbers to reassure me that I’m ‘normal,’ that my experiences somehow reflect the reality of a group of women who are “disadvantaged.” I’ve grown tired, confused, hearing number on top of number, statistic after statistic. No statistic I’ve found, no numbers on a chart, express my experiences or reflect my stories. The expectations for teenage mothers are low. I’ve exceeded almost every one. But if I’m so lucky and talented, how did I get pregnant in the first place? I am not the stereotypical teen mother who is thought of as dim-witted, weak, below average – a failure. […] I refuse to think of myself as a failure. And that’s the problem. My words, my stories don’t reflect any other words or stories being spoken about my kind. And I can’t find any other words or stories being spoken by my kind; it seems like other women like me are keeping their secret too, keeping quiet about their history. We’re all silenced by expectations, perhaps because we’ve exceeded them.” (2001, p. 77)

Gilbert’s words echo my own thoughts; I know that there must be other women like Gilbert and me, teen mothers who went on to achieve education’s ultimate affirmation – a Ph.D. But where are these women, and why aren’t they talking about their experiences?
Don’t they realize that it would help the others to hear our stories, to know that so much more is possible, even after early childbearing? Would it be dangerous for us to tell our stories?

Teen mothers who challenge the stereotype about teen motherhood by being successful threaten the socially constructed ideal of motherhood – the idea that a proper mother must be of a socially acceptable age and a socially acceptable status. This may well be why we never hear about these brave young mothers.

This dissertation confronts the silence by offering new narratives on teenage motherhood – narratives of resilience and triumph. This dissertation is the voice of silence no more.

**Research Questions**

As it is important to dispel the myths surrounding the teen mother to work towards her liberation from the oppression of her social construction, it becomes necessary to understand the teen mother, not as a what but as a being who exists within a politically charged context. According to German philosopher Martin Heidegger, to understand the essence of what it means to live in a certain way, in a certain context, researchers must study the “Dasein” of the subjects they are researching. As Heidegger defines it, if we want to understand the “Dasein,” we must examine

[...] its existence. Accordingly, those characteristics which can be exhibited in this entity are not ‘properties’ present-at-hand of some entity which ‘looks’ so and so and is itself present-at-hand; they are in each case possible ways for it to be,
and no more than that… So, when we designate this entity with the term ‘Dasein’, we are expressing not its ‘what’ (as if it were a table, house, or tree) but its Being.

(1964, p. 42)

Understanding the Dasein of the rural teen mother who goes to college is particularly important because it can help us understand her intentionality toward education and success. There are two important questions that this dissertation will seek to answer through a phenomenological investigation of the experiences of the teen mother who goes to college in the rural Southeast.

1.) What does mean to be a teen mother who goes to college in the rural Southeast?

2.) How does the context of the rural Southeast impact the Dasein of the teen mother, as well as her intentionality toward getting a college degree?
“Mouth[s] so full of lies / Tend to black your eyes” – Metallica, The Day That Never Comes

CHAPTER 2: HIT THE LIGHTS

Who are teen mothers?

Since the 1960s, the issue of teenage motherhood has been plunged into the national spotlight, with politicians on both sides of the political spectrum naming it as one of the great societal problems in the United States (Pillow, 1994; Luker, 1996; Luttrell, 2003, 2008; Davis, 2004; Musick, 1993; Nathanson, 1991; Kelly, 2000). While teen pregnancy rates saw a modest decline in the 1990s, numbers rose once again from 2005 – 2006 (Perper & Manlove, 2009, p. 1). Arthur Campbell (1968) wrote “The girl who has an illegitimate child at the age of 16 suddenly has 90 percent of her life’s script written for her (p. 238). Regardless of small fluctuations in the numbers over the last two decades, the United States’ teen pregnancy rates are higher than those in other industrialized countries (Darroch and Singh, 1999).

While the definition of teen motherhood varies from state to state, most define teen motherhood as happening somewhere between the ages of 10 and 20. The highest rates of teen pregnancy happen in the South and Southwest United States; in the Southeastern states where this study was conducted, teen pregnancy is defined as happening between the ages of 10-19, with an estimated 16% to 24% of all teenage girls who will become teen mothers (p. 1).
According to Perper and Manlove (2009), “regardless of where they live […],
teen mothers and their children face economic, educational, and socioemotional
challenges (p. 3). A Gates Foundation report on the reasons why students drop out of
school reported that one-third of all women whom they surveyed said that they dropped
out because they “became pregnant and were unable to juggle the pressures of young
motherhood and school” (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 6). Maynard (1992) and Maynard
and Hoffman (2008) reported “just over half of teenage mothers completed their
schooling, and thus show weak employment prospects (Maynard, 1992, p. 3).

Teenage pregnancy rates are higher among minority populations. Hoffman
(2008) reported that rates have fallen for all races, especially among black teens;
however, overall, the rates for minority teens are still troublingly high when compared to
other industrialized nations and to white middle class teens in the United States.

The dominant narrative of teen motherhood in the United States is an incredibly
depressing portrayal that predicts that women who give birth as teens will have
unfortunate lives. Researchers have reported that there are negative consequences for the
mothers, who will have decreased chances for getting married and for graduating from
high school, who will be more likely to live on government assistance, and who will
work more hours than their peers in their 20s and 30s (Hotz et al., 1997). There are
consequences for teen fathers, but this only happens when they support their children
(Brien and Willis, 1997). There are consequences for the children, who are “at a
statistically significant disadvantage in terms of cognitive development and academic
achievement compared with peers whose mothers were 20 – 21 at their birth” (Moore et
and who are less likely than their peers to receive adequate health care (Wolfe and Perozek, 1997). Furthermore, the sons of teen mothers are more likely than other children to be incarcerated, while the daughters of teen mothers are more likely to become teen mothers themselves (Haveman et al., 1997). Finally, there are consequences for taxpayers. Maynard and Hoffman (2008) found that teen motherhood costs taxpayers $7.3 billion annually; however, they also state that “a major source of these costs is the forgone income and consumption taxes resulting from the lower earnings of the teen mothers and the fathers of their children ($3 billion)” (p. 266).

While the methods used in the aforementioned studies, which present an incredibly depressing outlook for teen mothers, cannot be questioned, and while their findings are sound, what is missing from their work is an investigation of the WHY behind their findings. Moreover, an examination of some of the language used in these studies reveals that many of the researchers were heavily biased about teen motherhood when they were formulating their research questions. For example, Moore et al. (1997, 2008) used the following research questions:

To what extent are children disadvantaged by being born to a teen mother? Are the consequences of teen childbearing specific to certain aspects of child well-being? Do the negative consequences of being born to a teen mother vary across a child’s life stage? That is, do risks to positive development increase or decline as the children of teen mothers grow up? Are race differences found in the effects of being born to a teen mother? [And] are the subsequent
children born to a teen other at a disadvantage, or just the firstborn?” (1997, p. 145-146)

In other words, they immediately assume that there are only negative consequences for the children of teen mothers. They do not even entertain the possibility that there could be advantages. Furthermore, what Hotz et al. (1997, 2008), Brien and Willis (1997), Moore et al. (1997, 2008), Wolfe and Perozek (1997), Haveman et al. (1997, 2008), and Hoffman and Maynard (2008) did not talk about in these studies reveals a great deal about their biases, as well. If these women, particularly the poor women, earned the same salaries that their male counterparts earned, perhaps they would not have required public assistance. However, salary inequalities existed in the 1990s when the first book was written, and they still exist today (Harding, 1993). Hotz et al. (1997) failed to discuss why so many teen mothers drop out of high school. Haveman et al. (1997) did not talk about limited options for childcare for poor mothers who wanted to continue their educations or who needed to work. They did not discuss how racism might be a factor in why so many sons of teen mothers were eventually incarcerated. Hoffman and Maynard (2007) were more concerned with costs to taxpayers than the well being of these women and their children, and they failed to acknowledge that in countries with lower rates of adolescent childbearing, public healthcare is available to all citizens, regardless of their sex, race, or social class. Because they did not ask these additional questions, whether consciously or not, their subjectivities leaned towards sexism, racism, and classism.

Furthermore, they missed the opportunity to unveil solutions that might actually reduce the cost of teenage motherhood for taxpayers; if programs were enacted to enable
teen mothers to continue their educations and to earn as much money as their male counterparts, it seems logical that they would rely less on public assistance.

So, what is the WHY behind these dismal findings? To understand this, one must first take a look at the social construction of the teen mother in the United States, which is the driving force behind the dominant narrative of teen motherhood as a script that has already been written, which cannot be changed.

**Social Construction of Poverty, Race, and Gender**

As poverty and teen motherhood are strongly correlated (Hotz et al., 1997; 2008), it is important to first examine the social construction of the poor in the United States. Many believe that the United States is a classless society in which most citizens live a middle class lifestyle (DeMott, 1990; Kelly & Evans, 1995). For this reason, stereotypes of the poor are readily accepted as truth; if the poor are poor, many assume it is because they chose to be and are not willing to work. Stereotypes about poor women in particular abound, with women who receive welfare being socially constructed by the media as promiscuous and unwilling to work or go to school (Jackson, 1997; McLaughlin, 1997, Sidel, 1996, Wilcox et al., 1996). When Ronald Regan coined the term “welfare queen” in the 1980s, it was readily accepted by the American public as a truth (Lipset, 1990, p. 136).

Despite the evidence that America is definitely not a classless society in plain view for many Americans, especially in urban areas where homelessness is an undeniable
problem, the media is able to perpetuate the notion that Americans who work hard are not poor (Manstios, 1995).

These findings are important in understanding the stigma associated with teen mothers because they reveal the limited perspective that many Americans have regarding the poor. Many Americans do believe that poverty is a choice, and they imagine teen mothers as wearing their motherhood as some sort of badge of honor. This is an easy myth for Americans in the dominant class to see as fact because their perceptions on the issue are so limited. They are only looking through the narrow part of the funnel, and their myopic standpoints leave them naïve regarding life outside their own small worlds. However, this is not a harmless naïveté. The perceptions that many middle class teachers, doctors, social workers and other people in power have about teen mothers causes them to discourage and limit these young women, all while they honestly believe teen mothers are choosing to be poor and powerless. Because these misconceptions are so commonly accepted as truth, it is important to examine research that looks at the individual experiences of teen mothers.

Additionally, the social construction of race is an important component of the social construction of the teen mother because, since Africans were kidnapped from Africa and brought to the Americas as slaves, African Americans have been socially constructed as less fit than white Americans. For example, Moore et al. reported “for black [people], children born to the youngest mothers have worse home environments and more behavior problems” (p. 155). They have “less cognitive stimulating and less
nurturing home environments and more behavior problems” than do children born to mothers who were 20-21 at the time of their birth (p. 169).

The use of terministic screen theory and critical race theory are complementary lenses in this examination of the how these findings reflect the social construction of race. When the researchers used the discourse that claims that black children receive “less” cognitive stimulation and “less” nurturing at home, their word choice reflects their ethnocentric attitudes about what an ideal home should be for a child. Furthermore, by claiming that black children’s home environment is “less” good than white children’s, they deflect attention away from questions about how the white culture is privileged in our society. It may not be that the black homes provide “less” good environments; it is more likely that they are simply different environments. However, these differences are not recognized as valid by the dominant culture. Ogbu (1981) argued that this point of view is reflected in developmental psychology, which influences how researchers in all fields view interactions in home environments. Ogbu stated that

the research model of dominant-group developmentalists… is ethnocentric… Rather than being truly universal, it is merely a pseudouniversal rooted in the false beliefs of an ethnocentric population. It is false because it looks at the origins of competence from the wrong end of the relationship between childhood experiences and the competencies essential for functioning in adult life. (p. 425)
Finally, it is important to acknowledge the social construction of gender as a key component in this discussion of the social construction of the teen mother. In the United States, women have traditionally been expected to marry and have children, while their husbands earn money to support them, which leaves women financially dependent on their husbands. The sexist, heterosexist idea that a woman needs to be supported by a man is reflected in much of the literature regarding teen mothers. For example, Hotz et al. (1997) began their discussion on the negative consequences of teen motherhood by explaining that teen mothers had a lesser chance of finding a husband than their peers. Additionally, Brien and Willis (1997) wrote “if a young man fathers a child but is able to escape responsibility for support of that child,” then his economic prospects are improved (p. 116). The fact that they used the word “escape” is telling. Instead of saying that a young man might “refuse” or “neglect” to pay his child support, they treated this responsibility as something that could be “escaped” in much the same way that a hunted animal might “escape” a hunter’s trap. This hegemonic point of view was again shown in an updated version of their study (2008) when they wrote, “We assume that, in general, most men do not make ‘mistakes.’ They choose to marry and to become fathers largely in terms of what is in their best interests. This is, of course, dependent upon their ability to find a mate in the marriage market” (2008, p. 131). This implied that marriage and childbearing are in the hands of the male, and the female is, like a side of beef hanging in a meat market, on display, waiting to be chosen from the “marriage market.” It is a misogynistic notion to assume that the mothers of these father’s children are nothing more than opportunistic sluts who were intent on trapping the men into marriage. It is
equally sexist to assume that only the man has a choice in the matter of marriage, that a
top; one. Furthermore, in the other studies in this
series, the language about women and work was drastically different than the language
used in this chapter. The authors wrote about how paying fair amounts of child support
might be “less disruptive to [a man’s] investment in human capital than a forced
marriage” (p. 147-148). It is sexist to imply that only men can make “investments in
human capital,” while women merely work, and this sexist statement reflects the social
construction of a woman as being entirely dependent on a man.

Moreover, it is problematic and heterosexist to assume that marriage is the cure
for the challenges that young mothers face. Even if a baby is born to a married couple,
this does not mean that the baby will live in a more stable environment than a baby born
to a single mother. The United States has the highest divorce rate in the world
(Nationmaster.com). According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 4.8 million
women were the victims of domestic abuse in 2006 (Centers for Disease Control), and
while that number includes unmarried victims, it is logical to assume that being married
to an abuser would only make getting away from him more difficult. Meanwhile,
according to the Bureau of Justice (BJS), young, poor, and minority women are more
likely to suffer at the hands of an abuser than are privileged, white women (Bureau of
Justice). For these reasons, it is erroneous to assume that marriage alone would solve the
problem of instability in these women’s and their children’s lives.
The Social Construction of the Teen Mother

To understand the social construction of the teen mother herself, it is necessary to first examine its historical underpinnings. In her book, *Unfit Subjects: Education Policy and the Teenage Mother*, Wanda Pillow (2004) argues “…a close look at the construction of teen pregnancy as a social and educational problem reveals that the problem of teen pregnancy, even in its short history, has been defined differently at precise moments for varying political and social needs” (Pillow, pg. 18). Throughout the rest of this chapter, I would like to build on this idea using the works of Pillow, Luker (1996), Luttrell (2003, 2008), Davis (2004), Musick (1993) and Kelly (2000), and create an historical timeline of the social construction of the teen mother in the United States and discuss its impact on the educational experiences of teen mothers. It is only through an exploration of the development of the social construction of the teen mother that we can truly understand the reasons why most Americans view teen mothers so negatively.

“Bastardy”: The Puritanical Influence

While many of us might assume that the teenage mother is an “other” who has only recently emerged in our society due to the decline of “family values,” Luker posits that our thinking about the teen mother as an “other” is “shaped, whether [we] know it or not, by discussions that have been going on for the better part of three centuries” (p. 15). Unwed mothers and unplanned pregnancies were actually fairly common when the Puritans originally settled in the colonies.
In early America, as is often the case in the 21st century, unwed motherhood was immediately identified as a moral offense, one that did not exist singularly between a sinner and a god, but between a sinner and a community, primarily because this particular sin might prove a financial cost to people in the community.

It is important to understand the Puritan’s belief system and how it drove attitudes towards unwed mothers. Puritans believed that they were God’s chosen people, predestined to go to Heaven (Baym, 1995). While non-Puritans traveled with them across the ocean to the New World, they saw themselves as separate and viewed the non-Puritans as a lesser people (1995). This reflects a classist attitude because the Puritans were a fairly educated, privileged people, while the other immigrants were primarily poor and uneducated. They believed that, as Puritans, they would naturally follow God’s law because it was in their nature to do so. If any person committed sinful acts, then he or she was clearly not a true child of God. From a critical perspective, this enabled the Puritans to easily construct those who did not follow their strict guidelines as deviants. The discourse that was used to construct this type of deviance reflects the limited, privileged standpoint of the Puritans. As is made clear by the works of such women writers as Anne Bradstreet (1995), men controlled this society. It was easy for them to place the blame for sexual transgression on women, even if they played an equal part in it.

In this time period, it was not the age of the mother that caused concern to the rest of society. Instead, out-of-wedlock births, most often referred to as “bastardy,” were the great cause for worry on the part of Puritan settlers in America. Luker argued that “in
colonial America, bastardy was of enormous concern because it resulted from sexual transgression… and often created an economic burden” (p. 17). Even in these early days, the moral transgression of bastardy was tied to the economic burdens that out-of-wedlock births might cause through discourse surrounding these mothers and children. A single woman’s right to support herself was less an issue of concern than the sin she had waged, allegedly against her community more than against her god. The economic burden she imposed on her fellow Puritans was a direct result of her giving in to her sinful desires. Ironically, in many cases, evidence exists that some of these pregnancies were the result of rape or incest. In fact, Luker reported that the “age of consent,” or the age at which it was deemed that a girl was legally old enough to make a decision about whether or not she would have sex, was only seven years old in colonial times (p. 27).

Luker wrote that “the colonies punished bastardy with great harshness when it was discovered.” She goes on to explain the laws that were enacted to deal with the punishment of those guilty of bastardy, with penalties frequently involving public chastisement, such as lashing. “Many of these laws applied in theory to both men and women, but women were more likely to be convicted” (p. 17) because, as happened in the case of Hester Prynne in Nathanial Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, only women took with them visible consequences of having sex outside of marriage.

This early identification of teen mothers as an amoral (and thus non-Puritan) delinquent group established an early precedence for keeping “unworthy” mothers in the public eye, by constantly looking for them, even publicly whipping them when they were found. Foucault might argue that keeping them in the public eye was a step towards
controlling them without physical force, as constant observation is a means of holding power over people at all times (1977) and that controlling their sexuality was indeed treated as a control of criminality (1976). It is important to note that this kind of control was established over mothers deemed unfit by the dominant culture, even as far back as colonial America. The normal woman was expected to marry at a certain age, have children at a certain age, and behave in a certain way. Unwed mothers, women who were very often around the same age as married mothers, did not fit the socially constructed norm.

These efforts to suppress bastardy and prevent sexual transgression did not actually impact the number of out-of-wedlock births in early America. Luker explained “such a number of children may have increased throughout the colonial period, especially toward the end of the seventeenth century, and may have accelerated markedly in the second quarter of the eighteenth century… Babies born out of wedlock were a familiar part of life in the American colonies” (p. 17). Even in colonial times when punishment for young, unwed mothers was so severe, prevention efforts were, like today, unable to keep people from having sex outside of marriage. This might indicate that other factors have always influenced the age and context in which women got pregnant, regardless of how much society might have tried to control that age or context.

In response to the continued problem of bastardy, Luker argued that the emerging American culture began to look for other ways to prevent illegitimacy. American courts, more liberal than European courts on the strict definition of marriage, “made every effort to protect children, even going so far as to create in the nineteenth century a legal fiction
known as ‘common-law marriage’” (p. 19). Children could be “legitimized” if their parents were married.

   Early attitudes towards race and unwed mothers were documented when common law marriage laws were written. Children who were the product of “illegal miscegenation” (p. 19) were excluded from legitimization if their parents lived together for a long enough period of time. This early intersection of young motherhood and race has only continued, with some unwed mothers receiving even poorer treatment by society if they are minorities. From the colonial period to the 21st century, differing treatment of teen mothers of different races has persisted. Black families, socially constructed as deficient in the dominant narrative (Ogbu, 1981; Delpit, 1988), are still seen today by those in power as problematic, and this impacts the treatment that they receive from those in power, just as it did in early America.

   Gradually, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when urbanization led to recognition of the plight of the poor and reformers began to work to help the poor, out-of-wedlock births came to be viewed as a “social problem” (Luker, p. 20). Religious women “mobilized” as reformers, set the goal of transforming the morally weak, submissive unmarried mothers, who were often viewed as “ruined girls” who had been taken advantage of by men (p. 20-21). It is important to take note of this language. The term “ruined girls” implies that these women were permanently spoiled, an idea that is still applied to teen mothers today. For example, Hotz et al. (1997), found that “failure to delay childbearing […] has a negative and lasting effect on a teen mother’s marriage prospects” (Luker, p. 71), a notion that sounds all too similar to the concept of a “ruined
female.” The fact that people saw these women as “morally weak” reflect the standpoints of these reformers as part of the dominant class. To assume that these women were pregnant as a result of moral weakness implies that they were somehow faulty even before they were “ruined.”

However, it is also important to note that women during this period were expected to be submissive to men, meaning that young girls were getting mixed messages about how to respond to a man’s sexual advances, which might have exacerbated the problem of unwed pregnancy. The problem of how a woman should respond to a man’s sexual advances is still an issue in the literature today, and a good example is Peter Kivisto’s (2001) discussion on teen motherhood; he wrote that “younger teens are inclined to be less responsible than their older counterparts and appear to have less developed refusal skills” (p. 1060). It is interesting that the socially constructed idea that women have the sole responsibility for refusing/not refusing a man’s sexual advances has persisted from the Progressive Era to the 21st century.

According to Luker (1996), reformers adopted the idea that “healthy children” in “healthy situations” (Luker, p. 21) were an essential element in the elimination of poverty in the United States. Again, their language is important to note; what they viewed as “healthy” was based on their own limited experience. Some of the people that they may have been attempting to reform may have simply come from different culture; this did not necessarily mean that they were morally deficient. This type of reform set precedence for the racist ways of looking at black families described by Ogbu (1991) and Delpit (1998).
In 1912, the U.S. government created the Children’s Bureau, an agency that studied many issues relating to poverty, with out-of-wedlock children a primary concern. When a series of surveys conducted by this group showed that the mortality rates of out-of-wedlock children were far greater than the mortality rates of “legitimate” children (Luker, 1996, p. 22), the issue of out-of-wedlock children emerged as focus for reformists in the Progressive Era. Luker posited “an official language of compassion instead of condemnation” rose out of the efforts of these reformers, who were primarily women (p. 23). Nonetheless, it was still a discourse of discrimination. The very term “legitimate” reflects the belief that only children born within marriage are valid or acceptable.

Meanwhile, in Germany, as the work of Sigmund Freud became a prominent influence in the field of psychology in the 1920s and began to be accepted by researchers in the United States and Europe, some attitudes toward unwed mothers began to shift yet again. Freud’s discussion of the influence of the subconscious mind led many to view unmarried mothers as “sexual delinquents” (p. 23). In other words, unmarried mothers were gradually coming to be seen by those outside the reform movement as “the active (albeit unconscious) agent[s] in [their] own downfall[s]” (p. 23). In other words, these women were seen as either morally weak or villainous, with no other explanations as to why an unwed pregnancy might have happened. Freud was obviously operating from a limited standpoint as he did his work, and those who read and discussed his findings were most likely from a similar background that led to a limited way of seeing the world. To view people who are different as “morally weak” is hegemonic in nature, and it is
important to note that it was this type of view of people who were different that enabled Hitler to commit genocide during the Holocaust.

With two clashing views on unwed mothers, the reform-focused view of the unmarried mother as a “ruined girl” who could be rehabilitated and the Freudian version of the unwed mothers as “sexual delinquent,” the young, unmarried mothers who did not meet the American definition of “normal” or “healthy” remained in the eye of the public, supervised, and thusly, controlled (Foucault, 1977). In either case, focus was primarily given to white women who were unmarried and pregnant. Black unwed pregnancies, often the result of rape by white men, were viewed as something that should remain out of the public eye because black women were seen as being at fault for their pregnancies. Due to the differing views on unwed white and black mothers, race emerged as a defining factor in the treatment of an unwed mother. White mothers were treated badly; the treatment of black mothers, however, was much worse due to the fact that reformers did not believe it was possible to “rehabilitate” black women in the same way that they could rehabilitate wayward white girls. Black women were seen as wanton by nature, and reformers thought it best to keep them away from white women, else their lustful natures might be transmitted to innocent white women in much the same way that a contagious virus is transmitted from person to person.

Florence Crittendon Homes and Racialized Discourse

Pillow (2004) argued that it was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the “gendered and raced ideological framework of the U.S. welfare state” began to develop (p. 20). She wrote that as Freud’s work became widely accepted in the United States
“white unwed motherhood in the 1900s was constructed as a psychological problem” while black illegitimate pregnancies were still viewed as a “moral problem” (p. 20-21). As racialized discourse began to emerge in the social construction of the unwed mother, black and white unwed mothers gradually came to be treated in different ways. Lee Smith-Battle (2000) shares Pillow’s views about the historical implications of how we look at teen mothers. She stated that

…it was only with industrialization that adolescence emerged as a distinct life stage in which youth were prepared through formal education to select an identity from a range of opportunities. In the industrialized world, teenage childbearing is now believed to jeopardize the trajectory to adulthood by interrupting education, thereby curbing success in the labor market and ultimately leading to persistent poverty. (p. 29-30)

In 1883, Florence Crittendon Homes for Unwed Mothers were established. These “F.C.” homes were created to provide a means of rehabilitation for unwed mothers. Pillow argued that these homes “participated in defining and locating the problem of unwed motherhood” even going as far as to “influence public opinion” about the issue (Pillow, 2004, p. 20). The unwed mothers helped at F.C. homes were almost exclusively white, viewed as victims, “good girls” who could be cured with a little help. According to Pillow, F.C. Homes were based on the Christian ethic of “caring for all, especially those beneath you” (p. 22). Ironically, this Christian charity did not extend to minority mothers. Pillow wrote that “F.C. Homes routinely turned away black unwed mothers and homes in the South had policies to explicitly deny admittance to unwed black mothers”
(p. 22). Pillow argued that these polices led to “differential definitions” of the unwed mothers, with race being a factor in how the public viewed these women. White unwed mothers were seen as psychologically damaged, while black unwed mothers were seen as “wanton breeders” or “calculating breeders for profit” (p. 24).

F.C. Homes in the South justified excluding black unwed mothers from their services because they believed it would protect the white mothers. The differences between the two types of unwed mothers became so “ingrained” in how people viewed this societal ill that they actually feared that contact between white and black unwed mothers might cause the white unwed mothers to become “contaminated” (p. 26). In other words, they believed that, like the Big Bad Wolf waiting to distract naïve Little Red Riding Hood off the safe path into the dark woods, predatory black women might purposefully infect innocent white girls with their sinful sexual desires. This construction of black teen mothers as dangerous should not be a surprise, considering the dominant narrative about black people that is still widely accepted today. It is interesting to note that transatlantic slave traders only kidnapped people who were non-Christian (Baym, 1995). In other words, from the very moment that African slaves were kidnapped from their homes and brought to America, they were viewed as deviant. From a rhetorical perspective, the slave traders could deflect attention away from the evils of slavery by refocusing their language on the fact that these kidnapped people had a different religion.

This differing treatment of teen mothers depending specifically on the race of those mothers has continued into the 21st century. White, middle class mothers routinely went “away” to have their children, often at F.C. homes or at the homes of relatives.
While many did not wish to give up their babies for adoption, many were forced to do so, pressured by family members or counselors at the F.C. homes (p. 27-30). White, middle class teen mothers were allegedly able to continue with a “normal” life at this point, having been “rehabilitated” by their time in an F.C. home, learning positive Christian morals. However, this notion probably did not apply to poor white mothers, who likely continued to live with family members instead of going to F.C. homes to have their babies in secret. Little information is available on their experiences.

Progressives, even those who espoused feminist ideals, wanted to ensure that American children were “fit.” This reflects the limitations of first wave feminism (Springer, 2000). It focused on the standpoints of privileged women, treating feminism as a belief system that could empower a monolithic group of women. However, they failed to see the limitations of their own standpoints when they defined such concepts as “fit children.” They advocated restrictions on who could marry, believing that this would limit unfit births (Pillow, 2004, p. 31). In fact, many reformists explicitly supported the idea that the right to marry should be restricted. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a champion rhetor and reformer who fought valiantly for women’s suffrage, did not seem to recognize the plight of unwed mothers. In 1869, she made the statement that only those “who can give the world children with splendid physique, strong intellect, and high moral sentiment may conscientiously take on themselves the responsibility of marriage and maternity” (p. 31). Ironically, her discourse reflected a prejudicial, disempowering standpoint, one that was eerily close to Adolph Hitler’s arguments about the creation of a superior race. What she saw as splendid, strong, or highly moral was a reflection of her
privileged experiences. As she made powerful speeches that made full use of the rhetorical tools described by Aristotle, her lack of a critical perspective left her discourse doing the very opposite of what she sought to do – to empower women.

In her book, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920*, Mary Odem looked at how middle class white females in the early part of the twentieth century tried to initiate legislation to aid working class women who were often taken advantage of sexually, but because their focus was more on the acculturation of these working class women to more morally pure middle class values, their work actually resulted in more abuses of these women. She wrote in the conclusion of the book that

…even though the social panic over the heterosexual activity of young women may have subsided, the legal mechanisms of control that had resulted from moral protection campaigns remained firmly in place. The extensive system of courts, special police, detention centers, and reformatories established by purity reformers continued to monitor and regulate the sexuality of young women and girls throughout most of the twentieth century… And the double standard of morality that punished young women more often and more severely than men for similar sexual offenses persisted long after the reform movements had run their course.

(Odem, 1995, p. 189)
Meanwhile, little description existed regarding the experiences of minority and poor white unwed mothers during the Progressive Era, continuing until the sexual revolution. As there were fewer options for them in which they might go away to give birth, it can only be assumed that they continued to live with their families or on their own; they most likely lived in poverty, with few employment opportunities and with the difficulties in their lives only exacerbated by the added economic challenge of providing for a child. Odem argued that there was an increased bias in the system towards women of color because black female reformers were essentially denied any real “voice in shaping public policies” (p. 187). Her ideas are supported by critical race theorists, such as hooks (2001) and Springer (2002), who have argued that the voices of black feminists were silenced during this era. Clearly, the differential treatment that black unwed mothers received throughout the Progressive Era and into the 1960s was only one source of friction, a friction that would build and build until the explosion of change brought about by the Civil Rights Movement would call attention to the general treatment of black people, not just black unwed mothers. The treatment of unwed black mothers during this time period reflects the treatment of all black people. Their voices were silenced, even in the reform movements that were supposed to better their lives, and they had little say in how they were treated by the dominant group. Little by little, their frustrations built and their courage to fight for their right to have some control over their lives increased. Meanwhile, a similar pressure built over the years for all women, denied many of the rights that were given to men; the Civil Rights Movement and the Sexual Revolution of the sixties forced the need for change for many dehumanized groups in the United States,
although liberation for these groups has not yet been fully achieved, even in the 21st century.

The Sexual Revolution and the Emergence of the “Teenage” Mother

F.C. Homes continued to provide services to unwed mothers throughout the early and mid 1900s. Racialized language regarding these two types of mothers continued to grow into the 1950s, as pressure from racial and gender divides swelled within our nation, finally erupting in important social movements in the 1960s. The sexual revolution changed the public mindset about sex outside marriage. Meanwhile, the Civil Rights Movement shed light on the prejudices against minorities prevalent throughout our nation.

Pillow (2004) reported that, in 1963, Mary Louise Allen, Director of F.C. Home became fearful that black unwed mothers would “overrun” F.C. homes in the South if F.C. Homes were forced to desegregate. This language reflects the racist standpoint of the middle class, white director of F.C. homes. The verb “overrun” implies that hoards of unwed black mothers would stampede the F.C. Homes. This was not based on empirical fact but on the racist idea that lustful black women would have baby after baby out of wedlock. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 did mandate that these facilities desegregate, although F.C. Homes in the South still worked to keep their white mothers quarantined from the black mothers (p. 26).

It was during this time that the focus began to shift from unwed mothers to “teenage” mothers. Pillow posited that one of the greatest causes for this is that, following the sexual revolution
[m]ore teens, particularly white teens, were sexually active outside of marital or committed relationships… [T]here was an increase in pregnancies ending in abortions, particularly among white women… There was a cited increase in unplanned pregnancies, particularly among white women… [And] there were higher rates of birth to unmarried women and a significant rise in single parenting, again particularly by white women and teens. (p. 28)

With the sexual revolution came the idea that women were active agents in their own sexuality. They could choose to have sex outside of marriage if they so desired, and it was their right to do so. For these reasons, following the sexual revolution, it was no longer acceptable to focus on unwed mothers specifically, even though it is clear from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy’s mission statement, unwed pregnancy is still an underlying concern for those working to prevent teenage pregnancies. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy’s mission statement is

- to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families
- and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and
responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

(http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/about-us/our-mission.aspx)

If we are successful, child and family well-being will improve. There will be less poverty, more opportunities for young men and women to complete their education or achieve other life goals, fewer abortions, and a stronger nation.

An examination of the discourse used in this mission statement is important in understanding this organization’s motivation. Burke’s terministic screen theory is an excellent tool for this analysis. The selection of words used in this mission statement reveals the underlying perceptions of this organization. When they state that their goal is to prevent unplanned pregnancy among adults who are single and young, they reveal that they group unwed motherhood with teenage motherhood. When they say that they want children to be born into “stable, two-parent” families instead of merely “stable” families, they again show their bias against unwed mothers. Although one might argue that this is only because teen mothers are often also unwed, it is important to note that the organization is now targeting women in their 20s at community colleges, but not four-year colleges (Galston, 2008). The fact that the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy is now focusing on women in their 20s at technical colleges suggests that, despite the efforts of feminists during the Sexual Revolution in the 1960s to put control of one’s sexuality into the hands of women, the dominant culture still sees unwed pregnancy, especially unwed pregnancies of the poor (Women at technical colleges, who are typically less privileged than women at four-year universities, are the
only targets of the National Campaign’s efforts to prevent unplanned pregnancies in 20-somethings.), as something that society has the obligation to control.

As the 1960s continued, with great concern over the increase in pregnancies to young white girls, focus on “teenage” mothers finally became a part of the political discourse in this country. Contrary to what many might believe about the emergence of the societal burden of teenage mothers, it was not the black mother who was the initial “cause” of the discussion of the consequences of teen motherhood (Pillow, 2004, p. 28-29).

Pillow argued that white teen mothers were constructed in a new way following the sexual revolution. She argued that following the sexual revolution in the 1960s, the white teenage mother emerged in public discourse as the “Girl Next Door” (p. 28), a girl who was not an “other” but “one of us.” The “one of us” rhetoric was particularly alarming to middle class white families because it indicated that even their daughters could become teen mothers. It created a sense of expediency for dealing with the issue of teen motherhood because parents worried about their own daughters getting pregnant.

This expediency was strengthened by nostalgia for the myth of the “good old days,” which allegedly no longer existed after the sexual revolution and the civil rights movement. SmithBattle (2000) commented on the popular myth that the 50s were an ideal time in which a middle class existence was standard for everyone, a stark contrast to the realities faced by many in the 1960s. SmithBattle stated that “contrary to public opinion, the highest birth rates for teens in the
United States occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s” (p. 31). Like so much of what we assume about teen mothers, this notion of the “good old days” is clearly a misconception.

According to Pillow (2004), the Florence Crittendon Association began creating films during this time period, hoping to influence young girls to avoid premarital sex, marking the beginning of the public campaigns to prevent teenage pregnancy. These films ignored black teen mothers, focusing exclusively on white teen mothers, portraying them as “the girl next door.” Pillow described the main character in one such film, the 1960’s The Sweet Potato Vine, as “wholesome, from a respectable family… caught in this situation… does not wallow in self-pity or doubt… protects herself and her family by seeking professional help” (p. 29). These films appealed to those nostalgic for the mythical utopia of the 1950s, and it is important to note that these nostalgic individuals were most likely white, middle class families from the dominant culture. The depiction of a “wholesome” teen mother in “The Sweet Potato Vine,” reflects the ideology that young white girls are supposed to be wholesome. The title of the film is interesting when viewed through a critical lens. A sweet potato is fleshy fruit that is pleasing to consume, in much the same way that one might imagine a wholesome young white girl as pleasant to consume. The vine is important because the sweet potato is attached to the vine in the same way that a young, middle class girl should be attached to her family. Essentially, a sweet potato is alive but without legs and without the power to leave the vine of its own
will. Perhaps this title reflects this idea that this wholesome teen mother can somehow be rehabilitated and remain attached to her family until a suitable husband arrives to pluck her from her family’s vine.

Meanwhile, by contrast, in 1965, the Moynihan Report described the culture of the black family as a “culture of poverty” presenting it as lacking in “morality and irresponsibility,” presenting the black teenage mother as “untreatable” (Pillow, 2004, p. 30). Again, these ideas about the weaknesses of the black family are challenged by CRITICAL RACE THEORISTS, such as Obgu (2001), who argue that black families are simply different, not inferior. These differing discourses about white and black mothers justified keeping them separated during the 1960s to many in power, despite the government’s ruling that schools and other government facilities be desegregated. In the South especially, desegregation was met with resistance and violence (Pillow, 2004). Most often, the violence was directed at black people, who were supposed to benefit from desegregation. As all black people suffered during this turbulent time, black teen mothers continued to be viewed as morally deficient, wanton women, entirely responsible for the hardships they faced. Table 1 summarizes important events that occurred during the 1960s, a decade of tremendous change for all Americans. As black leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., fought for equality for all United States citizens, women from all walks of life asserted themselves in their homes and in the public sphere. Teen mothers, both black and white, were rocked to and fro in this turbulent era. And when the turbulence settled, teen mothers
would find themselves still in the public eye, but being watched through a lens that was different from how they had been viewed previously.

Perhaps the only foreshadowing of how teen mothers would be viewed in the 1970s was the 1967 release of the movie *Teenage Mother* (Pillow, 2004). Considered scandalous for its time, this movie portrayed a white teenage mother as a sexually promiscuous girl who believed “there was only one way she could trap the man she really wanted.” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zkCnHUnoYY). This idea that teen mothers attempt to “trap” men by having sex with them and getting pregnant echoes the apparent views of Brien and Willis (2008), who seem to believe that teen fathers can “escape” the responsibility of supporting the children that they produce. They wrote, “We assume that, in general, most men do not make ‘mistakes.’ They choose to marry and to become fathers largely in terms of what is in their best interests. This is, of course, dependent upon their ability to find a mate in the marriage market” (p. 131). In the case of Arlene Sue, of course, the innocent males were apparently forced into making a mistake due to her constant efforts at seducing them.

According to the trailer for *Teenage Mother*, “This is the story of a girl who wasn’t careful” (00:48). The narrator continues, as the camera spans the full length of the main character, allegedly only fifteen years old, clad in nothing but a bra, panties, and knee boots, “You can’t keep your hands off Arlene Sue” (1:03). (See Figure 2.) Even the name “Arlene Sue” speaks volumes about the sexist
implications of this movie, as it common for Southerners to call girls by their first and middle names; Southerners are socially constructed as less intelligent, often presented as “white trash.” Arlene Sue definitely lives up to this stereotype. Despite the fact that this movie portrayed a white teen mother, typically presented in this time period as “the girl next door,” the online trailer for the movie portrays Arlene Sue as a wanton vixen who only knew one way to “trap the boy she wanted” (2:21). In other words, this movie was the first time since the Progressive Era that white teen mothers were openly presented in such a scandalous, predatory way, as being at fault for their pregnancies.
The trailer for *Teenage Mother* took the social construction of the white teen mother in a new direction – Arlene Sue got pregnant on purpose to “trap” innocent men, pitting brother against brother. It is important to note that the two brothers in this movie were white, upper middle class boys, who tried to resist Arlene Sue’s advances. “I can get anyone – even you!” boasts promiscuous Arlene Sue in the movie trailer (2:34). The sexism and misogyny in this message cannot be overlooked. This trailer places the blame for the unplanned pregnancy entirely on Arlene Sue, and this is problematic because this does not reflect the fact that the fathers of teenage mothers’ children are also responsible for the pregnancies and should be required to support the children that their sexual encounters produce.
While the actual movie *Teenage Mother* was more about pregnancy prevention than about Arlene Sue’s sexual deviance, the trailer for this movie can only be described as propaganda designed to alarm the public and alert them to the danger of young girls like Arlene Sue. The trailer portrays her as the one who initiates sex with a truck driver who does not want to have sex with her, and two seemingly innocent teenage boys who are presented as wholesome and only willing to have sex with Arlene Sue after a great deal of very pushy persuasion; in one disturbing scene in which she is chased on a busy highway by groups of people in speeding automobiles, finally overtaken on the side of the road and attacked by one teenage boy as a crowd forms and watches approvingly, the narrator of the trailer describes this scene that hints strongly at pending sexual violence, with the words, “One night the whole gang got even” (3:46), as if Arlene Sue deserved to be the victim of a sexual attack, as if all the other teenagers in the movie would be so shocked by her abnormal sexuality, that they would be compelled to form something akin to a lynch mob and punish her… to gang rape her…

*Publicly…*

…In the same way that the Puritans two centuries earlier had publicly flogged unwed mothers, when the age of sexual consent was only seven years old, the girlfriends of the boys driving the cars participate in the attack on Arlene Sue, as if they will cheer while a gang rape takes place. Why? Apparently because Arlene Sue asked for it when she seduced so many innocent men. This is
troubling because it implies that the girlfriends would not have their own standpoints. It asserts that there is only one right way of looking at Arlene Sue, and it is the way that their boyfriends see her. From a critical feminist lens, this disturbing scene implies that any woman who steps outside the boundaries, set by men, of what a women should be, deserve to be publicly gang raped and that women should cheer for this misogyny, which could just as easily be directed toward them if they later choose to step out of line. The women’s standpoints are obviously important to consider here. If these young girls watching this gang rape so want the approval of the men around them, they have to support what is happening, even if it means that another woman is being violated. Ariel Levy (2005) explored this idea in her book, Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture. Levy talked about women who become “one of the boys,” going to strip clubs with men and engaging in other activities, such as Girls Gone Wild, that objectify and dehumanize women. Levy posits that these women are chauvinists, just like men. Clearly, not all women have the same standpoints, and social status certainly influences the way that a woman sees the world. All too frequently, privileged women accept tacit assumptions about poor women and condone their dehumanizing treatment by participating in much the same way that men do. Clearly, the girls watching the violence leveled against Arlene Sue are condoning what they are seeing in much the same way that Levy’s female chauvinist pigs who visit strip clubs are condoning and contributing to a similar objectification of women with a lower social standing. Finally, according
to Foucault (1975), public punishment of the deviants in society is useful when attempting to control the rest of society. While the crowd around Arlene Sue appears to enjoy what they are witnessing, the narrator describes the scene, as “One night the whole gang got even” (3:46). Clearly, what is being done to Arlene Sue is aimed at punishing her for her deviance, but it is also a strategy that can be used to control other women, even the women who appear to be happy about this gang rape.

It is interesting to note that in 1969, just prior to the release of Teenage Mother the Perry vs. Grenada Municipal Separate School District ruling was upheld (Pillow, 2004, p. 64). In this case, the courts found that teen mothers were not morally fit for regular schools because of the potential influence they might have on other students. The courts that upheld this ruling might have had a teen mother like Arlene Sue in mind when they rendered this verdict. Arlene Sue was definitely portrayed as “morally unfit.” The Grenada Municipal School District apparently felt that teen fathers were like the innocent truck driver and lily-white teenage brothers who had sex with Arlene Sue; the teenage brothers were the victims, and, therefore, could continue their educations despite the fact that they too had sex outside of marriage. The ruling appears to be based on the idea that the pregnant body of teen mothers needs to be hidden from other teens. Perhaps the ruling is based on the idea that the teen mother would be proud of her pregnancy and that she might encourage other girls to become pregnant too. Regardless of how this case was decided, this ruling is horribly unjust. It also
reflects a logical fallacy in the argument made by the dominant class that teen mothers want to live off welfare and, like hungry parasites, suck away the middle class’s hard-earned tax dollars. By directing attention towards the stereotype of teen mothers through the use of fictional characters like Arlene Sue, attention is deflected away from the fact that teen mothers have been and still often are denied their right to an equal education, which is clearly one of the real reasons that they live in poverty and rely on public assistance. Interestingly, in a personal interview that I conducted with SmithBattle during the course of this research, she stated that in her research, she has come to believe that becoming a teen mother can help a young women’s academic aspirations increase; she felt that with many of the participants in the studies she has done, teen mothers were actually “being pulled forward by mothering… getting better grades… setting higher goals for themselves” (L. SmithBattle, personal communication, Mar 17, 2005).

| 1960 | F.C. Homes produce the play, “The Sweet Potato Vine,” about a morally upright, White teen mother who moves to New York out of shame and struggles to survive. True Confessions runs a series of stories about White, middle class women who were once teen mothers |
| 1963 | F.C. Director Mary Louise Allen makes a public statement about her worry that F.C. homes in the South will be overrun by black teenagers if they are forced to desegregate. |

Table 1: Notable Events in the 1960s
1964 | The Civil Rights Act calls for end to segregation in publicly funded services, although F.C. Homes continued to find implicit ways to segregate until 1970s.

1967 | The movie “Teenage Mother” is released.

Epidemic Language and The Carter Administration

The impact of the sexual revolution on the social construction of the teen mother was almost immediate. Pillow (2004) reported that as more middle class white girls were having sex before marriage, getting pregnant, and having abortions, the general public became increasingly concerned about the prevention of teenage pregnancy. The political climate of the 1970s would soon force the negative stigma of the teen mother – black teen mothers, white teen mothers, and now Latina teen mothers – into the public eye to an extreme not previously reached in the social construction of the teen mother in the United States.

During the administration of President Jimmy Carter, rhetoric about the teen mother rapidly escalated to what rhetorical theorist Linda Singer refers to as “epidemic logic” (1993), or language aimed at establishing a feeling of exigency in the public about dealing with the problem of early childbearing. Pillow (2004) argued that this epidemic logic largely involved the use of highly racialized language (p. 32) and that the right to an equal education soon to be guaranteed to teen mothers in the early 1970s was primarily enacted because middle class white girls were having babies at alarmingly higher rates.
following the sexual revolution, bringing questions about those girls’ access to public education into the public eye (p. 30).

For the first time in United States history, following the years of radical change and focus on disenfranchised groups in the 1960s, the federal government made a move to legally protect the rights of teen mothers to an education equal to that of their peers. While many people only know about the act’s implications for athletics, Title IX, passed in 1972, ordained that

a recipient [of federal funding] shall not discriminate against any student, or exclude any student from its education program or activity […] on the basis of that student’s pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, or termination of pregnancy or recovery therefrom, unless the student requests voluntarily to participate in a separate portion of the program. (Mink, 1972)

Despite the passage of Title IX on June 23, 1972, Pillow posited that many teen mothers were denied their right to schooling in the early 1970s and the early 1980s. More than anything else, school districts took the word “voluntarily” from the language concerning teen mothers in Title IX, and used it to force many teen mothers out of school, one way or another. Deborah Davis (2004) shared the story of a teenage mother in the early 80s, coerced by her principal into withdrawing from regular classes without being informed of her legal right to stay in school. Karen Landrum, the former teen mother reflecting on the experience, wrote

in order to finish high school, he informed me, I needed to withdraw from my regular classes, come to school through the back doors, after school hours, and
complete the year by correspondence courses. He strictly forbade me to communicate with other classmates; talking to them would be a cause to terminate the course and I would not get my diploma. If I completed the course, I would receive my diploma through the mail. He would not allow me to participate in the graduation ceremony. (p. 63)

This story clearly reflects the attitude from the early days in Florence Crittendon homes that teen motherhood is somehow contagious. The principal in this story would not even allow this teen mother to communicate with her peers. Perhaps he felt the need to let them believe she was no longer in school because he believed that this would discourage them from having sex and risking pregnancy. At any rate, it reflects the undemocratic idea that the middle class has the right to control the poor in such a way. This principal seemed to believe that, upon becoming pregnant, this young woman forfeited her constitutional rights to be a self-determining, autonomous person, which can be adversely affected by the lack of an education. Ironically, the father of this girl’s baby may have very well still been in this principal’s school, and if he were, the other students likely knew that he fathered a child with this young woman. However, as a male participant in the creation of this child, he was not seen as a contagious threat to other students. Again, this smacks of the same misogynistic beliefs that caused female children in the Puritan era to be publicly punished for their pregnancies, even if the fathers of their babies were adults who may have forced them to have sex. Furthermore, once again, this is an example of the logical fallacy that is imbedded so deeply in the dominant ideology concerning teen mothers that, despite its obviousness, most people fail to see. If teen
mothers are denied their right to an education, the chance that they will rely on public assistance is greatly increased; if the goal is to reduce the tax burden that is caused by teen mothers, then, logically, our goal should be to keep teen mothers in school.

In 1972, a Georgia school district successfully argued that it had the right to expel a pregnant student, who could get an equal education in nighttime GED classes; not only that, but the district convinced the courts that keeping pregnant girls out of regular classes would “maintain a safe environment” for other students (Pillow, 2004, p. 65). Pillow also wrote about a student that same year who was denied her education in Indiana, even though this student did not have transportation to nighttime classes. The Indiana district argued that this student could return to school after giving birth, but only if her behavior was “acceptable”; moreover, the policy of keeping pregnant women out of regular classes was only in place to “protect the student body at large from contamination by the unwed pregnant teen” (p.65). Meanwhile, there is no mention of such consequences for the teen fathers who may have been involved in these pregnancies. Even though they participated in sex too, only the pregnant females were viewed as a threat to the other students. This was 1972, which is AFTER the sexual revolution, so it is highly likely that a large percentage of the study body in this school was engaging in sexual activity. However, only the females who happened to become pregnant were seen as unfit for school and as a danger to the other students. This reflects the androcentric view that pregnancy, a condition that can only exist within a female body, is a dirty thing that should be hidden from others. It also reflects the sexist ideology that pregnancy is a woman’s responsibility, but not a man’s. Finally, it is indicative of the dominant middle class
belief that pregnancy outside of marriage is always a bad thing that should be hidden, especially from children.

While Landrum was a white teen mother denied her right to the same public education that her non-pregnant peers received, Upchurch and McCarthy (1990) found that Title IX did impact educational opportunities for white teen mothers in a positive way. Unfortunately, they also found that in the 1970s and 1980s, Title IX did not ultimately help black mothers’ access to an equal education.

Chris Vitale, a former teen mother contributing her story to Deborah Davis’ book (1994) described what it was like in the alternative schools for teen mothers that most black teen mothers who stayed in school attended in the 1970s and 1980s. As one of the only white teen mothers who stayed in this alternative school for teen mothers, Vitale was struck by the fact that few white teen mothers chose to stay in the school, wondering if it was because black teen mothers primarily attended this type of school. She stated about every three to four days, a white girl would come to the school. Consistently, she would keep her distance and build a wall between herself and the outside world. Usually, we’d try to settle her in a bit, but at the end of the day, we’d never see her again. […] We weren’t sure why they never returned; maybe they didn’t feel like they fit in, maybe it was a race issue, or maybe they just gave up. (Davis, 2004, p. 23-24)
Vitale’s experience at this alternative school was mostly positive, and she went on to be a successful mother and nurse. It is important to note that her observations come from the standpoint of a white teen mother.

In 1975, teen pregnancy, according to Wanda Pillow, “officially emerged as a social problem (2004, p. 31) when Congress began working to find a way to prevent teen pregnancy. Edward Kennedy proposed the “National School Age Mother and Child Health Act,” which gave districts the right to create separate programs for school aged mothers. Although this act did not officially pass, school districts all over the country clearly began creating alternative special education programs for teen mothers anyway. In 1976, the First Interhemispheric Conference on Adolescent Fertility met in Virginia; the epidemic logic that began with Kennedy’s proposition continued to be a part of the discussion at this conference. A large focus was on identifying exactly what types of girls were becoming teen mothers (p. 31); they wanted to know if white girls were indeed as likely to become teen mothers as black girls. During the Carter administration, the fear that teen pregnancy was growing like an epidemic among white, middle class teen mothers continued to bring the issue into the discussions of policy makers. While their language focused primarily on helping these women, Pillow (2004) showed that a number of women, white women and minority women, were excluded from the educational experiences provided to their peers during this time period. The Carter administration passed the Adolescent Health Services and Pregnancy and Prevention Care Act in 1976, and at this point, the evolution of “pregnancy prevention rhetoric” discussed later in this chapter will show that the Carter administration ultimately
contributed to the negative stigma associated with teen motherhood. Table 2 outlines important events regarding the social construction of the teen mother in the 1970s.

**Table 2: Notable Events in the 1970s**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Title IX is passed, guaranteeing the school-aged mother the right to an education, even if that education occurs alongside her non-pregnant peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Kennedy proposes the National School-Age Mother and Child Health Act.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>The First Interhemispheric Conference on Adolescent Fertility is held in Virginia. The Hyde Amendment, which repealed funding for abortion clinics and limited what adult workers could say to teens about contraception, is passed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>The Carter Administration passes the Adolescent Health Services and Pregnancy and Prevention Care Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td><em>Phi Delta Kappan</em> publishes an article about upper and middle class White teens getting pregnant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Welfare Queen and the Reagan Administration**

The 1980s ushered in a new political era in the United States and, much like the impact of the sexual revolution on society’s awareness of teen mothers, the impact of the Regan Era had an immediate result in the evolving social construction of the teen mother. According to Pillow (2004), the new Republican regime refocused the public discussion of teen mothers. Instead of fixating on the growing rates of white teen mothers, the concern shifted almost immediately to the economic burden to tax payers of the black teen mother. In fact, Pillow reported that it was President Reagan himself who coined the
phrase “welfare queen” to describe the teen mother who used having babies to avoid work (p. 34). Pillow asserted that, through the mid-1980s, government policy continued to focus on teenage mothers with such acts as the Adolescent Family Life Act in 1981, which promoted the idea of “Chastity Centers” in public schools. The phrase “children having children” also began to circulate regularly in popular media (p. 35).

The myth of the welfare mother still exists today. The aforementioned comments by Bill O’Reilly regarding Jamie Lynn Spears’ pregnancy is only one example. A perusal of discussion boards, blogs, and other public spheres of discourse readily reveals the impact that Ronald Reagan’s “welfare queen” term has had. Take, for example, the text taken from this Facebook group called “Where’s MY Government Money?” (All text is copied in its original form, despite misspellings, mistakes in usage/syntax, and grammatical errors.)

Are you a female, that finished highschool, got a job or went to college, with out having a child before 20?

So I was thinking the other day, Every year the Government gives MILLIONS of OUR hard earned Dollars to teen mothers and require ABSOLUTELY NOTHING from them in return!!! Why are politicians promoting teen pregnancy by giving them free money, almost encouraging them to have sex, becasue the goverment is right there ridding them of consequences! Why is it that there is NO reward for females like myself and others around the world, who successfully complete highschool, attend college,
and somehow manage to not get pregnant? Shouldn't we be the ones getting paid? We are not adding to our Nation's economic problems by bringing children into the world that the government will be responsible for its care!!! We deserve something, our tax dollars are paying for thier irresponsible actions!! Join this group, I am in the process of getting my politicians attention and speaking with him to see that something is done to reward US for being responsible, and bettering the country! In NO way am I putting down teen mothers, or saying that they should be stuck caring for the child alone! I just believe they are being rewarded for something negative, rather than getting hit with the reality they need. We should be rewarded for something positive!!!

(http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=14589132103&ref=sear ch&sid=12715115.1105777931..1)

While the English teacher in me would love to spend time discussing the miserable writing that infects this entire paragraph, what is far more important is the idea, on the part of the creator of this page, that teen mothers are being rewarded for having children because they get large amounts of money from the government. Those who have never been on the receiving end of government assistance fail to realize how difficult and demeaning the experience of being on welfare can actually be. Few realize how the red tape and desensitized social workers often prevent those who desperately need assistance to survive in a only a minimally adequate way from receiving the help they need. Setting
aside the degradation that comes with applying for and using public assistance, this young woman’s assertions also make little sense from a purely economic perspective. A person depending on government assistance for food, shelter, and healthcare will only have the cheapest food, the cheapest shelter, and the cheapest healthcare. No matter how one might look at government assistance, it is hardly an optimal situation. Clearly, this young woman is speaking from her privileged standpoint, and it is unlikely that she actually knows on a personal level anyone who is poor. Additionally, a young mother going to college could get a great deal more money from the government through student loans than she might receive through welfare, especially if she were going to graduate school. This would give her more money to spend AND a higher social status.

Additionally, this statement is evidence of how deeply embedded the social construction of the teen mother is in our society; this young woman appear to accept the idea that teen mothers not only do not go to school at all, but that they do not work at all.

This young woman’s misconceptions reflect a widely held belief among the dominant class that living on government assistance is comfortable and easy. The voices of those who have experienced what it is really like need to be amplified for the dominant class and real narratives about living in poverty need to be shared with misinformed young women like the founder of this group. A fantastic example of such a narrative was written by Jennifer Lind, a former teen mother who shared her story in Deborah Davis’ book (2004); she reflected on the experience of receiving unemployment in the era just following the Reagan administration. She wrote
I stood in the unemployment line with tears streaming down my already puffy face. In my hand I clenched the list of places I had applied to and the check I had been sent for last week. Thirty-five dollars. My feet ached. [...] ‘It wasn’t enough,’ I said. ‘It barely covered the gas I used to drive to all these places.’ ‘The check is based on last years’ income,’ [the case worker] replied. Tears ran into my mouth and down my chin as I tried to explain to her, again, that I had been a junior in high school last year and that this check was based on my summer job. (2004, p. 182)

In 1986, the epidemic logic that began in the Carter administration reared its head in the form of language designed to help the poor. The Children’s Defense Fund actually used the word “epidemic” in the widely-distributed pamphlet, “Teen Pregnancy is Epidemic/ Teen Pregnancy and You” (Pillow, 2004, p. 33). By using the words “epidemic” and “you” in the title of this pamphlet, the rhetorical implication that teen pregnancy posed an immediate danger to all of us was conveyed. The pamphlet contributed to the negative social construction of the teen mother by portraying her as a threat to everyone.

Meanwhile, the black teen mother continued to be linked with welfare. Pillow pointed out that this focus on the costs to taxpayers of teen motherhood is ironic because “birthrates to teens were at their lowest” from the 1960s through the 1980s (p. 26). This means that the real concern was probably not economic in nature. It was probably cultural. Following the sexual revolution, women were embracing their sexualities
without shame. It was a phenomenon that ran counter to the Puritan foundation of our political ideology, and this meant that even if birthrates to teens were actually low, the problem had to be portrayed to the public as epidemic. Nonetheless, it was during the 1980s that the popular media began to create a lot of hype about teen motherhood. For example, in 1986, *Education Week* published a story on the fact that the number of births to white teenaged mothers was on the decline, while the number of births to black teen mothers was on the rise (Pillow, 2004, p. 36); meanwhile, *Ebony* magazine published a story on the decline of the black family around the same time (p. 41). Pillow argued that the “myth” of the black welfare mother, perpetuated by the media since Ronald Reagan first publicly discussed the “welfare queen,” “further situated the Black family as deficit” (p. 42). Pillow presented as evidence of this the case of Liz Walker, an unmarried black female newswoman in Boston, who became pregnant out of wedlock. Although she made over $500,000 a year and was not a teenager, she received a great deal of negative feedback in the wake of her pregnancy (p. 42). This is ironic because the alleged logic driving the epidemic language surrounding teen pregnancy centers on the idea that teen mothers do not finish high school, do not get jobs, and rely on the government to support them through public assistance, as is shown today in the work of Hoffman and Maynard (2008), who argued that teen mothers cost U.S. taxpayers 7.5 million dollars annually. Liz Walker was not a teen mother or a mother dependent on welfare; nonetheless, the public treated her as if she were dangerous in the same way that some principals felt teen mothers were too morally impure to remain in school with their peers. Critical race theorists might argue that this reflects the racist ideology of the
dominant class. As a black mother who was constantly in the public eye, Walker was seen as a threat for many reasons. She was an unwed mother earning half a million dollars a year. Moreover, she was a black unwed mother earning half a million dollars a year. Her daily appearances on television challenged the dominant narrative about what a black unwed mother is like, and people felt threatened by this. The complaints about Liz Walker’s pregnancy were likely fueled by racism and sexism.

As the epidemic language about minority teen mothers continued to circulate in popular media in the late 80s, government policy continued to reflect the national concern that teen mothers would overrun the welfare system, in much the same way that F.C. Homes in the South feared they would be “overrun” by black teen mothers following desegregation. In 1988, the Family Support Act was passed, mandating that states could require teen mothers to live with their parents to receive government assistance (Pillow, 2004). This could be problematic for teens whose parents did not agree to continue to support them after finding out about their pregnancies. Moreover, when one considers SmithBattle’s (2004) ideas on the ways that teen mothers can reject the parental practices of their parents when they feel they were not good, this act might have actually forced a teen and her child when it was not in her best interests. The act also indicated that if an 18 or 19 year old in school was not making “adequate progress,” she could be required to participate in “work training” programs deemed “more appropriate” for her by the state (Pillow, 2004, p. 44). Such a decry is contradictory to the very fundamentals of democracy because it is based on the idea of Social Darwinism – it asserts that the privileged in society are so because they are smarter than the less privileged, and the poor
are poor because they are not smart. Even more important is the assumption that the
privileged class has the right to make decisions about the poor because they have the
intelligence to know what is best for them. The parents of upper middle class teens would
be quick to fight the government if it attempted to assign an “appropriate” work program
to their children who are not making “adequate progress” in school. However, hardly an
eyebrow was raised in the late 1980s when such an act was passed that could put too
much power in the hands of guidance counselors over the educational futures of teen
mothers, especially minority teen mothers. This paternalistic act smacked of classism
and racism because it implied that the poor needed to be told what to do and how to live
because they were incapable of knowing what was best for them.

Table 3 outlines important events that occurred in the social construction of the
teen mother during the 1980s. Due to underlying racism on the part of many Americans,
the 1980s were a time when hostility towards teen mothers over their financial burden to
taxpayers grew (Selman, 1998). According to Mike Males (2007), the very idea that
babies cost taxpayers too much money is indicative of this hostility. He wrote

The notion that babies—selectively applied to poor people’s
babies—“cost too much money” is an appalling question on many
dimensions. It reduces human beings and human potential to a
predetermined red or black bottom line. It is almost impossible to
calculate in unbiased fashion. And, in the case of teenage mothers,
the calculations have been warped by academic fraud and rank
bigotry to produce a politically pleasing result. And so it’s not
surprising that this reactionary throwback to long-discredited
eugenics has become the central argument for preventing what we
call “teenage motherhood”—advanced by liberal lobbies. (“Do
Teen Mothers Save Taxpayers Money?”)

**Table 3: Notable Events in the 1980s**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1980 | Ronald Reagan coins the phrase “the welfare queen.”  
Phrases like “children having children” begin to emerge in the popular media.  
The focus shifts to black teen mothers. |
| 1981 | Orin Hatch promotes the Adolescent Family Life Act or “the Chastity Bill.” |
| 1986 | *Education Week* publishes a story on declining white teen births and increasing  
Black teen births.  
Children’s Defense Fund distributes the “Teen Pregnancy is Epidemic” pamphlet.  
*Ebony* magazine publishes an article on the decline of the Black family. |
| 1987 | Unmarried, black anchor woman Liz Walker is publicly chastised for her pregnancy. |
| 1988 | The Family Support Act is passed. |

**The “Browning” of America**

Unfortunately, the changing of the guard from Republican to Democrat upon the
election of Bill Clinton in 1992 did little to change the climate of hostility toward
minority teen mothers that grew in the 1980s (Pillow, 2004). Just prior to Clinton’s
election, in 1990, *TIME* magazine ran a cover story entitled “America’s Changing
Colors” (see Figure 2).
The cover of the magazine asked the question, “What will the U.S. be like when whites are no longer the majority?” and the article argued that, due to increasing minority births and declining white births, by the year 2020, white people would no longer be the majority in the United States (Henry, 1990). Irrational fears perpetuated about teen mothers contributing to the “browning of America” ran rampant during the 1990s (Pillow, 2004). But why should anyone feel threatened by census numbers? If we harbor no secret judgments against people of other races, then census numbers would be nothing more than numbers. And yet, for some reason, the idea behind this story remains in the
public sphere. The very idea that it is somehow a bad thing for white people to no longer be the majority in the United States is based on racism. In 1993, Bill Clinton spoke in favor of America’s increasing diversity in a speech to students at Portland State University (Sobran et al., 1993); in response to this speech, conservative Pat Buchanan said “Mr. Clinton assured us that it will be a better America when we are all minorities and realize true ‘diversity.’ Well, those students [at Portland State] are going to find out, for they will spend their golden years in a Third World America” (Hsu, 2009). The idea that the presence of more people of color will somehow cause our country to become a third world country is clearly racist. It is also particularly ironic considering the fact that our country’s current economic crisis was caused by rich white people and that people of color and poor white people were simply the victims hit hardest by their greed.

Even though Clinton spoke out in favor of diversity, he was not as open minded about teenage motherhood. He made the statement in a 1996 State of the Union Address that teen pregnancy is “one of the seven greatest challenges” facing the U.S. He later stated in a radio discussion of his speech, “We have to make it clear that a baby doesn’t give you a right and won’t give you the money to leave home and drop out of school,” (Pillow, 2004, p. 46). Clinton’s statements about teenage motherhood championed the perspectives of conservative politicians who were still nostalgic for the Reagan Era; his comments did not really serve a specific purpose. In other words, they did not lead to any significant changes in how the government dealt with teen mothers. Quite the contrary, what these comments likely did was to improve his rapport with conservatives in Congress. As Burke said, language has political aims (1989). In this case, Clinton was
attempting to find common ground with his political adversaries. Teen mothers, a
silenced, disempowered group, were simply a topic that could unify the opposing parties,
as it is an issue that the dominant class, which is comprised of both liberals and
conservatives, recognizes and seemingly despises.

Obviously, Clinton’s statement reflected the misconception that teen mothers
want to drop out of school and live off welfare and ignored the fact that many teen
mothers have been denied their right to an education equal to that of their peers. When
one considers that the image of the welfare queen is usually connected to black women in
the media, this statement reflects a racist ideology. According to Littlefield (2008)
The media have historically perpetuated ideas about race and ethnicity that place
African American women at a clear disadvantage. The overabundant
portrayal of the African American woman stereotype, as Jezebel in
popular culture, raises serious questions concerning the state of race in
America and the persistence of linking sexual promiscuity to the nature
and identity of African American women. Despite the changes and
understanding of race as a social concept with no biological meaning, race
is still a factor in the lives of African American women who, since
slavery, have been consistently portrayed as the sexual prowler. The media
perpetuate this image, popularize it, and present it as the defining
characteristic of African American women, thus leaving our communities
with images that are damaging, demeaning, and injurious to race relations.
(p. 677)
In 1996, congress began a series of hearing on the “decline of the American family” (Pillow, 2004, p. 46). Meanwhile, as immigrants from South America began to be more visible in light of these discussions on the “American” family, Texas Health Commissioner William Archer made the public statement that “Hispanics lack the cultural belief that getting pregnant is a bad thing” (p. 45). In other words, Archer identifies Latina procreation itself as a “bad thing,” not the impregnation of Latina teen mothers. Clearly, the aforementioned fear of minority groups taking over America impacts statements like this. If Archer agrees with Pat Buchanan that having more people of color than whites in our country would automatically make us a third world country, then it is easy to see why he feels Latina women should believe that procreating is a bad thing. However, these ideas are clearly racist because they reflect the idea that only white people are capable of keeping the United States in a position of leadership in the world.

Pillow argued that the alarm surrounding the fear of the “browning of America” led to strict government regulations on unwed teen pregnancy. She argued that “by [the mid 1990s] unwed teen pregnancy was firmly situated as a legitimate social concern” and that its regulation was “more emphatically, a societal right” (p. 47). In 1996, Congressional Republicans sponsored welfare reform that would enact this type of regulation. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was designed to protect the American taxpayer from the “irresponsible” teen mother (p. 47). The act spelled out the attitude towards teen mothers by explicitly stating “it’s time to change the norms and make responsible parenting the norm, not the
exception” (PRWORA, 1996). The act proposed to make “responsible” parenting the norm by denying minor mothers the welfare that “adult” mothers might receive. While this act has now expired, its impact is certainly still felt by the children and mothers who grew up while it was in force. The language reflects the misconception that teen parents, as poor parents, are automatically irresponsible parents, deflecting attention away from the reasons that teen mothers might be poor. Cocca (2002) wrote about this very problem, when she looked at how the Personal Responsibility Act of 1995 would not allow teen mothers below the age of 18 to receive welfare assistance because it was thought that this would encourage them to remain on welfare for the rest of their lives. Other researchers have shown that this is simply not the case and that becoming a parent can actually help an at-risk teen to mature and set higher goals (Zachry, 1995). It is important to note that this study did not imply that teen women become pregnant in order to mature; it merely points out that it is possible for positive results to follow the birth of a teen mother’s child. Corcoran and Kunz (1997) found that going on welfare at a young age was not a significant factor in staying on welfare, even Hotz et al. (1997, 2008) found that teen mothers who were poor to begin with were no more likely than their poor peers to be on welfare or other forms of government assistance.

Even with a Democratic president in office through most of the 90s, the stigmatization of teen mothers in the United States only continued to grow, and policy makers worked to slow the growth of minority births through welfare reform. While the real fear behind the harmful and alarmist rhetoric, like that shown in the trailer for the movie Teenage Mother, that dominated the language of the media and politicians in this
decade was likely more about growing numbers of minorities than it was about teen mothers themselves, Burkean scapegoating (Burke, 1984), or “in its purest form the use of a sacrificial receptacle for the ritual unburdening of one’s sins,” which functions in society as a technique of purification (p.16), of teen mothers through the language that was used in such policies as the PRWORA Act of 1996, which argued that it would make “responsible parenting” the norm (which implies that teen parents cannot be responsible), served the political function of attempting to slow the growth of minority populations (Pillow, 2004). Table 4 outlines the important events in the social construction of teen mothers in the 1990s.

**Table 4: Notable Events in the 1990s**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Congress begins a series of hearings on the decline of the American family. Clinton’s declares teen pregnancy one of America’s “seven greatest problems” in his State of the Union Address.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>William Archer, III makes public statement that Hispanics lack cultural knowledge that “getting pregnant is a bad thing.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The 21st Century**

As the 21st century began, the fear that Latinos would overtake our country has only grown stronger throughout the United States. The factoring in of teen mothers in this debate is important to note. In much the same way that *TIME*’s “Browning of America” article tied the fear of growing numbers of people of color with declining
numbers of white people, teenaged Latina mothers are readily ushered to the front lines of political discussions regarding teen motherhood.

While the attitude that teen mothers are a social burden is still evidenced through such examples as the aforementioned Facebook group, “Where’s (sic) MY government money,” other portrayals of teenaged mothers, particularly white teenaged mothers, have been a common topic of discussion for the popular media, as well as the new writing venues, such as blogs and wikis, for the general public made possible by the Internet.

In 2007, the release of the critically acclaimed movie Juno presented a white, middle class teenaged mother who casually explains to her parents that she is pregnant. In the trailer for the movie, her parents react without much ado, stating with a humorous tone that they would rather she be “expelled” or on “hard drugs” than pregnant (Juno Trailer, 0:46) and she proceeds to win the admiration of her peers as her stomach grows with child. The trailer shows the young girl’s reaction to her pregnancy test, as an onlooker replies, flippantly, “That ain’t no Etch-A-Sketch. That’s one doodle that can’t be undid, Home Skillet” (Juno Trailer, 0:27). The young girl decides to give her baby up for adoption and does so without too much of a struggle, finding ads for adoptive parents who are “Desperately Seeking Spawn” (Juno Trailer, 0:56). The movie presents teenage pregnancy as something cool and easy to endure, with few consequences. Juno does not seem to experience any lasting feelings of remorse over giving her baby up for adoption, when she tells the adoptive parents, “If I could just have the thing now and give it to you, I totally would, but I’m guessing it looks probably like a Sea Monkey right now and we should let it get probably a little cuter” (Juno trailer, 1:26). This portrayal of teenage
motherhood, though humorous, does not depict the reality of teenage motherhood because Juno’s life goes far too smoothly as she attends school while pregnant and eventually gives her baby up for adoption.

Some might see the movie Juno as portraying a positive teen pregnancy. However, several components make this problematic. First of all, Juno is a middle class, white teenage girl. So, we might wonder if this positive portrayal is reminiscent of the “Sweet Potato Vine” (Pillow, 2004) series produced by F.C. Homes. It portrayed the teen mothers as a “girl next door” type who simply got into some trouble but who could be rehabilitated once she gave her baby up for adoption. Therefore, the movie reinforces some negative ideas about white, middle class teen mothers, as well as about teen mothers and adoption. While there likely are white, middle class teen mothers who have given their babies up for adoption and who returned to a “normal” life at that point, their perspectives do not even come close to representing the standpoints of all the teen mothers who are living completely different life stories.

Secondly, for those who believe the epidemic logic surrounding teen motherhood, a public portrayal of a teen mother who does not face dire, permanent consequences for her careless, immoral actions, is dangerous because it might encourage other young women to get pregnant too. While this irrational point of view completely denies the possibility that teenage girls (and boys!) might have sex because they simply want to have sex, it is an idea that is so entrenched in the American psyche that even today, when I almost have a Ph.D. and have been married to the father of my two successful, well-
adjusted children for twenty years, I am still often treated like I should be ashamed of the fact that I was a teen mother.

The harm that can be done by the hip portrayal of a teen mother in the movie *Juno* became more apparent in December of 2007 when the paparazzi lambasted Britney’s Spears 16-year old sister Jamie Lynn’s pregnancy. The public reacted negatively, assuming that Jamie Lynn would influence other young girls to have sex. This young Nickelodeon star was supposed to be a role model for young girls who watched the program. Outraged parents suggested her popular television program, *Zoey 101*, be pulled from the Nickelodeon lineup. When executives made the decision to keep the program on air, the media questioned the decision. A seventh grade teacher in Orlando, Florida seemed to sum up the fears of those angry over Nickelodeon’s decision to continue *Zoey 101* when she stated in an MTV article “My fear is that young girls will start to see this as OK, and the family structure in the U.S. will deteriorate further than it already has. Miss Spears has money to support herself and a baby at the age of 16. Most girls who get themselves into this trouble do not have the same resources” (Kaufman, 2007). This statement reflects the irrational fear of F.C. Homes in the South, who kept black unwed mothers segregated from white unwed mothers, even after desegregation laws were passed, out of the belief that teenage pregnancy is contagious. It is an illogical belief that indicates that as long as teens do not see other pregnant teens or have any contact with them, they will not get pregnant; it denies the fact that teenage girls (and boys!) might choose to engage in sex simply because they want to engage in sex and not
because they want to have a baby. It also perpetuates the idea that only people with enough money should be allowed to have babies, and this is a classist ideology.

Placing a critical lens on the concerns expressed by this 25-year old teacher is an important step in understanding the impact of the social construction of the teen mother in the United States. This teacher seemed to be arguing that keeping a teenage girl who is having a baby in the public eye might have phenomenally destructive results on the American family by glamorizing teen pregnancy. She insinuated that other teenage girls might believe having a baby at 16 is a good thing if this one young woman is allowed to continue her career, a career that she has a right to continue in much the same way that actors such as Robert Downey Jr. and Charlie Sheen (two of the highest paid actors in Hollywood) have continued their own careers. This seventh grade teacher does not believe that Jamie Lynn has the same right to continue her career because it puts her in the public eye, following an unplanned pregnancy, which she must believe is somehow much worse than Sheen’s abuse of his wife or Downey’s drug abuse. This reflects the sexist society in which this teacher lives and places her in the position of female chauvinist pig, described by Levy (2005).

Not surprisingly, this seventh grade teacher went on immediately to discuss the economic consequences of teenage pregnancy. Other mothers, unlike Ms. Spears, will obviously not have the economic means to support their babies. Her concern was seemingly not for the well-being of the babies or the teenage mothers, but instead on the financial situation in which these young mothers would find themselves. Again, this is
classism because she apparently thinks of poorer women as welfare queens and imagines that they will waste her hard earned, middle class tax dollars.

“Fun Stuff”

The preceding accounts of the social construction of the teen mother provide support for the concept of a dominant narrative of teenage motherhood, a narrative that argues teenage mothers and their children are in a hopeless situation. As a result of this negative social construction of teen motherhood, teen pregnancy prevention rhetoric unfortunately seeks to prevent teen pregnancy through an attack on teen mothers. In other words, this prevention rhetoric seems to operate on the premise that a negative portrayal of teen mothers, one in direct contrast to the funny portrayal in a movie like Juno, might help teens to make better decisions about sexual activity and not get pregnant. Perhaps they believe that the best prevention is scaring teens into not having sex, rather than educating them on how to avoid getting pregnant. While this idea does not readily make sense, it is clearly demonstrated through posters currently on sale on the Web site for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. While pregnancy prevention messages appear in fine print that is easily overlooked on these posters, messages conveying the negative stigmatization of teen mothers appear in bright red letters and are impossible to miss.

The aforementioned mission statement for this campaign implies that preventing teen pregnancy and single motherhood will reduce poverty; the organization seems to support the notion that teen pregnancy is a cause of poverty, not a symptom of poverty. Moreover, their mission statement seems to advocate the idea that opportunities for
young women can only be created by preventing teenage motherhood. They do not seem to recognize the possibility of educational opportunity for teenage women who are already parents, an idea that exists so far outside the dominant narrative that it appears to be beyond consideration.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy’s negative, disparaging, and unethical portrayal of teenage mothers is best presented at a link on their Web site that is ironically called “Fun Stuff.” This link title is ironic because a rhetorical analysis of these posters reveal that they seem to be more about maligning teen mothers than about educating other teens about safe sex, something that can hardly be considered “fun.” These posters are disturbing because they perpetuate myths about teen mothers and, in the process, hurt teen mothers by dehumanizing and objectifying them. Without knowing who created these posters, a viewer might well come to the conclusion that they were created by a racist, classist hate group that wants to perpetuate the ideas of “white trash” and “minority sluts.”

As I am not certain that the controversial posters currently for sale on their site will continue to be there in the future, I am including a screen capture of the page in the “Fun Stuff Section” of their site where the posters I will now share are sold. This screen capture is shown in Figure 3, with red circles denoting sections of the site that show the link name and one of the posters that is for sale. The series of posters in question show a variety of teenage girls, scantily-clad, most often minority, underneath incredibly demeaning, negative captions.
For example, in Figure 4, the poster also circled in the screen capture in Figure 3, shows a young woman standing behind the big, bold letters, “CHEAP.” The caption reads, “Condoms are cheap. If we’d used one, I wouldn’t have to tell my parents I’m pregnant” (http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/fun.aspx).
The young woman in this poster does not appear to be pregnant at this time, but much like Arlene Sue in the 1967 film “The Teenage Mother,” we can assume her choice of clothing is an indication of her sexual promiscuity. In fact, it resembles the clothing worn by the sister of Jamie Lynn Spears in her famous video, “Oops, I Did It Again,” a song written by extremely wealthy record producers Max Martin and Rami Yacoub (Wikipedia), but sung by an underaged Brittany Spears wearing a schoolgirl outfit. The song implies that the singer in the song is the one who is responsible for “playing with [a
man’s] heart,” much like Arlene Sue (Teenage Mother). The tag line for the poster is written in very small letters than one can only read if one takes the time to exam the poster closely. Posters are generally designed in such a way that their primary message is easily viewable from a distance, which brings into question whether or not these posters were actually designed to promote pregnancy prevention. Based solely on the design of the fonts used, the primary message seems to be that this young woman is a cheap slut. The message that is conveyed most prominently is not that condom-use is important, but that this seemingly Latina young woman in a raunchy, Brittany Spears inspired schoolgirl outfit is “CHEAP.” Clearly, the rhetorical message behind this poster is that this young mother is a promiscuous person who obviously does not meet the norms promoted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies. If the real message of this poster was that condoms are inexpensive, the message about condoms would not appear in a font size that is often used when communicating copyright information. There are other ways to share that idea without creating such a negative image of this young woman. Simply put, on top of perpetuating myths about teen mothers and their promiscuity, this poster is racist because it places the label “cheap” in big red letters over the body of this Latina teen. From a feminist perspective, the fact that this label is placed over this young girl’s body is important to consider in an analysis of the poster. Judith Butler (1999) discussed the way that discourse can impact how society reads our bodies. She looked specifically at how discourse about the body can contribute to hegemonic control of women and other disempowered groups in society. She wrote

    How does that materialization of the norm in bodily formation
produce a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation, which in failing to qualify as the fully human, fortifies those regulatory norms? What challenge does that excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as "life," lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving? (p. 15)

The bright red word “Cheap” across the body of this Latina girl implies that she does not meet the requirements of which Butler spoke here. Because she is a teen mother, she is a deviant – she is cheap. Her body, unlike the bodies of other, more wholesome or morally upstanding women, does not matter. Her life is not worth saving, and she is not worth grieving. She is, as Butler described, an “abjected” body in this poster. In this light, it is easier to look at her as a burden to taxpayers and forget that she is a human being, capable of suffering.

This dehumanizing message about teen mothers is conveyed loudly to teen mothers on a regular basis. Deidre Kelly (2000) argued that an extremely common image of teen mothers “most often evoked” by such agencies as the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregancies is the image of the “stupid slut” (p. 27). Kelly explains that the teen mothers in her study felt the label of “stupid slut” most acutely when it came from their peers. As posters such as the one shown in Figure 4 support the Burkean scapegoating (Burke, 1984) of the teen mother as a “stupid slut” and are sold to guidance counselors and health
departments to display for the world to see, it is clear how the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy is harming girls who are already pregnant. From the perspective of the Burkean pentad, the motives behind these posters are incongruent with the alleged mission statement of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, which is to prevent teen and unplanned pregnancies. The act, in this case, is the public display of a poster in a location that is frequented by teenagers. The scene could be a guidance counselor’s office, a classroom, a health department, or a social services office. The agents involved in this action are both the creators of the posters and the ones who choose to display them on the wall – all of whom allege to have the goal of preventing teen pregnancy. The agency in this drama is almost non-existent because the posters do the speaking for the agents once they are on the walls. However, the agency of the agents is still an issue because design choices were made when these posters were created. Someone had to choose to make the pregnancy prevention statements on the posters so small; and someone had to make the decision to make the derogatory terms about the girls on the poster so large… and to place them ON the bodies of these young girls. What does all this reveal about the motive behind this action? The agency involved in designing these posters indicates that pregnancy prevention was a secondary message on these posters. The most important message was to let everyone know that teen mothers are “white trash” and “minority sluts.”
Figures 5, 6, and 7 show additional posters in the “Fun Stuff” series, all of which portray teen mothers in incredibly negative ways, all of which support the assertion that teenage mothers in the United States really do live up to the negative stigma that is associated with them.

**Figure 5: DIRTY Poster**

This poster shows an Asian teen, wearing noticeably thick makeup, touching her face in what might be considered a provocative manner. The tiny caption on the poster reads, “I want to be out with my friends. Instead I’m changing dirty diapers at home.” Again, what is visually prominent on this page is the word “Dirty,” in big, bold letters, across this young woman’s chest. It is interesting to note that it is not common to associate
Asian teens with the stereotypical images of teen pregnancy. While the poster was available for sale on the National Campaign’s Web site early during the drafting of this chapter, it is the only poster that is not currently still available for sale, on December 11, 2008. This poster reflects the same motives identified in the Burkean analysis of the first poster. An analysis of the agency that went into designing these posters reveals that teen pregnancy prevention was not the primary goal in the creation of these posters. Once again, the primary goals seem to be to dehumanize and abject this body, making it unworthy of human consideration (Butler, 1997).

**Figure 6: REJECT Poster**
Meanwhile, this poster entitled “Reject” is still available on the National Campaign’s Web site. It depicts a black teen mother with a sad look on her face, standing behind the large, red font spelling out the word, “Reject. The caption on the poster reads, in small print, “I had sex so my boyfriend wouldn’t reject me. Now, I have a baby. And no boyfriends.” This caption not only supports the commonly accepted notion that teen mothers are somehow more responsible for unplanned pregnancies than teen fathers, but it presents this young black woman as a reject. The design of the poster, eerily similar to World War II propaganda posters that expounded the commonly believed ideas about Germans and Japanese people, is nothing short of detrimental for young black mothers already struggling with the many challenges of unplanned pregnancies. When one considers the stigmatization of black teen mothers as welfare queens (Pillow, 2004; Littlefield 2008), it is clear that this poster is racist in nature because it perpetuates the idea that a black woman is looking to be dependent on a man, an idea that is particularly harmful in a culture that celebrates the Kayne West song declaring that “baby mamas” are “goldiggers.” It is a sexist poster because it promotes the idea that not having a boyfriend is a bad thing and that this young woman is not happy because she does not have a man in her life. Moreover, because she does not have a boyfriend, she is also a reject and a loser. This resembles quite closely the notion presented by Hotz et al. (1997) that becoming a teen mother reduces a woman’s “marriage prospects.”
Figure 7 shows a white teen mother with the word “Nobody” with the same bold red letters that are characteristic of the other posters in this “Fun Stuff” series. The small caption reads, “Now that I’m home with a baby, nobody calls me anymore.” The young woman stands with her arms crossed, as if she were too stubborn to do what others suggested she do. And the poster implies that she is now paying for this because now, she is teen mother and, thus, a nobody. We cannot miss this message with the world in big, red letters, sprawled across this young woman’s chest. A poster like this one perpetuates the notion that teen mothers have essentially ruined their lives when they become pregnant.
It is hard to believe that these posters, posters available to guidance counselors in schools throughout our nation, would do much to prevent teenagers from making the choice to having unprotected sex. The choice of red for the font used on the posters is particularly telling because red is usually used as a symbol for danger in the United States. This reflects the long-held belief that teen mothers are somehow dangerous to everyone else in society. It is also obvious that while these posters would do much to damage a teen mother’s view of herself, they also damage the views that all the people around her have about her. Furthermore, these posters appear to be ineffective at educating students about how to avoid an unplanned pregnancy, as they only vilify young women who happen to get pregnant. The posters are actually miseducative in that they imply that pregnant teens are nobodies – cheap, dirty, rejects. They are racist, classist and sexist, and they reinforce myths about teen mothers.

Using Burke’s dramatic pentad to examine these posters reveals that the motives behind them are not necessarily aimed at preventing new teen pregnancies. As has already been established through an analysis of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy’s mission statement, this organization wishes to enforce the sexist, heterosexist, and classist idea that it is always preferable for children to be born to parents who are married. The scenes at which these posters are hung are also important to consider; quite often, it is at health departments and social services office that posters like these are put on display. Most of the teenage girls who visit these offices are already pregnant or mothers; while some of the girls are actually coming in for birth control, it
cannot be denied that because of the scenes in which the messages in these posters are delivered often involves girls who are already pregnant, the message is also directed at them. I have been a teen mother sitting in a health department waiting room looking at posters like these, posters which told me my life was over and that all I could do now was to become the dismal statistic I was destined to be. While we cannot publicly flog teenage mothers like the Puritans did, no one thinks twice about the public punishment that these posters purvey. The bright red letters sing the message loud and clear – teen mothers are cheap, dirty nobodies. Their punishment is to have this announced publicly, in bright red letters, in front of everyone. It really isn’t that different from the scarlet letter worn by Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne.

These posters that the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy view as “Fun Stuff” are one of the best examples, perhaps even the culmination, of the negative social construction of the teen mother in the United States. The words on these posters do dehumanize and objectify the girls behind those red letters, and the impact of that is, in my opinion, unacceptable.

If we can, as Freire (1970) prescribed, cut the umbilical cord of the myths surrounding the social construction of teen mothers in the United States, teen mothers might learn how to transform within the confines of their dehumanized lives. If social workers, teachers, and health care workers, as well as teen mothers, could somehow understand that so much of their understanding of teen motherhood is shaped by both liberal and conservative political agendas and a great deal of myth perpetuated over the
last three centuries, perhaps we could begin to liberate teen mothers and their children from the bonds of poverty.

In order for this to occur, we must begin studying the phenomenon of teenage motherhood in the United States in its entirety. We must examine the intersections of socioeconomic status, race, religion, and geography in an effort to eradicate and deconstruct commonly held myths that may or may not bear little resemblance to the actual experiences to the lives of teen mothers.

Frequently overlooked in the literature researching the lives of teen mothers in the United States is the rural teen mother, who often lives in a geographic area in which the population of teen mothers is small enough and isolated enough that they might be ignored by researchers in need of a bigger statistical sample. This does not excuse ignoring the lives and experiences of rural teen mothers. Quite the contrary, it only sheds light on the importance of studying their ignored but, nonetheless, important experiences, whose lives may be drastically different from the lives of urban teen mothers who have access to more resources because they live in cities with public transportation and other supportive services.

This dissertation will examine specifically the experiences rural teen mothers who go to college, as this group is almost entirely missing from the research summarized in this chapter. Only Deborah Davis’ (2004) collection of personal narratives contains some reflections written by teen mothers who go to college. While the stories shared there are moving and inspirational, well-designed for the audience of the general public (which, as has been demonstrated in this literature, could definitely use a healthy dose of
reality when it comes to the dominant view of the abilities of teen mothers), the collection of personal narratives does not follow a rigorous qualitative research design. This dissertation will follow Davis’ example of giving teen mothers who pursue college educations a voice, but it will do so using the rigorous research model of phenomenology.
CHAPTER 3: THE MEMORY REMAINS

The purpose of this study was to examine an experience that has been ignored in the literature that reports on teenage motherhood in the United States. The dominant narrative of teenage motherhood is a dismal one in which the teen mother drops out of high school, lives on welfare and other forms of government assistance, has additional children to increase her payments from the government, and lives in poverty for the rest of her life. Moreover, her children go on to repeat this cycle of poverty, most likely becoming teen parents themselves.

However, this dominant narrative of teen motherhood may not represent the experiences of all teen mothers. The goal of this study is to present an alternative narrative of teenage motherhood by answering the following research questions through a phenomenological investigation:

1.) What does it mean to be a teen mother who goes to college in the rural Southeast?

2.) How does the context of the rural Southeast impact the Dasein of the teen mother, as well as her intentionality toward getting a college degree?

Again, Heidigger (1964) defined the Dasein not as a “what” but as a “Being” who exists within a specific context and who makes meaning of this context. In other words, if we
would like to understand the Dasein of the teen mother, we would not look as many researchers have to this point, at teen mothers as merely a “what.” In many ways, this is how Maynard (1997), Hoffman and Maynard (2008), Hotz et al. (1997, 2008), Brien and Willis (1997, 2008), Moore et al. (1997), Manlove et al. (2008), Wolfe and Perozek (1997), Wolfe and Rivers (2008), and George and Lee (1997, 2008) studied teenage mothers. Teen mothers were viewed as “whats” – a group of delinquents with the similar characteristic of early childbearing – a group of “whats” that could be studied collectively, objects that are not human. Statistical inferences were drawn about these “whats” without really delving into the “whys” or more specifically – the relationship of young girls who get pregnant at a young age and the context in which they live. These relationships between these young, pregnant women and the contexts in which they were having children at young ages clearly needs to be explored if both women who miscarry and who deliver babies successfully have the same chance of being poor (Maynard, 1997, p. 12). Heidegger would argue that studies such as the one in Maynard’s book fail to examine the true Dasein of the subjects. As a result, the descriptive statistics in the aforementioned studies do not get at the true essence of what it means to be a teen mother.

Of course, the goal of studies like these was not necessarily to get at the essence of what it means to be a teen mother. The primary goal, instead, appears to have been to answer specific questions about the economic burden of teenage motherhood. Results of this type of study have a political agenda and are used to make arguments to the federal government to fund pregnancy prevention projects, such as those promoted by the
National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. While the purpose of this dissertation is not to argue against planned parenthood and prevention of teenage pregnancies, it is important to understand the gaps in knowledge that these studies fail to address. As has been demonstrated in Chapter 2, the social construction of the teen mother has led to harmful attitudes about her, and, unfortunately, the aforementioned research and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy have only perpetuated this negative social construction. It is only through a real understanding of who she is that we can help her break the cycle of poverty in which she lives to and to help her be liberated from this poverty in the Freirian sense. While a number of other studies mentioned in Chapter 2 have examined different aspects of teenage motherhood, the experiences of rural teen mothers and the experiences of mothers who have lived outside the dominant narrative by going to college have been largely overlooked. Moreover, as it seems crucial to, as Freire (1970) posited, “cut the umbilical cord” of myth surrounding teenage mothers if we want to liberate them from the oppression in which they live (p. 175), we need to examine the experiences of teen mothers who defy socially constructed ideas about them. Specifically, we need to examine the rural teenage mother who goes to college.

Who Participated in this Study?

Snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961), which is useful when participants are scattered and not easily identifiable, was used to select the eight participants who were interviewed in this study. I sought a diverse group of participants with varying socio-
economic statuses and ethnicities. Finding differing contexts in which the phenomenon occurs was important to get a richer understanding of the experience of teen motherhood in college. Each participant was given an alias to protect her identity. Aliases used, along with demographic descriptions of each participant, are listed below.

Participants:

1.) “Jackie” - a married, 19-year-old white, middle class woman attending a technical college

2.) “Kathy” – a married, white, low SES, 28-year old mother of three who had her first child during her junior year of high school and who decided to get an online degree at the age of 27

3.) “Yvette” – a single, white, middle class, 24-year old mother of one, attending medical school

4.) “Keely” – a single, white, upper middle class, 24-year old mother of one, getting a graduate degree in engineering

5.) “Kira” – a single, white, upper middle class 22-year old mother of one who attended a four-year university and who is now an architect

6.) “Lynley” – a married, black, middle class 20-year old mother of one who attended a technical college and transferred to the four-year university she is now attending

7.) “Debbie” – a married, biracial, 20-year old, low SES, first generation college student and mother of one attending a four-year university
8.) “Melissa” – a single, black, 36-year old, low SES, first generation college student and mother of one who went to a technical college and transferred to a four-year university, where she completed her bachelor’s degree and master’s degree

Implementation of a Transformative Transcendental Phenomenology

While both Heidegger and Husserl would call for a phenomenological investigation of the experiences of the teen mother who goes to college in the rural Southeast to answer these two research questions, it is important to explore exactly which type of phenomenology is best suited for this particular situation. In this case, the researcher is a teen mother who went to college in the rural Southeast, and she is studying the very phenomenon that she experienced. As has been demonstrated in Chapter 2, particularly through the personal narratives shared in Deborah Davis’ *You Look Too Young to Be a Mom*, a teen mother cannot readily separate herself from this social construction. Being a teen mother is ingrained in a person’s identity so deeply that it would be impossible, at least in the traditional sense, to simply bracket the personal experiences associated with being a teen mother and set them aside before beginning the study.

According to Moustakas (1994), however, the first step in a phenomenology is the “epoche” phase. He explains the epoche phase as “setting aside prejudgments and opening the research interview with an unbiased, receptive presence” (p. 180). As the researcher in this study and a former teen mother who went to college, who had her very
identity shaped by the experience of having done so, it is not possible for me to set aside my experiences in the traditional sense and be completely objective.

Clearly, my work is similar to the transcendental phenomenology described by Husserl. Moustakas (1994) defines the model of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology as following a specific set of linear steps.

1. Epoche – The researcher reflects on his/her experiences and sets them aside so that he/she may approach the research with an unbiased, objective eye (p. 22).

2. Phenomenological Reduction – The researcher conducts interviews with individual participants and considers each experience singularly, with the phenomenon being described in a “fresh, new” way (p. 34) The researcher must ensure that he/she uses “horizontilization,” which means that all statements from participants are given “equal value” (p.95). The researcher should identify “delimited horizons” (context independent themes that emerge across different accounts of the experience) (p. 97) and “invariant qualities” (Themes that emerge only in specific contexts of the experience) (p. 98).

3. Imaginative Variation – The researcher will attempt to “grasp the structural essences of the experience” (p. 35) by looking at various meanings of the themes from the various perspectives of the phenomenon. Husserl’s version of imaginative variation, based on Cartesian philosophy, includes “free fantasy variations” (p. 35) in which the researcher uses intuition to “present a picture of the conditions that precipitate an experience and connect with it” (p.
35). Ultimately, the research must construct “individual textural descriptions” of each participant’s experiences with the phenomenon and “composite textural descriptions” of the invariant themes that emerge across the participants’ varying contexts (p. 180).

4. Synthesis of composite textural and composite structural descriptions –

The researcher synthesizes the findings from the imaginative variation phase of the study and “intuitively-reflectively” uses the synthesis to describe the essence of the experience of the phenomenon (p. 181).

However, my phenomenology varies from this linear approach to transcendental phenomenology by using a more postmodern, multi-linear approach that I call “a transformative transcendental phenomenology.”

Kathy Charmaz (2000) argued that researchers need to take a more constructivist approach when doing qualitative research with the aim of social justice. While her work focused primarily on grounded theory and social justice, she did make arguments that seem applicable in this situation. Charmaz asserted that “in divergent ways, Strauss and Corbin’s works as well as Glaser’s treatises draw upon objectivist assumptions founded in positivism” (p. 509). She argued that grounded theorists who wish to do studies with the goal of social justice should return to the roots of grounded theory found in the Chicago school (p. 508). In much the same way, as this study has the aim of social justice for teen mothers, this phenomenology must go back to the philosophical roots of phenomenology, moving away from positivistic claims of objectivity. Heidegger’s
Dasein in the subjective world seems an excellent lens with which to examine how this study may be different from recent phenomenologies. Heidegger (1982) wrote

The world is something ‘subjective,’ presupposing that we correspondingly define subjectivity to this phenomenon of world. To say that the world is subjective is to say that it belongs to the Dasein so far that this being is in the mode of being-in-the-world […] To exist means to caste-forth a world. […] Being with things extant in the broader sense, for example, circumspective commerce with things in the more confined and the broader environment. (p. 168).

In other words, Heidegger would argue that since a researcher’s version of existence in the world gives him/her a specific Dasein, this renders him or her unable to be entirely objective. For me, as a researcher who has experienced the transformative and identity-forming experience that I am studying in my phenomenology, it is necessary for me to take what Heidegger refers to as a “circumspective” approach. Basically, while I may have a biased perception of my own experiences, if I can continuously, throughout my entire study, work to ensure that I see them as my perceptions, bracketing my own biases and keeping them separate from my participants’ perceptions, understanding that we were all originally making our own meanings of the experiences that we had with teenage motherhood and going to college, realizing that every experience is equally valid, even when it differs from other experiences, then I can provide a richer interpretation of the experience of teenage motherhood with my unique perspective to guide me in my analysis. My personal experiences with the phenomenon will give me the ability to infuse a greater degree of circumspection in Chapter 5 than might be possible if I had not
experienced this phenomenon. However, I must ensure in Chapter 4 that I allow my participants’ voices to speak on their own, in fresh new ways.

Of course, there is some recent precedence for a “transformative phenomenology.” In *Transformative Phenomenology: Changing Ourselves, Lifeworlds, and Professional Practice* (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008), fourteen authors reflect on transformative, or life-changing, experiences in their lives using a phenomenological framework. In other words, each person creates a textural description of an experience that he/she feels was transformative in nature. The experiences themselves differ. It is the process of reflecting on one’s transformative experiences and identify themes that emerge out of the different contexts, using the steps in a phenomenological study that make the editors call this type of study a “transformative phenomenology.”

The study being done in this dissertation is different because the participants and the researcher in the study share a specific experience - being a teen mother who goes to college in a rural setting. However, because this experience is so deeply ingrained in personal identity and because I, the author of this study, am a former teen mother who went to college in a rural setting, this otherwise traditional transcendental phenomenology contains a great deal more bracketing of my experiences. In other words, the epoche phase will occur in the beginning, but, using Charmaz’ (2000) idea of a constructivist approach to this social justice study, as I conducted this research, I built on what I knew about this experience by continuing rigorous cycles of self-reflection and bracketing throughout the phenomenology, ensuring that my personal experiences with the phenomenon of teen motherhood were constantly in my view, separate from my
participants’ experiences. Finally, at the end of the study, when I began to make meaning of the essence of the experience I had studied, I re-inserted my experiences into discussion.

This method of infusing self-study into transcendental phenomenology required a multi-linear approach. In this multi-linear, transformative version of the traditional transcendental phenomenology, the epoche stage of the research occurred in three phases, which happened at various times during the study. For the Phase I Epoche, I reflected, as I have in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, on my experiences as a teen mother who goes to college without having had any interviews with participants. The Phenomenological Reduction stage was more complicated in this transformative transcendental phenomenological study. It incorporated a Phase II Epoche and a series of interviews with eight teen mothers who went to college in the rural Southeast.

**Steps in a Transformative Transcendental Phenomenology**

In the phenomenological reduction phase of the study, I completed the following steps:

1. **Phase I Epoche** – I reflected on my experiences with the phenomenon. This reflection appears at the beginning of Chapter 1.

2. I conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant, lasting from 90 minutes to two hours, making an audio recording of the interviews, as well as taking written notes. One participant was unable to meet with me in person, so I conducted the interview over the course of three emails.
3. I transcribed the audio recording of each individual interview that I conducted.

4. I constructed a narrative of the interview that took place, using both my transcriptions and the notes that I took at each interview.

5. **Phase II Epoche** - After constructing the narrative of each interview, I immediately reflected on the interview that I had conducted, working to set my own experiences aside.

6. I conducted a member check via email, sending the narrative of the interview to the participant to ensure that I had interpreted the interview correctly.

7. I made any necessary changes to the interview narrative.

8. I sent the updated narrative to the participant for a second member check to ensure that the narrative was correct.

9. I uploaded the final version of the narrative into NVIVO-8 for qualitative analysis.

10. **Horizontalization**: Using the coding function in NVIVO-8, I identified significant statements (Moustakas, 1994) in the interview narrative. An example of a significant statement comes from Kira, who stated, “I think I’ve always kept the attitude that [being a teen mother] is just one element of my life…not my whole life.” Table 5 lists selected significant statements, which will help readers gain an understanding of the range of perspectives that emerge in the interviews.
11. After identifying significant statements within the interview narratives, I grouped them together into units of meaning or themes. I identified thirteen themes that appear across the contexts of the interviews. Table 6 shows these thirteen themes and shares excerpts from the interviews, which highlight how the participants made statements that relate to these themes.

12. Imaginative Variation: Finally, after analyzing the themes that emerged from my data, I created textural and structural descriptions of the experience of being a teen mother who goes to college in the rural Southeast. Textural experiences explain what was experienced, and structural descriptions explain how it was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). These textural and structural descriptions of the experience appear at the end of Chapter 4.

Finally, during the synthesis stage of the study, I identified composite textural and composite structural themes that have emerged from my self-reflections and my participants’ interviews to describe the essence of the experience of being a teen mother who goes to college in a rural setting.

Interview Questions

The goal of this transformative transcendental phenomenology was to understand the essence of the experience of going to college after becoming a teen mother. For this reason, a semi-structured interview of approximately 90 minutes was conducted with
each participant. An audio recording was taken of the interview as it occurred. One interview was conducted via email, on the request of the participant. Following each interview, I transcribed the interviews and uploaded them into NVIVO-8-8 for qualitative analysis.

It was important to ask questions during the semi-structured interviews that explored the intentionality of the participants within their individual contexts. The questions needed to be specific enough to get at the heart of the experience of going to college as a teen mother. At the same time, the questions needed to be general enough to allow each participant to reflect fully on her individual experiences. I prompted the participants to elaborate on particularly interesting components of her answers as part of the semi-structured interview process.

The following questions were used in the interviews:

1. Please tell me about the experience of being a teen mother who goes to college.
2. In what situations or contexts is the experience of being a teen mother who goes to college unique from the experiences of other people?
3. Describe a typical day in your life when you were a teen mother going to college.
4. Describe a challenging day that you had experienced as a teen mother going to college.
5. Describe a rewarding day that you had as a teen mother going to college.
6. What were the biggest obstacles you faced as a teen mother going to college and how did you overcome them?
7. If other people doubted you could go to college as a teen mother, how did this make you feel?

8. What were your biggest assets as a teen mother going to college?
“Set sell to sea but pulled off course / By the light of golden treasure, / How could she know this new dawn’s light would change her life forever?” – Metallica, The Unforgiven III

CHAPTER 4: BRING THE NOISE

This chapter on the results of the interviews conducted with the eight participants in this study is structured based on the model of the transcendental phenomenology outlined by Moustakas (1994). It contains the following sections:

1. The narratives of each of the eight interviews, followed by a short discussion of the important context dependent ideas that emerged from these individual interviews

2. A summary of the selected significant statements that were identified in the interviews in (Table 5)

3. A list of the clustered units of meaning, “themes,” that emerged from an analysis of these significant statements (Table 6)

4. Textural and composite structural descriptions of the experience of being a teen mother who goes to college, organized around the themes that were identified in Table 6.

The narratives that were written for each interview begin below, with the interview conducted with “Jackie.”

Jackie

I met with Jackie, a 19-year-old white female from a middle class background, in a coffee shop near her home. She is a friend of one my students, who eagerly gave me
the phone number of her friend from high school when she read about my dissertation on my electronic portfolio. Jackie was only 17 years old when she became pregnant. She had just graduated from high school and was planning to attend a mid-sized university in an urban area, which was a considerable distance from her hometown. She seemed eager to tell me her story, having called me twice to set up a time to meet with me. When I saw her in the coffee shop, her enthusiasm was immediately evident. Jackie entered the coffee shop with a bounce in her step, wearing a bright pink sweater, dark rinse jeans, trendy accessories, and a huge smile. Her smile didn’t stop during our entire discussion.

“It was never a question of whether or not I would go to college,” she said, when she reflected on that time of her life when she first dealt with an unplanned pregnancy. “I never questioned whether or not I would still go to college. But I was so scared of so many things. I just didn’t know how I’d manage without my parents’ help.”

Jackie and I talked for a few moments about her decision to go to school after she became pregnant. She explained, “I got pregnant when I was 17 just out of high school. I was already going to go to [a medium-sized state college about three hours away] but when I found out I was pregnant I decided to stay here [in my hometown] and go to a local technical college.”

“So, you never thought about not going? You just decided to go to a different school because you were pregnant?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I just felt like that would be easier.”

“Could you explain why?” I asked.
“Well, my family is all here, so I just felt like I would have more support at home.”

When I asked Jackie about why she was afraid and what she feared most, she reiterated that she was afraid to face this challenge without her parents. However, when she told them about her pregnancy, she explained that it was not as bad as she had anticipated. “They were mad at me, but they let me know that they would be there for me. It made me feel a lot better when I told them and I knew they didn’t hate me for what I’d done.”

“So you were worried they would hate you?” I asked.

“Well, yeah. I mean, they had warned me about taking risks, but I got pregnant anyway. I went against their wishes. I was scared they wouldn’t be able to forgive me for that,” she explains.

Ultimately, Jackie decided to stay closer to home and go to a smaller technical school in her rural hometown and has plans to transfer to a four-year college after she completed her associate’s degree. “I knew I had to go to college to make a better life for my child,” Jackie explained. “My parents went to college. All my friends were going to college. It was only natural that I had always wanted to go to college, but having my baby made it all the more important. I knew then that I didn’t have any time to play. I would have to be serious about my future right then and there.”

“So you believe it made it easier to decide to go to college because everyone else around you was going to college?” I asked.

“I think so,” she replied.
Jackie gave birth to her daughter when she was 18. She attended college for one semester while pregnant and took the second semester off to give birth. She lived at home with her parents during the pregnancy. Soon after the birth of her daughter, Jackie married the father of her baby, and the young family moved into an apartment near her college. Her husband went to work full time in retail to support her and the baby while Jackie finished school.

When I asked Jackie about how it feels to be married, a college student, and a mother, she replied, “I couldn’t do this without my husband.”

Later, when I asked who had been there to support her while going to school, Jackie brought up her husband again, and stated, “He’s my rock. When I feel like I can’t do it, he encourages me and lets me know I can. And then, there’s my mom. She keeps my daughter for me every day while I go to class. She is amazing. She watches my daughter for me every day and rearranges her schedule so I can go to class. We could not afford day care, and I’m not sure I would want my daughter in a day care anyway. My mom believes that I can do this so much that she’s willing to give up her free time for me. That means the world to me.”

When I asked Jackie why she might not want her daughter in a daycare, she said, “Kids in daycare get sick a lot. And I’m not sure they get the individual attention that they need either.”

Jackie went from her comments about daycare to a discussion of her family finances. She is fortunate in that her school offers a number of classes online, which means that she can work part time. “I have not always had it as good as I have it this
semester,” she explained. “I have more freedom in when I will take my classes now.” At the time of the interview, she had reached the second year of her associate’s degree in Early Childhood Education, and she had more options with her schedule. She had to attend classes on campus on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but she was able to contribute to the family income by working because her Monday/Wednesday/Friday classes were all online.

When I asked Jackie about her normal routine, she explained that she wakes up at 7:30 a.m. each day to take her daughter to her mother’s when she has on-campus classes or work. She said that her studies keep her occupied on the infrequent days that she is home, and she spends most of the day alternating between her own work and taking care of her daughter. On the days that she works or goes to school, she can only begin her homework after she has made dinner, done housework, and spent time playing with her daughter. She believes that lack of sleep is her greatest challenge, as she often has to function on five hours sleep or less.

“My baby comes first,” explained Jackie. “If I’m in the middle of writing a paper or studying for a test and there’s a dirty diaper, I have to stop and take care of that first. I have to work around feedings and other things. But it is still very doable.”

When asked how people felt about her decision to go to college, Jackie explained, “My family and my friends were very supportive. They were actually proud of me for my decision. Even strangers are often impressed that I would choose to take on such a heavy load.”
Still, Jackie said that she occasionally encounters someone who doubts her future plans to transfer to a four-year college next year. Jackie said that when someone doubts her, it “hurts at first, but then it just makes me even more determined to prove them wrong.” She said that people who express the thought that she will not be able to graduate from college or that she should stay at home with her baby are usually “older people who don’t really know [her] or people from high school that [she] wasn’t friends with.”

When I asked Jackie to elaborate on what it means to “prove them wrong,” Jackie laughed. “It means I’m just all the more determined to get my education. When they see me in five years, I want them to have to eat their words.”

When I asked her if it motivates her to think of the people who doubt her finding out that she’s graduated from college, she laughed and said, “You better believe it does!”

Meanwhile, Jackie described her professors at the technical college that she attended as largely supportive, especially the semester that she was pregnant. She explained, “Most were surprised [that I was pregnant], but no one ever gave me a negative comment. They were, I think, impressed that I was so young and still choosing to go to school after getting pregnant.”

Even with supportive professors, Jackie still described a number of obstacles in her quest to be a good mom and get a college degree. She explained that her biggest challenges are, “The distractions at home while trying to study. And the unexpected illnesses [my baby] got - they kept me out of class, or when she couldn't sleep one night
and, thus, neither could I, and then I would have to sit through a 3-hour lab. Typical mom stuff. Not so typical college student stuff.”

When asked about what a really good day is like while going to college, Jackie said, “A really good day is one where I get a good test grade back and know that all of my hard work is paying off.” Meanwhile, a bad day “would be like the time that my mom was very sick and I had to try and arrange another sitter for my daughter; I missed a biology lab and wouldn't you know, he gave a pop quiz! When I came to him and told him my story, he could have cared less and wouldn't let me make it up.”

“So, not every professor is supportive?” I asked.

“Well, some of them treat all students badly, and those guys aren’t going to make an exception for me. But maybe some of them don’t have kids themselves and they just don’t have any idea what it’s like when your baby is sick. They don’t know what it means to have a priority higher than grades.”

“So how did you handle this bad day, when this professor would not work with you on the pop quiz grade?” I asked.

Jackie laughed and explained, “Well, this guy was a horrible teacher for many other reasons, so I went to the department head. Turns out I wasn't the only one complaining. I still got the zero, but I was able to bring the grade up. I think the department head talked with the professor about being more flexible.”

“Do you think that’s important – that professors be more flexible?” I asked.

“Well, we don’t need special favors because we’re teen moms. Everyone else would hate us for that, and people don’t like us anyway,” Jackie laughed. “I think
professors just need to understand that we are different from the other students, and we are actually willing to work harder most of the time. But we have to put our babies first no matter what, and there’s no negotiation on that for us. I think most professors do understand that, but for the ones that don’t… I don’t know. I don’t know if they would change their minds.”

“You say we’re willing to work harder?” I asked. “Can you tell me what you mean by that? What is different about teen moms who go to college?”

Jackie sipped her latte and asked to think about this for a minute. She took a deep sigh, raising one eyebrow and offered this answer: “Some [teen moms] choose to wait [to go to school] because they have to. Some don't have people to watch their kids or they need to work for the money. I consider myself to be very fortunate. Teen mothers have a lot on their plate. We are new moms and are just trying to make up for the decisions we made. I know for myself, I wanted to be a great example for my daughter. I wanted her to know that no matter what life throws at you, you can be anything you want to. I couldn't give up because I don't ever want her to give up.”

“So, you’re saying that having your baby made you willing to work harder?” I ask.

“It made it so that working harder was my only option,” Jackie explains.

“Could you elaborate on that?” I ask. “What makes you so driven to be in school?

“I have a purpose for being there, my daughter. Most students I know are going without a goal in mind. I don’t slack off because I know that I have to finish school to get a job to take care of my daughter,” she replied.
“So working harder and having a good support system – like your mom and husband – is that enough? Is that what makes it possible for you to do all you do?” I ask. “Is that what the other teen moms need in order for them to go to college?”

“I think that funding is an obvious solution to some of the issues. It is hard to go to school and pay for all that comes with a baby. And having flexible times, like at the college I go to has online classes, that makes things so much easier. Also with the money issue, maybe having something in place for mothers who have to pay for childcare. Or possibly having a place for childcare right at the school - that would definitely help a lot of people. I also think that having a counseling program set up that would help teen moms set up a schedule that will work for them and how to manage homework. Just encouragement. Not everyone has a supportive family to help them. I’m lucky that I do.”

At the end of the interview, I ask Jackie the question that seems hard for some of my participants to address. “What does it mean to be a teen mother – what is the essence of the experience?”

Jackie answered quickly, “I love being a mother, and I am proud to go to college and make a better life for my child and myself. I want to be a great example for her, and I know one day, she will look back on this and be proud of me as well. I can't say that it doesn't come with its own set of obstacles and problems, but they are worth the final prize. I am trying to break the stigma that comes along with being a teen mom. I want the world to know that being a young mother doesn't mean that you are incapable or unworthy of making a better life for your family. Teen moms need to be empowered not shunned.”
Jackie: Summary

It is important to note that Jackie is a middle class, white female. Jackie became pregnant and made the decision to go to college. Jackie came from a background in which everyone around her went, is going, or will go to college. This likely impacted her outlook on her experiences. Clearly, becoming pregnant did not cause her to question whether or not she would go to college. Instead, it impacted her choice of college.

Perhaps one of the most important ideas that Jackie discussed is her motivation for going to college. She talked about how she knew that she was doing this for her daughter and how she believed that her daughter will be proud of her for doing this someday.

Finally, a third important component of this interview was the discussion of the support system in Jackie’s life. She talked about deciding to stay in her hometown and going to a smaller college so that she could have more support, and she described specifically the importance of the support that she received from her mother and her husband as a teen mother going to college.

Kathy

Mentioning that I was doing a dissertation on teen mothers at a family gathering led to finding a participant I did not anticipate having. Kathy, my 28 year old cousin, is a mother of three – a 10 and a half year old, a six year old, and a 2 year old. She got pregnant with her oldest daughter just before her senior year of high school, at seventeen
years of age. It is only now, ten and a half years later that she has decided to return to college.

I met Kathy at her mom’s house. The poverty in this area has always been glaringly obvious, although now, it seems a quieter, even less hopeful area than in was when I used to go and spend the night with my grandmother all those years ago. Kathy lives in a small new apartment complex not far from my aunt’s house.

I knew that Kathy was happy to do this interview with me, but she seemed thoroughly exhausted as I sat down with her at the kitchen table. The dark circles under her eyes told me she hasn’t had enough sleep. “I am working twelve hours a day right now,” she explained, as she poured herself some Diet Dr. Pepper from a two-liter bottle. “It’s hard. I’m sorry it took me so long to be able to do this. I hope it’s not too late.” She turned up her Diet Dr. Pepper and drank it all down at once.

I explained that I understand.

“Diet Dr. Pepper is my life saver!” she explained, as she poured herself another glass. “I don’t like coffee, but I have to stay awake. So, this keeps me going.”

“I didn’t get into coffee until I was a little older than you,” I laughed. “But Dr. Pepper still gets me through some days too.”

Kathy works in a plant, and I know the labor is particularly physical in nature because my sister used to work at the same plant and shared many stories about back injuries and burned hands and an overall sense of discontent with working at this particular place.

Kathy is a white female from a low socio-economic background.
“You know I was on honor roll my senior year, after I had Crystal.” Kathy offers, before I even began the interview questions.

“I did not know that,” I explained. “But I am not surprised. You were always very smart.”

“Well, Kathy, let’s get this interview started and let the whole world know why teen moms who go to college rock!”

“So, tell me about going to college.” I began.

“I wanted to start college right after high school, but my priorities were being a wife and mother. I also worked a full-time job, so unfortunately there was no time for school,” says Kathy. “While online one day I saw an ad for the University of Phoenix, and it is a completely online school. I called and registered for the next block of classes to get my Associate's degree in Elementary Education. I have been attending for one year and have about 9 months left. I will then continue attending to get my Bachelor's degree, and possibly my Master's. Not sure how far I am planning to go yet.” (It is important to note that at another recent family gathering, Kathy ran to greet me as I came in the door. “I finished my associate’s degree!” she exclaimed with delight. “I’m starting my B.A. in January!)

“So, online classes made it possible for you to do this?” I asked.

“Definitely. There is no way on earth I could go to some campus all day right now with three kids, working like I have to work,” Kathy answered.

“What do you think are your biggest assets as you go to college while raising your children?” I asked.
“My biggest asset is my husband, who will let me lock myself in the bedroom and get my work done while he takes care of the kids. I can't stay away from them for long, but every minute helps. My mom and dad are really proud that I am finally getting my college degree to be a teacher. They always ask if I need them to watch Timmy for me so that I can get homework done, or if I simply need a nap!” Kathy laughs. “My children make me want to do my best at school. They see me doing homework and it makes them realize how important school is; of course, now they say they are going to college on the computer, but we will see when they reach that point. People at work also encourage me while I am doing homework on break, and they say they think I am doing a great thing.”

“So you have Internet access at work and are able to do homework during your breaks?” I asked.

“Yes, it really helps a lot.” Kathy said.

“That’s great!” I exclaim, surprised.

“Is it important to have the family support that you describe – your husband, your mom, your dad, your kids?” I asked.

“Oh yeah. That really makes it possible for me to want to finish this, even when it’s tough.” Kathy smiled.

“So what makes it tough?” I asked next. “What are the biggest obstacles?”

“The biggest obstacle I have found is lack of sleep. I end up working on homework most nights until 3:00 am. I sometimes get a nap, but usually Timmy (Kathy’s youngest child) wants to play rather than sleep. I really don't overcome the lack of sleep;
I just keep a supply of Diet Dr. Pepper on hand,” Kathy reminds me. “It is my coffee.” She raises her glass, as if to toast.

“Can you tell me about a time when you had a really bad day while going to college?” I asked next.

“Oh yeah,” Kathy shook her head. “I definitely have some of those. There was one day that I was trying to get a final assignment turned in for one class, and the finals cannot be late, even a minute. Mark was watching the kids after dinner, and I was in the bedroom. Timmy, being two, could not understand why I would not let him in. He sat at the bedroom door and cried for fifteen minutes. No matter what Mark and the other kids tried he would not quit crying for me. I ended up putting aside my homework, played with him, got him to sleep, and finished my assignment with only five minutes to spare.” And then she added, laughing, “Thank goodness my Internet didn't freeze at the last minute!”

“Does that ever happen – the Internet freezing up?” I asked.

“Yeah, we have dial-up. So everything takes a really long time. But dial-up’s pretty cheap now, you know.” Kathy replied.

“So you overcame that tough day by taking care of your kids’ needs first, I guess?” I asked, to be sure I understand correctly.

“Definitely. There’s no way to do this if you don’t have your priorities in order,” she stated.

“Can you give me an example of a really rewarding day you’ve had as a young mother going to college?” I asked next.
“I sat down to do homework one day, not feeling like it at the time, and then Crystal and Teddy, got out their homework to do with me. We all sat at the kitchen table and talked about our work, and I helped them when they needed it. Just having that bit of time with them without television or bickering made it so wonderful,” Kathy explained.

“So, it feels good for you to all do your homework together? Why do you think that is?” I ask.

“Because it makes us feel close. It lets me know I am setting a good example for them – that they will care about school too.”

“So, what is a normal day like for you?” I asked next.

“I wake up at 6 am to get Mark off to work. Then I lay out the clothes for the kids to wear to school. I then wake them up at seven to get ready for school. I make lunch for Teddy, check homework, and make sure they are all ready to go. They leave at 7:50, which is when I can get a nap if Timmy has not woke up yet.” Kathy paused for a sip of Diet Dr. Pepper. “If he is awake, then there is a chance I will not get to go back to sleep. If I do get a nap, I wake up around 10:30. I then get my shower, give Timmy a bath, and fix us lunch. Then, if I have any errands, I do them. If not, I work on homework or watch cartoons with Timmy. I pick the kids up from school at 2:50, and I help them with their homework. Mark gets home at 3:15, and we leave for my job. They take me to work, and my dad comes to pick me up and takes me home. I normally work from 4 to 12, but like I said – right now, I’m going overtime for extra money. I normally get home around 12:20, when I do homework until around 3:00. I go to sleep by 3:30 and start my day again three hours later when it is time for my husband to go to work. Whew!”
“Wow.” I said. “So, how long have you been making it on only three or so hours sleep per night?”

Kathy shook her head and sighed, “Too long. I guess it’s been around six months or so now. But it will be worth it to get out of that plant.” (It is also important to note here that, at our recent family gathering, Kathy told me about her new job working at a daycare. She was indeed able to escape the plant.)

“So, in your opinion, what makes the experience of being a teen mom who goes to college different than the experiences of other teen moms? Or of regular college students?”

Kathy paused a long time. “I don’t really know how to answer that. I do everything here, on my own. I don’t know any regular college students. I just don’t know how to answer. I’m always busy with my kids here. The only people I see are my family. You know?”

“No worries!” I laughed. “I think you answered the question anyway.”

Kathy laughed. “I’m good!”

“So, what do you think it means to be a teen mom who goes to college?” I asked next. “How would you sum up the experience?”

“Same for this one. Hard to say since I was not a teen mom in college,” Kathy answered.

“Let me rephrase it then. What does it mean to be a teen mom who goes back to college later?” I ventured.
“It means you love your kids enough to get seriously addicted to Diet Dr. Pepper,” she laughed. “But really, it means you have the support you need to do it too. I mean, more women would do it if they had certain things. I think by providing support to the mom as far as child care at the school or introducing her to online school like I am going to. The only problem with the online program is that you have to push yourself to get the work done on time. The instructors are available, but only if you request their assistance, and it is limited. I think that just having other moms who have been there to talk to would make a world of difference, so that the mother does not feel like she is alone.”

“So, feeling lonely… would you say that is part of the experience too?” I asked next.

“I know it is for me,” she answered

Kathy: Summary

Kathy is a white teen mother from a low socioeconomic background. College is not a norm in her family.

Family support also seemed to be a key issue of importance of Kathy, who mentioned her husband, as well as her parents, when talking about family members who help her reach her goals. Additionally, she mentioned that her children were a source of motivation and talked about a good day included spending time with them, helping them with their homework.
Kathy’s situation is, in my opinion, made more difficult than Jackie’s by the fact that she has three children instead of one. At the time of this interview, she was working full time plus overtime in a grueling plant job. Nonetheless, she still felt that she had a good support network as she managed her difficult schedule. Online classes made it possible for Kathy to go to college, and she does not believe she would have been able to go to college without online access.

Keely

A former student of mine who was aware of my dissertation topic messaged me on Facebook to tell me about a friend of hers. “I know you’re looking for teen moms to interview,” explained my student. “Keely and I became friends at a church camp one summer. She won the Miss Teen ________ Pageant. Anyway, she got pregnant a year after the pageant, but she still went to [a medium-sized four year university in the Southeast] and graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering. She’s in graduate school now. Anyway, I talked to her about you, and she said she would love to do an interview.”

I contacted Keely soon after this. Her schedule of attending to a four year old while taking graduate classes in engineering is extremely demanding. She requested that I email her my interview questions to let her type answers as she had time. She said we could have a phone conversation following the email interview to ensure we had covered all the information I need for my dissertation. According to Opdenakker (2006)
Face-to-face interviews have long been the dominant interview technique in the field of qualitative research. In the last two decades, telephone interviewing became more and more common. Due to the explosive growth of new communication forms, such as computer mediated communication (for example e-mail and chat boxes), other interview techniques can be introduced and used within the field of qualitative research.

According to Bampton and Cowton (2002) email interviews can be advantageous because they involve asynchronous communication. In other words, the researcher and the interviewee have time to really think about the questions and responses that are taking place in the email discussion. While this may result in the loss of spontaneous responses that occur in face-to-face interviews, it is possible that it leads to more substantive responses to interview questions. Additionally, it may be the only way that busy interviewees can participate in the study.

In her email interview, Keely explained that she is now twenty-three years old. She was eighteen when she got pregnant and nineteen when her daughter was born. She did not marry the father of her baby, who is not involved in her daughter’s life now. She is white, from an upper middle class family, with parents who both have white-collar jobs. For her, even after becoming pregnant, there was never a question about going to college. She explains, “I had already been accepted to one college and was making housing arrangements when I found out I was pregnant. I was fortunate that I had also been accepted to another college that a lot of people from my town commuted to, which
was a 45-minute one-way commute. After telling my parents I was going and we would make this work and finding out the due date, I started college in the fall with hopes to make it through exams before my December due date.”

When I asked during our follow-up phone conversation about this idea of “telling her parents she was going to college” and convincing them that they “could make this work,” Keely explained that she has a good relationship with her family. They respected her decision and that she could handle this challenge. She elaborated on the importance of college, explaining, “Deciding to go to college, or rather continue college, after becoming a mother, made the situation a very important one. It brought challenges, but many blessings. Being a mother helped me stay focused on going to class, making good grades, and NOT repeating ANY classes. I made a rule for myself that I would graduate in four years, and failing or withdrawing a class was not an option. “

It is important to note that Keely did graduate on time, as planned, and immediately decided to go to graduate school. She continues to excel in an engineering master’s program.

When I asked her if everyone whom she told about her plans to continue with college felt that way, she said, “Some people felt it was great that I still believed in getting a college education. However, there were a handful of people who believed it was a stupid idea and that I just needed to stay at home and take care of my daughter.”

I asked her how this made her feel. She answered, “I consistently wanted to prove them wrong. I was never a huge (sic) competitive person before my daughter and
do not thrive on being competitive, but having someone tell me I cannot do something or should not do something makes me want to do it even more.”

I asked her on the phone, just to clarify, if becoming a teen mom made her more competitive. She laughed, “You better believe it!”

When asked about how her professors, particularly professors in a major that traditionally has not included many women, responded to her pregnancy and motherhood, Keely said, “I never came right out and said [I was a mom] unless there was a reason to. I did go to college pregnant one semester, and the professors were very nice from what I remember. They let me take my final exams early so I could go ahead and be induced. There was really only one conflict that I had with a professor when my daughter was put in the hospital for severe dehydration. I was supposed to take a test and the professor was giving me a hard time about making it up…I had to eventually talk to the chair of the department and we finally got it worked out. I did not appreciate the unneeded extra stress.”

She says that the department chair was very helpful in ensuring that her grades reflected her hard work in the course. She was allowed to take the test because the department chair agreed that her daughter’s serious illness was deemed an acceptable reason to miss a test.

In the email response to my interview questions, Keely described a typical day for her as a teen mom going to college, writing, “One word: BUSY! I tried to organize my schedule so that I was not gone 5 days a week, but sometimes it could not be helped. Since I had a 40-45 minute commute to school, I preferred to organize my days to where
I had at least three or four classes on the same day so I could get them over with. A typical day would be getting up and getting myself ready for school, getting my daughter ready for my mom to take her to daycare and then getting on the road. I usually spent time in between classes doing homework and would often not bring much homework home (if any) so I could have the nights to spend time with my daughter. Various times of the year I also had a part-time job which I would do Thursday night – Sunday night at a restaurant.”

When asked about her biggest assets as she works towards her graduate degree now and as she worked towards her undergraduate degree in the past, Keely said, “I learned to like coffee right away! I also take naps when available, and I do my best to get a good night’s rest.”

When asked on the phone if she feels that she always gets enough sleep, Keely explained that she tries and usually succeeds but that it is simply “not possible” sometimes. However, she explained that her system for doing her homework while still at school is very helpful. “It gives me time to relax with Jenna when I am at home. I need that time with her, and she needs that time with me,” she stated.

I asked her on the phone if she thinks organization is one of the assets that has helped her make it in a difficult graduate program. She replied, “You know, I have rarely stayed up past midnight to study for a test because I knew it was not worth it; I had someone else to take care of. Organization in my life has become huge because you do not like unplanned surprises when raising a child. I also learned that staying busy is not a bad thing, but you cannot let it overwhelm you.”
I asked her what it means to be overwhelmed, and she explains that it is when “you let the stress get to you and make you feel like you cannot make it.”

I asked Keely how she dealt with those challenging days in which she felt overwhelmed. She explained, “I can remember a couple of classes that I just did not get right away and failed the first test in the class. I freaked out about the idea of having to drop or withdraw from a class and knew it was not an option.”

I asked her to elaborate on how she handles these stressful days; Keely said, “I usually do a little retail therapy - get a pedicure or a new shirt. And then I just play with my daughter and forget school for the rest of the day.”

On the phone, I continued to ask for information about Keely’s assets for going to college because she is one of the few moms I have spoken with who usually gets enough sleep at night and the only one who has mentioned “retail therapy” for dealing with stress. She explained, “I know that I was able to [handle this stress] for two reasons: a wonderful support system and my drive and determination to get an education. Some people are more fortunate than others, and I agree 100% that I was fortunate, but I also know that it was my determination to be successful and not have a negative connotation attached to my name because I was a ‘teen mother.’ The difference between teen mothers who do and do not go to college can be extreme and varies upon situation. I think it boils down to what you want out of life and what you will settle with. I want the best for my daughter and me – we live in a country where anything is possible, and I have people who love me enough to let me go and live my life.”
I asked Keely what she means when she says she is fortunate. “My parents had enough money to help me with daycare and other expenses,” she explained. “I was able to live with them for the four years of my undergraduate degree, and they supported me in a lot of ways. I was the primary caregiver for my daughter, but I had help when I needed it.”

When I asked Keely about the what a good day was like as a teen mother going to college, she explained in her email response, “Probably the best day I had while going to college as a teen mother was graduation day. To know that I worked really hard and it was paying off was an honor.” “I was blessed to have a lot of support throughout the four years, as well as on that day. It was an emotional weekend.”

When asked in the email interview about how to sum up the essence of the experience of going to college while being a teen mom, Keely has much to say. She explained, “Being a teen mother and going to college was one of the best experiences of my life. It really and truly put things into perspective for me and taught me the priorities in life and the importance of an education. I hope that I, in some fashion or another, served as a role model to those in my area who were teen mothers and trying to get an education. I know people would judge and talk, but you have to brush it off because at the end of the day if you have a healthy baby and you are a creating a future for yourself, it does not matter what others think. The essence of the experience was becoming an adult and fostering drive and determination by my circumstances and showing my daughter day by day that we can survive, regardless of our situation because I want the best for her.”
At the end of our phone conversation, Keely talked a bit about how to help more teen mothers go to college. She stated, “I think a big part of how to help is instilling confidence and letting teen mothers know they do not have to be bounded by their circumstances or situation.”

She also added, “In addition, some way to help with childcare while they get an education is needed. I think it is appropriate for colleges or universities to help with this because people should applaud for a teen mother who wants an education and to help with childcare could increase the number of teen mothers who do continue their education.”

**Keely: Summary**

Keely’s upper middle class social status clearly impacted how she made meaning of the experience of being a mother who went to college and who goes to graduate school. Her reflections took on a different tone than the reflections of Jackie and Kathy. Even though she shared some of the experiences that they described in their interviews, she also mentioned experiences that seem incongruent with their descriptions. This must be attributed to her status as an upper middle class white female who fits the socially constructed idea of what an ideal woman is like; Keely won a major beauty pageant in her state. Nonetheless, she selected a major that is not common for women, and she has been successful enough in engineering to go on to a demanding graduate program. She does not appear to feel that having a man in her life is an important factor in her experience, as she never mentioned the father of the baby or any current boyfriends in her interview. She is an assertive, confident single mother who seems content with her life
the way that it is. She also makes no mention of the need to make up for the fact that she became pregnant as a teen.

Yvette

A professor who knew about my dissertation research gave Yvette’s name to me. Yvette was one of his students who had managed to excel in his classes while taking care of her son, who was born during her senior year of high school. Yvette is now 24 years old, and her son, Devon, is seven.

Like Keely, Yvette chose to continue her education beyond an undergraduate degree. She is now in medical school, studying to be a pharmacist. Yvette’s schedule, like Keely’s, made it difficult for us to meet face-to-face. She asked to reply to questions via email. Over the course of four emails, we conducted her interview.

Like Keely, Yvette is a white, upper middle class graduate student. She is also single, not having married the father of her son.

When asked about her decision to go to college, Yvette said, “I graduated high school in 2002, and that fall I began college. It was important for me to continue my education as I had planned on doing before Devon's birth. With the help of academic scholarships and my parents, the expenses of college were paid for.”

When asked about her decision to continue to medical school, Yvette explained, “During my final year at [a medium-sized college], I decided to continue on my education at [a state medical school] to pursue a Pharm-D degree. I am currently taking out loans and working to cover the cost.”
She continued discussing her decision to go to college by elaborating on the reasons why she went. “Being a new mother had little to do with my decision of going to college. I knew that's what I wanted to do, and I was going to make it work.”

When I asked Yvette about a typical day in her life, she wrote, “I wake up at 6 a.m. and get ready. At 6:45 am I wake Devon up, make breakfast, and get his lunch packed. I leave my house at 7:20 am and take Devon to school. From there, I head downtown for my 8:00 class. Then, I head to work for a couple of hours. I come home about the same time Devon is getting off the bus. We work on his homework and eat a snack. We may have soccer or baseball practice, depending on the day. Then around 6:30 pm, I cook supper. We eat, and then we have bath time. Bedtime comes at 9 p.m. I am now able to start my studying. I watch lectures online and put together my notes. And the cycle continues.”

Yvette can easily identify the biggest challenge that she faces as she pursues her education. “SLEEP!” she types in all capital letters in her email response to me. When I ask her about how a lack of sleep impacts her, she explains that it can lead to some very bad days.

“I just had one,” she continued. I had back-to-back exams, and I was working on one hour of sleep in two days. Everything just seemed to go wrong. I was so clumsy! I spilled Devon's milk, forgot his lunchbox, forgot my lab coat, and missed my own breakfast. I was completely stressed.”
Yvette also lists time management as an obstacle. She explained, “I've learned that I can't be everywhere at once. I have to prioritize for it to work. Devon always comes first, regardless of what might be due.”

Yvette also thinks that being doubted by others is an obstacle for teen mothers who want to go to college. She wrote, “At times, it is easy to believe all the nasty things people say about you. If you are constantly put down, you start to think that what they are saying may be true. As corny as it sounds, it’s important to believe in yourself in order to succeed. Unfortunately, some teen mothers succumb to all that negativity. Having a child and going to college takes motivation and an awareness of oneself.”

When I asked Yvette about people who doubted her, she says, “Those that knew me did not doubt my ability to balance motherhood and college. I quickly learned that others, on the other hand, had no reservations in communicating their opinion. I soon realized that there is no reason for me to feel hurt by the opinions of those who have never lived in my shoes. In fact, I enjoyed proving them wrong.”

She continued in a second email in which I asked her to elaborate on the comments made by others, “Family and friends that knew me were not surprised at my decision. They would have been shocked if I told them I wouldn't be going to college. However, people that just learned of my situation found it hard to believe that I would go on to college. I remember a mother upon meeting me said in disbelief, ‘How'd YOU get into _________? My son applied and he didn't get in!’ I just smiled politely.”

Yvette tells me she did not generally tell her professors that she is a young single mother. She writes, “I have told very few professors. I didn't see a reason to. I didn't want
to be treated any differently. The professors I did tell were very kind and full of questions."

When asked about her biggest assets as she went to/goes to college, Yvette talked about her family. She explained, “I think that growing up in such a supportive environment allowed for success after high school. I have a loving family that encourages me to pursue my dreams. It is difficult for some teen mothers to continue their education if no one believes in them.”

When I asked about a really good day that Yvette has had while going to college, she wrote, “It would have to be Devon's first day of Kindergarten. He was so excited. Equipped with lunchbox and book bag, he was ready to go, and so was I. That day, while I was in class, I reflected on my elementary school days. The same expression he had on that day was the same feelings I remember having on the first day of school. I felt completely content.”

Yvette was more than prepared to answer the final question in the interview, which has been a challenge for some participants to address. When I asked her to explain what it means to be a teen mother who goes to college, Yvette said, “I've actually thought about this question many times before.” She explained, “I remember how awful it was strolling through the halls my senior year in high school, with eyes watching me and passing judgment.”

She added in a second email, when I asked her to elaborate on this, “Even teachers are quick to judge you. I remember walking into my advanced level courses and teachers thinking I walked into the wrong room. Before ever meeting me, one teacher
told me that I would be better off in a lower, on grade level course. Why? I've always taken higher-level courses. I told her I was fine right where I was, and I was thinking, ‘Bring it on!’”

Yvette’s determination to succeed despite the doubts of others is clear as she continued the story, “When I made an A on her first test, she called my mom, thinking that I had cheated. I was SHOCKED! I worked so hard to prove her wrong just so that she could insult my intelligence!”

Yvette continued, “Secretly I would love to go back to her once I graduate and introduce myself as ‘Dr. ______.’ Anyway, to answer the question, I think it is our duty to be a mentor to teen mothers in this situation. Let them know it is possible to continue their education. It is possible to ‘prove the world wrong,’ and it feels so good when you do! I'm not saying it's easy; I'm saying it’s possible, and I'm living proof!”

She completed our last email by elaborating a bit more on what it means to be a teen mother who goes to college, “Being a teen mother who goes to college means that you are a strong, independent, curious woman. It means you're up for the challenge. You are not afraid to experience college through a different pair of shoes. Your unique situation gives you character and something new to offer.”

**Yvette: Summary**

Like Keely, Yvette is an upper middle class, white teen mother in whose world going to college was the norm. She is also single and in graduate school. Nonetheless, some of the experiences that she described in her interview are more similar with the experiences that Jackie described. She goes into more detail about having others doubt
that she could be successful in college after becoming a teen mother. Like Kathy, she had her baby prior to her senior year in high school, which meant that she was also a high school student and a teen mother for a period of time.

**Kira**

Kira actually came to me about doing this interview instead of me going out to find her. In Kira’s case, it was a discussion in the business writing classes that I taught while completing my Ph.D. that prompted her to come see me in my office one day. I was talking with my students about the kinds of sampling they might do for some research I required them to do for a proposal they wrote in my class when I explained to them my dissertation topic.

We were three-fourths of the way through the semester, and I had no idea that Kira, a hard working architecture major, was a teen mother. My students work in groups on a project for an outside client, requiring them to meet often outside of class. Ever the perfectionist, Kira had taken on more than her share of her group’s work without ever mentioning the added responsibility she had outside her schoolwork.

When she asked to meet with me in my office to discuss “research,” I assumed it involved the client project. I was surprised when she told me that she wanted to be a participant in my dissertation. I was not ready at that point to begin my interviews, and it was a full year later when I had finally defended my proposal and called Kira to set up an interview. She elected to have her interview take place over the phone, as her new job had taken her rather far away from our university.
Like Keely and Yvette, Kira comes from an upper middle class, white family. Going to college was never a question for her, even after giving birth the weekend before her senior year of high school. She explained, “I’ve always planned to attend college. It wasn’t really a tough decision to make. I went to a high school that boasts a 100% college matriculation rate. We all went away for school; college was the natural next step. It was a culture where continuing your education felt like the only option. And I think that the competitive academic environment was really what kept me from giving up on that goal.”

Her hometown was a small but wealthy rural town in a state that borders our university. Kira went on to explain that while having a baby as a teen did not impact her college plans, it did make a difference in where she went to college. This is similar to the experiences of Keely, who went to a college that was not her first choice because it was closer to her parents’ house.

Kira began discussing her decision to go to college, “I don’t know any other teen mothers; I can’t really speak for them. I know, for me, that college was an expectation rather than an option. And there were a lot of issues with my son’s dad, so going away for school was quite attractive to me.”

When I asked Kira to elaborate on what she meant by “problems with her son’s dad,” she indicated that she did not want to elaborate on the “issues” that she had with her son’s father.
She continued with her discussion on her choice of college, stating, “I applied to seven schools because I really had no idea what would work and what wouldn’t. I eventually narrowed it down to the three schools that had architecture programs. I visited them all, and then narrowed it down to two. My dream school was __________ University in St. Louis. I thought it was perfect for me. When I visited, I loved the school even more. But even a scholarship didn’t make the $40,000/yr tuition easier to handle.” Kira laughed and continued, “I eventually settled with [our university]. At the time, I felt like I was sacrificing my choice of college because I got pregnant in high school. Fortunately, that feeling only lasted a few months. I’m proud to call myself a ________ alum. I really think that ________ made me a better person in so many ways that [my first choice of university] would not have done. So, I guess in way, being a mother was a good thing for my decisions regarding college.”

When I asked her what she meant when she said that our university made her a better person, she explained that it enabled her to meet a variety of different kinds of people and to do projects like the one in my class in which she used her design skills to design a Web site for a local chapter of the Habitat for Humanity.

Kira said she’s not really sure what people thought about her decision to go to college after having a baby. “I didn’t really ask other people’s opinions,” she explained. “I think some had doubts that everything would work out. My grandmother offered to pay for daycare if I would leave my son in [my home state] and live in a dorm the first semester.”

“So your grandmother really wanted you to make it, huh?” I asked.
“Definitely, she explained. “But I couldn’t leave Max at home while I was here. So he came with me and went to daycare here.”

“How did you deal with those people whom you think had some doubts?” I asked.

“I really didn’t pay them much attention. I guess I kind of rolled my eyes at them and ignored what they had to say, even if it did come from well-meaning family members.” She laughed, “It came down to this: if you don’t think I can handle college right now, then what’s next for me? I already had the baby, so that’s not changing.” She continued, “I think I’ve always kept the attitude that [being a teen mother] is just one element of my life…not my whole life. I don’t have to sacrifice everything for my son. Don’t get me wrong, I definitely would [not go to college] if it came down to his well-being…but college isn’t a big deal. I’ve graduated and moved on, and I still don’t understand why people made it such an issue. People’s praise that I actually managed to accomplish this goal actually bothers me a lot more than any doubt some initially expressed. I still get really uncomfortable when people say they respect me for it or are amazed at what I did. We all make mistakes and have to overcome the obstacles they create. This is the attitude that made college possible for me.”

“I guess this interview’s a little hard, huh?” I asked.

“Yes and no,” she answered. “In some way’s it’s hard to discuss these things. In other ways, I feel more comfortable about that than I used to. I guess since you have done it too, it feels a little different talking to you about it.”

“So, it motivated you to think of going to college as a way to make up for past mistakes?” I asked.
“You could say that,” Kira agreed.

“So, did you ever talk with any of your other professors about being a mom?” I asked.

Kira sighed, “Sometimes. I never went out of my way to tell them, though. The situation usually came up when I missed class because my son was sick (which happened a lot during that first year of daycare). Most professors were incredibly understanding – more than I would have been in that situation. I had a few professors (men without children) who seemed to go out of their way to make sure they treated me no differently than others. I almost appreciated that approach. I think, especially early on, I viewed single motherhood as my own problem. I got myself into the situation, and it wasn’t the professors’ job to care. I think I’ll take a different approach in grad school.”

“What do you mean by a different approach?” I asked.

“I think I’ll be more open,” she answered. “I don’t think I’ll be as secretive about things. Maybe I’ll tell other students about my life. Maybe I’ll tell my professors too. Not because I want special treatment, of course.” She laughed.

“When you say that some of your male professors without children did not treat you differently, what do you mean exactly?” I asked.

“Well, they didn’t give me any special favors. I don’t think I deserved special favors just because I had a baby,” Kira explained.

“What would a special favor be?” I asked.

“Letting me turn in assignments late or something like that. Why should I have different rules from the other students?” she stated.
“So, what was a typical day like as you got your degree and took care of your son,” I asked.

Kira answered, “College spanned a four year time frame. What was typical freshman year would have been abnormal for senior year. My son turned one on the day we moved to [the city where our university is]. He hadn’t yet taken his first steps. That would happen two weeks later. And he didn’t eat solid food. He was a preemie, and even though he was up-to-date on other milestones, his teeth came in really late. By graduation, he was a few months away from Kindergarten. At first, I would put him to bed early, around sixish, so that I could get homework done. That meant that he would, of course, wake up no later than five. I’m a morning person; that was fine with me. I would take him to daycare around 7:30 and then go to class. It was hard getting into a routine at first, but by the end of the whole college experience, I was staying on campus nearly all day. It’s easier to get work done in between classes than to have to juggle a toddler and homework at night. I would pick him up around 5:30, go home, eat dinner, and go to bed.”

Kira continued,”By my senior year, it was rare that I did any homework at night. My son was an active four-year-old, and I have to admit that playing with him was more fun than writing papers! I would rather spend time with him until he went to bed and get up at three or four in the morning to do school work than stay up late. I really am a morning person. I enjoy running and would try to fit that in whenever I could, but it wasn’t part of the routine.”
Kira also discussed the benefits of raising a child in a college town. “We would try to go to a lot of the low-key sporting events like baseball and soccer games in the afternoons and on the weekends. I think ______ is really a great place to have a young kid. You have tons of safe parks, high-profile games on campus, and events like the circus and Barney at [our school coliseum].”

When I asked Kira about the biggest obstacles she faced during her four years at our university, she did not hesitate to answer. “Finding a sense of community,” she said right away. “You can’t be on campus for more than an hour without hearing about the ‘_______ Family.’ But it’s hard to enjoy that when every freshman is required to live on campus, and I didn’t. When every student eats together in the dining halls, and I didn’t. When classmates study together at night, and I couldn’t. I was living a lifestyle so different than theirs, but I was a freshman too. I was living away from home for the first time too. I was learning to deal with college-level classes too. I was going through so many of the same experiences; yet I couldn’t experience them in the same way. I was really lonely my first year. It got better when I started to learn in architecture and when more of my friends moved off campus. But that first year was awful.”

Kira continued, “If I had declared any other major, I think that first-year nightmare would have been how I characterized my whole college experience. But with architecture, we were around the same 80 people our entire four years. We had class with them for four hours a day, and we would often be in studio with each other outside of class time. I may not have liked all of my studio-mates, but I had a connection with
them. Studio added the social element I missed my freshman year. I could hang out with friends during class. They made things a lot easier—not perfect, but manageable.”

“So being lonely and not being part of the ‘________ Family’… you are saying that was your biggest obstacle?” I asked.

“Yes,” Kira answered. “Especially the first year.”

When I asked Kira who was there to support her while she was going to school, she answered, “College would not have been possible without my parents’ financial support. I had the fortune of having scholarships that covered a big chunk of my out-of-state tuition, but living expenses like rent without a roommate and daycare were tough to cover on my own.” Kira paused briefly and continued, “Needless to say, I have a lot of student loans. Other than that, I don’t have any family in the upstate. The closest relatives were my parents, who lived 2 ½ hours away. At the end of four years, I had a few close friends that proved to be incredibly supportive.”

I then asked Kira about what her biggest assets were as a teen mom going to college. She paused a few seconds and replied, “I really don’t know how to answer this question. Sometimes I think my biggest flaws actually made college possible. I’m stubborn, opinionated, and at times completely unwilling to compromise. These characteristics absolutely suck in interactions with people on a superficial level because I come off as selfish and rude. But when you’re trying to accomplish something for only yourself and you have so many people and factors bringing you down, sometimes personality is the only thing that allows you to ignore them.”

“So being stubborn helps teen mothers be successful, you think?” I laughed.
“Yes, I think so,” Kira laughed.

“What was a really good day that you remember while going to college as a young mom?” I asked Kira next.

“I don’t remember a specific one,” she answered. Things that made a day good for me are the same things that make a typical college student happy. Sometimes it may have been a good grade on a paper, project, or test, or maybe it was just having a great time with friends. I don’t think motherhood really ever makes or breaks my days. It’s just a normal part of my life. It’s the outside factors that really influence things.”

“Do you remember an example of a bad day?” I asked.

“Again, I don’t remember a specific one,” Kira replied. “It probably was one of the days when I had stayed up for a couple of nights at a time to finish a studio project. Trying to function with no sleep is hard for anyone, but being alert enough to care for someone who is completely dependent on me is tough.”

“How did you overcome those situations?” I asked.

“I honestly just slept,” said Kira. “I really think lack of sleep was the source of nearly all my emotional meltdowns in college. Well, besides boys…” she laughed.

Toward the end of our interview, I asked Kira what it means to be a teen mother who goes to college.

She replied, “Everyone asks me what it was like to be a young mom in school, but it’s hard to describe the experience. It wasn’t as though I had had a taste of college life and then had the baby. I don’t know how to be a college student and not be a mom. The two experiences have always gone together.”
She continued, after a brief pause, “Maybe my experience is different from other people’s. As for what theirs is like, I really don’t know that I care. I definitely think that everyone should continue her education beyond high school. But if a teen mother wants to go to college, then she’ll find a way to do it. I would say the biggest obstacle is money. To find time to spend with the kids, go to class, do homework, and provide...those things are tough. I was very fortunate to have supportive parents. I know that a lot of teen mothers don’t have that luxury. But I don’t know what to say to them. Keep your grades up, earn scholarships to cover tuition, take out loans to pay the bills. There’s got to be a better way, but I don’t know what it is. My parents paid what they would have paid had I been a traditional college student. But when you add daycare, an extra mouth to feed, etc., there’s got to be more money coming in. I’d rather suffer the student loans than lose time with my son to work part-time, which, by the way, would earn enough money for maybe groceries...it wasn’t worth it.”

“And now, you’re thinking of graduate school too?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered. “That’s coming up next.”

**Kira: Summary**

While Kira came from a background that is similar to Yvette’s and Keely’s because she is a single, upper middle class white teen mother, her interview brought up a few themes that have not yet appeared in the composite textual descriptions in this dissertation. For example, she spent time talking about how her identity involves more than her role as a mother, something that no one else in this study mentioned.
Furthermore, she expressed that she is not terribly concerned about other teen mothers, unlike Yvette, who believes that we have the responsibility of mentoring other teen mothers. This attitude may be influenced by Kira’s limited perspective as a privileged, upper middle class white teen mother; she does not fully understand how challenging the life of a teen mother from another background might be. Finally, Kira discussed not wanting any praise for her accomplishments, something that did not come up in any of the other interviews.

Lynley

A friend of mine from high school who recently went back to college to get her teaching certificate suggested I interview a classmate of hers who was a teen mom, now in college. I contacted Lynley via email, and she agreed to meet me to do the interview.

Scheduling a time to meet with Lynley proved to be quite a challenge. She was student teaching this semester, on top of working a part time job. She explained how this semester was different for her, saying, “Being in the school full time is different than going to classes during the day. Usually I have some breaks in the middle of the day or whatever, but not anymore.”

Lynley was still dressed for teaching, wearing a button down, pink blouse, a pair of black slacks, and a pair of black patent loafers. She seemed a bit stressed that afternoon, mentioning that she had a stack of papers to grade back at the apartment.

I laughed and told Lynley that I understood because I remembered student teaching. We ordered coffee and took a seat in the McDonald’s that was close to
Lynley’s apartment. At the time of the interview, Lynley was a 23-year-old black female whose daughter was four. She was raised in a middle class family, got pregnant during her senior year of high school and gave birth the summer after graduation. She married the father of the baby soon after her daughter’s birth but put college off for a few semesters while she stayed home with the baby. Her mother was the first person in her family to go to college, and Lynley said she is proud to attend the same small college that her mother attended.

“Had you planned to go to college right after high school before you got pregnant?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “But I just didn’t want to leave her when she was very young. I felt like I had to wait.”

“What made you decide it was finally time to go?” I asked.

“My friends were all talking about their classes when they were home for the summer or for Christmas. I’d always been smart in school, and I knew that I could handle the classes. My mother offered to babysit while I went to school, so I thought I should do it.”

Lynley explained that she first went to a local technical college and transferred to the four-year college she is now attending.

“So, how did people feel when you told them you were going back to college?” I asked.

“My friends were happy,” Lynley explained. “But my in-laws felt like I was doing the wrong thing, like I would be hurting my relationship with Emma.”
“Because you would not have as much time with her?” I asked.

“Yeah. My mother-in-law was a stay-at-home mom, so she felt like I should be too,” she explained. “But I knew that I wanted to be a teacher, you know. I feel like I still have a life outside of being Emma’s mom. I’m still a person.”

“Has this changed now that you are almost finished with school?” I asked. “Do your in-laws support you now?”

Lynley sighed a long sad sigh. “No. Not really,” she explains, “Last year, Emma got the flu and was really sick. My mother-in-law wanted me to drop out that semester because she said that having to go back and forth from my house to my mom’s house was making her not get well. I stayed out with her when she was very sick, but when she was getting better, I went back. Anyway, my mother-in-law made me feel like it was my fault that Emma was sick.”

“How did you handle this?” I asked.

“I just try to ignore her,” explained Lynley. “I think she never really liked me that much because I’m black, and they’re white, you know? I think they wish I was white like them.”

“So you ignore her a lot?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Lynley laughed. “I have to.”

“When Emma was sick and you had to be out of class, how did that impact your school work? How do your professors usually react when you tell them you are a mom?” I asked.
“Well, I usually don’t tell them,” she explained. “I mean, when Emma was sick, I had to. But my professors were actually really great about that. They let me make up what I missed. I really didn’t have any trouble then.”

“Has it always been that way when you needed to tell a professor that you have a child?” I asked.

“Well, there was this one history professor back at Tech,” she answered. “I mean, kids get sick a lot, you know? So, I had to be out a couple of classes when Emma got sick and my mom was sick too. Anyway, he was kinda mean about it. He didn’t let me make up some work, but I still got a B, so I wasn’t too worried about it. But he told me that I couldn’t have any special favors because I had a baby. That really made me mad. I didn’t want any special favors, you know? I was just telling him why I was out.”

“So, was he pretty strict on absences with all his students?” I asked.

“I am not really sure,” she answered. “I didn’t really know any of the other people in that class.”

“So, what would you say are your biggest assets as you go to college? You know – the things that make it possible for you to do this?” I asked.

“Hmm… I don’t know. I mean, my mom babysits. And my husband believes in me, and he stuck by me when I got pregnant. He was only my boyfriend then, so he didn’t have to. That’s important. I guess for me personally it’s just being able to face the world one obstacle at a time and proving to myself I can do a lot of things.”

I replied, “Let me make sure I understand. Having your mom and your husband support your efforts is one thing. But then, on a more personal level, you feel like you
have the ability to face one obstacle at a time and just take care of it. And you like proving yourself. Like you enjoy knowing you can do things. Is that right?"

“Yes,” she answers.

“What kinds of obstacles are there that you have to face one at a time?” I asked.

“Well, just getting enough sleep is really hard for me. It was worse when Emma didn’t sleep all night, but now I have to be up at night grading papers and stuff too. I usually just wait ‘til Emma goes to sleep.”

“How many hours would you say you sleep per night?” I asked.

“Well, I don’t know for sure. I mean, sometimes it’s like a couple of hours. But I guess most of the time, it’s probably about five hours,” she answered.

“Are there any other obstacles besides getting enough sleep?” I asked.

“The worst thing is probably when my in-laws say I should drop out of school,” she said. “I mean, it makes me doubt myself. When I first went back, it made me feel like I was not strong enough, even if I put my mind to it.”

“How did you overcome that?” I asked.

“I’m really stubborn on the inside,” she laughed. “I knew I was doing what was right for me and my family. We would have more money eventually, and Emma would see me as a professional person who cared about her enough to go back to school. To be honest, it has been kind of fun to prove my in-laws wrong. They used to say I would flunk out and stuff like that,” she paused. “Well, they were dead wrong on that.”

“Is it important to prove them wrong?” I asked. “I mean, does that motivate you in any way?”
“I guess it does,” she answered. “Yeah. It does. I mean, it hurts when someone tells you are going to fail. But if you know you can pass, if you really know you can, then it is fun to think about them finding out about you passing, after all they said to you.”

“Do you send them your grades when you get them?” I laughed.

Lynley laughed too, and said, “No, but my husband calls them and tells them. Like one semester, I got a 4.0. My mother-in-law sent me a card in the mail that said congratulations. But then, the next semester, she was back saying I should not be going to school.”

We both laughed.

“You know, I thought of one other obstacle I have faced,” she said. “I have a hard time finding time to hang out with my friends, especially now while I’m student teaching.”

“Are they finished with school now?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered. “But like my friend Christie moved back here, and she wants to hang out sometimes. I have to keep putting her off because I don’t have time.”

“So, do you have any other friends who are moms?” I asked.

“No,” she answered. “I mean, I know people and talk to them at church or whatever. But I don’t wanna hang out with them because they are a lot older than me.”

“Would you say you’ve been able to keep most of your friends from high school, after having the baby and getting married and all that?” I asked.
“I lost touch with a lot of people, like most of the girls I cheered with. We were good friends before, and we tried after I had Emma, but my life was so different than theirs,” she said. “I mean, we talked when they came back from college for Christmas that first year. But after that, it wasn’t the same. Christie is my best friend, and we have stayed in touch. She has even stayed with us some when she came home from college to visit. But like I said, it’s not like I can just go out and party whenever I want.”

“Do you have any new friends at college?” I asked.

“I know some people that I have been having a lot of classes with,” she paused, “But we don’t exactly hang out. I don’t know. It’s hard to have much time. And my life is really different anyway. When everyone else in my class was talking about how drunk they got on the weekend, I was talking about potty training. It’s not like most twenty year olds wanna hear about potty training!”

We both laughed. “So, does it make it hard to make friends when you are a young mom going to college?” I asked.

“I guess so,” she answered.

“How does that make you feel?” I asked.

“Well, maybe lonely sometimes. I don’t know. I feel better now than I did a couple years ago,” she answered. “It was harder when Emma was younger.”

“So, you think it’s easier now when she’s four?” I asked.

“Well, she’s still a handful and is into everything,” she laughed. “But I guess I feel better now about me. I know I can do this now, and it doesn’t seem as hard as it used to.”
“How would you describe a typical day?” I asked.

“Getting up, packing my husband’s lunch, my lunch, taking Emma to Mama’s, going to school, picking her up, doing laundry, cleaning the house, putting her to bed, eating dinner, doing homework, then going to bed,” she paused, “And then, on the weekends, my husband stays home with Emma while I work at _______ (a retail shop).”

“How would you describe a really good day you’ve had while going to college and having a child?” I asked.

She laughed, ”Actually finishing homework or studying before falling asleep!”

“Can you tell me about a time when you had a really difficult day?” I asked.

“Things were going bad at school, and I just felt like I hated it. Ahhh – I did – I HATED it!” Lynley said emphatically, as she threw her hands up in the air and shook her head. “I remember just going in the bathroom and crying after I got a test back with a bad grade. I cried and cried and thought about dropping out. But then, I thought about Emma. When I went home and I looked in her eyes, I found the courage to go back to school the next day because I knew I was doing it all for her.”

“What makes a teen mom who goes to college’s life different from the lives of other teen moms or other college students?” I asked.

“You go from doing a lot… you know – partying a lot with your friends… to doing nothing like that all of a sudden. It’s hard. When you can’t go out, you lose friends. But then, you do it because you want something good for your life. It doesn’t matter what other people think. You know it’s what you think that counts, and you know
you can do it. Teen moms who go to college are different because they have the smarts to make something better for themselves.”

“Do you think there’s anything we can do to help make it easier for those girls who decide to go to college like you did?” I asked.

“We need to provide support groups for teens moms or even older moms who have babies in college. It’s lonely. We need to know we aren’t the only ones, you know?” she asked.

“I know,” I answered. “We do.”

Lynley reminded me at this point about the stack of papers waiting for her back at her apartment. I thanked her for her interview and wished her luck in grading all those papers.

**Lynley: Summary**

As a middle class, black teen mother married to a white husband, Lynley’s interview paints a picture that is quite similar to the interview of Jackie, a white middle class teen mother. Both of them mention how supportive their husbands are, but both still appear to do a lot of household chores. Both have supportive mothers who babysit their grandchildren while their daughters are in college. What seems to be different for Lynley is the pressure that she feels from her strained relationship with her in-laws. Her mother-in-law in particular appears to put a lot of unnecessary pressure on Lynley.
Debbie

At the time of her interview, Debbie was a student of mine who read about my dissertation topic on my e-portfolio. She is a graphic communications major in the second semester of her junior year. She did not mention that she had been a teen mother to me until a few weeks into the semester, and when she did, it was more or less a random comment about her son. When I showed interest in the fact that she was a mom, she readily shared part of her story with me. When I asked her about the interview, she happily agreed.

We met at a coffee shop near campus and talked for almost two hours about her experiences. Debbie seemed happy to have the opportunity to talk about her experiences. She strolled into the coffee shop smiling, wearing trendy jeans and a pink hoodie. Her lovely hazel eyes shone brightly when she talked about her son.

Debbie is a bi-racial twenty-two year old who was adopted by her white, working class grandparents in an area of our state that is plagued with poverty. She is married to a graduate student at our university and together, they have a three year old son. Her biological mother was white, and her biological father was black. “People get confused when I tell them that my parents adopted both me and my mom,” she laughed. “See, they originally adopted my mom, and then she got pregnant with me when she was fourteen. She had a drug problem and just pretty much abandoned me with them, and so eventually they decided to adopt me. I haven’t seen her in a long time, and I am not really interested in it either. My grandparents are my parents, and I think of them as mom and dad.”
I asked Debbie how her parents felt about her going to college. She laughed as she explained, “I was the first person in my family to graduate from high school. They were just happy for me to be a high school graduate!”

“So, when you told them about college, what did they say?” I asked.

“Well, I got pregnant right after graduation, and I was already planning to go to college. So, before they didn’t think it was a big deal, but after I got pregnant, they had some concerns. My parents did not think I should do it. No one in my family had ever gone to college, and they are a lot older than me. Anyway, my sisters are all a lot older than I am too, and they were stay at home moms. Yeah, their goal was just for me to graduate high school, and that was enough for them. And now they are supportive but then they couldn’t see why I would want to go. They felt like my focus should be on my baby. No one in my family could understand why I wanted to do such a crazy thing!”

“So, you got pregnant right after high school and when did you get married?” I asked. I knew Debbie was married because she had already shown me a picture of her husband and son in class one day prior to the interview.

“Right after I found out I was pregnant,” she explained.

“So, what did Austin’s family say about you going to college?” I asked.

“Well, he was already going, you know. He’s a little older. For them, everyone goes to college. Austin’s mom by far has been the most supportive. She has always said, don’t you want to go to college? She understood why it was important. She had four kids and went back to work after she raised them. I might have resented Austin if I did not go back to school.”
“Why do you think you might have resented him?” I asked.

“Austin’s going to graduate school already, you know. He’s going to make a lot of money, but I don’t want to rely on him. I mean, I want to know I have options. I have started this, and I am going to finish this, you know,” she explained.

“Do you think you might have resented that he got to get an education and you didn’t?” I asked.

“Maybe,” she said. “I can’t say for certain, but it doesn’t seem like it would have been very fair for him to get to go to college but not me. You know what I mean?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I laughed. “It seems like if you are working together to raise the baby, you can both go to college too.”

“So, you would say that Austin’s family is pretty different from your family?” I asked.

“Yeah, they really are. They just have more money and that kind of thing,” she explained.”

“Has that been a big adjustment for you, being married so young and being married to someone from a different background?” I asked.

“Sure,” she answered. “But it was all such a big adjustment, I don’t know how to separate it out. Was it that I was a teen mom? Was it that I was going to college? Was it that I was in new marriage? I don’t know. It was hard to adjust to all of it, you know?”
“Yeah,” I agreed. “You really were going through a lot of things all at the same time.”

“So, let’s talk about what it was like then,” I say. “You got married before you started college?”

“Yes,” she explained. “When I found out I was pregnant, I got married. Austin was already in school, and I just went that first semester as a freshman. So, we got married, and I just took the next semester out to have Michael. I decided not to go back until he was a year old.”

“And then, your mother-in-law was supportive about that. Does she babysit for you?” I asked.

“No, Michael goes to daycare. We got on a reduced-income program. And it’s really good. He loves going,” she explained.

“So, do you have scholarships? How do you and Austin pay for school?” I asked.

“Well, his parents helped with some of his tuition and I qualify for a scholarship and the Pell grant, but we are both getting student loans too. Now that he’s a graduate student, he can get a big check every semester and he has an assistantship too. It will be a lot to pay back, but he’s going to get a Ph.D., so we should be okay,” said Debbie.

“What is Austin studying?” I asked.

“Biology,” she explained.

“So, what is a typical day like for you guys? What’s it like being parents who are both going to college?” I asked.
Debbie explained, “Well, I don’t like to wake up early at all. Austin tries to wake me up at 7, but I usually get out of bed around an hour later. Now, Michael is an early riser, but he’ll wake up and play in his room until he hears us. So, I’ll go downstairs and fix us maybe cereal or maybe eggs or maybe a good healthy breakfast. Then, it’s a rush to get out of the house, usually around nine or ten depending on who has a class first that day. Then, we take Michael to daycare and start classes. My schedule this semester is pretty steady. Last semester, it was really crazy,” she paused and rolls her eyes, seemingly remembering last semester. “Now, this semester, I have a class from 10:10 to like 1:10 on MWF, and then on T/Th, I have class from like 11 to 4:30. I like having a steady schedule, and my schedule’s pretty set. Austin likes me to stay at school until I have to pick Michael up at daycare at 5:30. But sometimes, I’ll go home and crash or something if I didn’t have enough sleep. But usually, I’ll stay at school doing school work until like 5:30, you know – trying to get it all done here. Then, we all go home and do dinner, maybe watch a movie or something. And then, we do school work at night. But a lot of times I have to stay up like if I have a test or something like that.”

“So, you two share the car?” I asked. “Does that make things hard when you have a crazy schedule like last semester?”

“Oh yeah!” she answered. “Totally! Like when we have schedules spread out all over the day, it’s a matter of waiting on each other or not having any time together. It’s very hard.”
“You mentioned that you don’t like to get up early,” I stated. “Do you feel like you get enough sleep? I mean, how many hours would you say you get on average each night?”

“Maybe five or six when I don’t have a big assignment,” she paused. “But not always. I’ve already had one all-nighter this semester. I was so ill the next day! I usually don’t start my schoolwork until I put Michael to bed at 9 or 9:30. But sometimes that depends on how willing he is to go to sleep,” she laughed.

“So, would you say you feel tired a lot? Is that why you go home sometimes while Austin is still in classes and take a nap?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s hard to get any time alone, and I love those little naps!” she laughed.

“Can you tell me about a challenging day that you have had while going to college as a teen mom? Like a really awful day?” I asked.

“Most of the time it starts with being late. I hate to be late,” she paused. “My husband and I, we have one car, we share a car. We have to go to school every day. Some days it’s my fault, and sometimes it’s his fault. I get in the worst mood whenever I’m running late. So a horrible day starts off with being late, and then everything just goes bad from there. You know how most people just get in a funky mood where nothing can satisfy you, and you’re just complaining for no reason, well – I get in that mood, and I’m just like, ‘I wanna quit school!’ you know? ‘I have a family! I want to quit school! I don’t need to do this!’ I think I put myself in the mood. It’s kind of my own fault. Because I could be thinking on things that are good instead of moping around.”
“Interesting!” I said. “So you’re saying that you see it as you have the power to take a bad situation and make it better? Am I interpreting that right – like it’s up to you?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“That’s important,” I said.

“Well, while we’re on the subject of being positive, can you describe a really good day that you’ve had as a teen mother going to college?” I asked.

Debbie smiled brightly, “I think this whole semester is rewarding. I had to struggle for the first few years. My classes were really hard. Like when I had chemistry, it was awful! My GPR fell. I was having a very hard time. I wouldn’t say it’s the school work or anything to do with my professors; it’s mostly my attitude about it. But this semester - it’s like I got my schedule arranged where I can handle things. I like my classes, and I feel on top of things. I am making really good grades, and that makes me feel so, so good. I know I’m doing the right thing. I know I can do this.”

“So, once again, you feel like it’s about how you control it – like you have it under your control, so it’s okay?” I asked.

“Definitely,” she answered.

“Well, that’s probably a good time to think about this. What have been the biggest obstacles you have faced as a teen mother going to college and how did you overcome them?” I asked.

“My biggest challenge is that I have a lot of work outside school. My son wants all my attention when he is awake,” she laughed. “I tell him to go play in his room, and that’s okay because he has lots of toys, but he can only make it about five minutes before
he’s back to get more of my attention. So, basically, I have to do my schoolwork after he goes to bed. That’s definitely a challenge because I’m always so tired. And that means I don’t feel good all the time and can be in a bad mood,” she answered.

“So, you said that you think you have the ability to control the mood somehow. How do you do that?” I asked.

“I pray a lot when I get in a bad mood,” she answered with a long sigh. “For a long time, I believed in God, but I didn’t really feel like I personally had a connection to God. After I had Michael, it changed. It was like I could feel God with me and I knew God approved of me going to school. When I’m tired and I pray, it really helps me refocus and know I’m going to be okay.”

“So, having faith in God helps you control your mood and refocus and believe you can make it?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered.

“Are there any other obstacles?” I asked.

“Health is a big challenge for me,” she answered. “Everyone in my husband’s family is a health nut. And Austin… he is HOT. I mean, he’s amazing – so good looking and fit. I used to weigh 120 pounds, but I gained weight while I was pregnant and I cannot seem to lose it. My father-in-law, bless his heart, gave me this article about South Carolina teen moms gaining weight and not losing it. It made me feel so bad, like he was saying I’m fat. It’s a lot of pressure.”

“Can you explain what you mean by pressure?” I asked.
“Like I had so much trouble losing weight after I had my baby. And no one else did. My husband is still good looking, but I don’t feel so cute anymore. I just don’t have time to work on my appearance. I want to look good – I really do. When I’m in class with all these single people, I feel like I stick out like a sore thumb. I don’t want to stick out like a sore thumb. I want to work out, but that would cut my sleep to 3-4 hours per night. Plus, if I go to a gym, it needs to have a daycare. Gold’s gym does, but it costs too much. Our university gym is free, but they have no daycare. I don’t know how to do it. I want to be healthy… but there’s no support at our university for a student with a kid to be healthy,” she pauses. “Like last summer, I went on the Atkin’s diet and I lost like 20 pounds really fast, but then school started back, and everything went crazy. It’s not like I can bring salad to lunch every day without a refrigerator. I can’t go to our school cafeteria and get one. I mean, I can’t spend like five dollars on lunch every day; we can’t afford it.”

“So, you think that article you father-in-law gave you might have to do with that – like not having access to things that help teen moms get healthy after having a baby?” I asked.

“I think we’re just so busy taking care of everyone else and our school work, we just don’t have time for ourselves. I think health is very important. It’s not like I’m not concerned about it, I just don’t know what to do. I already have X amount of things to do and I have to add that too? And sometimes I go buy clothes, and Austin’s like, ‘Do you want to buy clothes before you lose a little more weight?’ You know, just being economical, and I’m like, ‘It takes a long time to lose weight!’ So, he just doesn’t
understand sometimes, but like if I feel like crap, I’m not going to get my butt out of the
bed an exercise. For him, it’s just so easy to just go outside and run. I don’t know,” she
paused.

“Only a few of the girls that I knew from high school are back down to their
normal weight. I don’t know. The only reason I weighed 120 in high school was
because I had an eating disorder before I got pregnant. When I got pregnant, I knew I
couldn’t hurt my baby, so I stopped. I couldn’t be crazy and keep it up, and Austin
realized what was going on, so he didn’t let me do it either. So, I started eating like a
normal person. And then I was like, wow – I can eat. So, I just kept eating so much
more. And now, it’s hard – it’s really hard.”

“Did you talk with a doctor about the eating disorder?” I asked.

“No,” she answered. “I just stopped.”

“Stopped not eating? Stopped throwing up?” I asked.

“Both,” she answered. “I guess I was anorexic and bulimic too.”

“Do you ever think about going back to that now?”

“No,” she answered. “Never. I hate feeling fat, but I won’t do that,” she sighed.

“It seems like people who are single, they have no problem finding time to get to the gym
and eating healthy. But it’s not as simple for me. But health is very important. It should
be more important to me,” she paused with another long sigh and then continues, “I’ve
made a commitment to give Michael healthy food; I don’t want him to go through some
of what I’ve gone through being overweight and going to college. I have committed to
giving him healthy food. It feels like nothing around me, other than our university gym, is supportive of moms or a family or trying to be healthy when you have a child too.”

I take a moment to ponder all that Debbie has just told me, realizing that she’s letting me get at a very sensitive topic now. I marvel at the fact that she thinks she’s so overweight, as she certainly does not need to lose that much weight now. Before I can think of how to form a question that addresses this, she continues speaking.

“Actually, there’s no support at [our university] at all for a student with a child. At first, Austin and I looked at married housing. But it was so nasty. I would not take my baby there. Then, they took it away now, so there isn’t even anywhere for married people to live on campus. I need to do an internship for my major, but the internships are all away. I can’t move away. When I talked to my advisor, she said that I’d just have to move. I don’t know what to do about that. My husband is in school here. I can’t leave him and Austin, even if it’s for a few months. They need to understand that it’s different for a parent going to school. They need to have a plan in place to deal with it to make it fair,” she took a brief pause before continuing.

“Another problem is the other students. I don’t feel like I connect to any of them. They are single. They might care about school, but their number one priority is partying. If I am in a group – like the group in your class – my best time to meet is on Saturday morning. But they won’t do that because they get drunk on Friday night. The only people I connect to are Austin and the people at my church. It’s really all I have.”
“So, you’re saying that you feel alienated from the other students?” I asked. “Do you think that other college students realize how different your life is? Do you ever talk to them about it?”

“Oh, not at all. Not at all,” she answered, sighing, the smile that had been present throughout most of the interview now deteriorated. “Like whenever we were picking groups in your English class, you know one of the questions you asked was for us to find out each other’s schedules. Well, my schedule is pretty set throughout the week. I don’t have a lot of open time. On Tuesdays and Thursdays in my free time I have this Graphics group that I go to, and I like it. On Wednesday, I go to church. On Sunday, I go to church. Saturday is my only free time. After partying all night, the other students want to meet on Sunday afternoon. I am in choir on Sunday afternoon. I try to make it so that I do no work on Sundays. I would even be able to work on Friday nights, but that’s out for all the other students. Their focus is just… well, to school to some degree, but mostly it’s just to have fun.”

“So, you feel like you are more focused on school than they are?” I asked.

“I have no choice but be more focused,” she answered.

“Do you think they respect you for what you are doing, the other students?” I asked.

“No,” she answered. “I am pretty sure they don’t care. Sometimes, I just feel like a sore thumb around them. I’d like to go to class bumming and wearing my pajamas, but I was talking to Austin, and he was saying sometimes people treat you better when you dress up more. I was feeling like people were treating me different for a
while there, but I think it was just up to me to feel better about myself and then they would treat me better too. It’s that whole image thing – not wanting to stick out like a sore thumb.”

“So, you feel like you have to dress up and focus on your appearance to get their respect?” I asked.

“I guess,” she answered. “And make good grades in class. I feel better when I do that. I guess when I feel better, people will respect me more.”

“So, once again, you feel like you have the power to win people’s respect?” I asked.

“I think so,” she said.

“Well, here’s a questions I haven’t asked yet that fits perfectly here,” I said. “If other people doubted you could go to college as a teen mother, how did this make you feel?”

“Mainly, people just didn’t understand why I wanted to do it. At my church, most of the women are stay at home moms,” she answered. “And my husband is planning to get a Ph.D, so he is going to make good money someday. But I wanted a degree for me. It didn’t mean I didn’t want to spend time with my son. I just know that education is important. It was important before I became a mom, and it’s just as important now. When people ask me why I want to do it, I simply say, ‘Why wouldn’t I want to do it?’”

“So, you mentioned that you feel like you connect to the people at your church… You feel like they didn’t support your decision to go back to college after Michael’s birth?” I asked.
“Well, not exactly that,” she answered. “I guess you could say they just didn’t understand why I would want to do it. Once I was going, they were supportive and all that. I guess they just enjoy being stay-at-home moms, and they couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t want to do that too.”

“Let me make sure I understand,” I said. “Now, you feel like your church is supportive of your going to college?”

“Definitely,” she answered. “They pray for me when I need it and stuff like that.”

“Okay,” I answered. “And that helps you feel supported?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered.

“So, what are your biggest assets as a teen mother going to college?” I asked.

“What about you makes you able to handle all this? Like if people didn’t think it was a good idea at first, like maybe your parents or the people at your church, what made it possible for you to do it anyway?”

“I’m very determined and stubborn,” she answered immediately. “When I decided I wanted to go to back to college, nothing could stop me. I went the first semester pregnant and took time out, but I had started it, so I had to finish it, no matter how hard it might be. My sense of responsibility is important because it makes it possible for me to know which things are important on my to do list.”

When I asked her what she meant by her sense of responsibility, she stated, “I mean that Michael and Austin are my top priority.”

She continued, “Austin always wanted me to go to college too. It helps to have a husband who is supportive,” she paused briefly. “And honestly, I have to say the women
at my church were supportive, even if they didn’t understand. Austin and I moved away
from home to go to school here, and I did not have any family here. When we started
going to church, I found a group of women who would help me with various things,
babysitting, etc. Without my church, I do not know how I would do this.”

“Can you elaborate on that?” I asked. “Were you always one to finish what you
start or did having Michael make you determined?”

“Well, I have always been pretty stubborn,” she laughed. “Before I was dating
Austin, I was dating this other guy, and my parents didn’t like him, so I said, ‘Oh, I’ll
show you!’ and I kept dating him. Or when I started dating Austin, his parents said,
‘Well, if you want to date him, you’re going to have to go to church.’ And I said, ‘Oh, I’ll
show you – I’ll go to church!’ Which that kind of turned around and bit me in the butt
because I accidentally started paying attention,” she laughed heartily now. “But it’s just
always been, like if someone says, ‘You can’t do that,’” I just think oh, okay – I think I
will then. I’ll prove them wrong.” Debbie’s radiant smile has completely returned now.

She continued, “I think another important thing to bring up is the faith aspect. I
mean, if I didn’t have my faith, if I didn’t have a firm, strong belief in God then, I might
not do it. I know this is the path that I’m supposed to be on. If I wasn’t sure about that, if
I didn’t have that faith, I’m not sure that I could continue what it is that I’m doing.”

“So, you feel like you are doing something you were meant to do, and having
faith in that helps you?” I asked.

“Definitely,” she said.
“So, you like to do things anyway when people say you can’t… but this is about more than that. I guess I’m saying it isn’t just proving people wrong – it’s more than that?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “Like even when I’m thinking, ‘I hate [going to college]! I want to quit!’, I think, ‘Well, I’ve trusted God so far, why would I stop now? That would be silly. It’s just my own insecurities creeping up.’”

“Okay. I think I get it,” I said. “When you feel insecure, your faith helps you feel confident again?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“Is there anything else you want to add about this whole proving people wrong thing that you feel is important?” I asked.

“I’m curious,” she asked. “Are most of the women single – the ones who go to college?”

“Yes – most are,” I said, surprised at this question. “I don’t know the exact number, but it’s gotta be something like 1 or 2 out of fifty or so who get married. I mean, I’m just guessing there, but I have been teaching here for six or seven years total, and I’ve only had a few married students. And as far as parents go… well, it would be way less, I think.”

Debbie continued, “I know several girls I graduated high school who got pregnant and said they were going to college, like my town had the baby bug. There were black girls who had no money, white girls who had plenty of money, even some Asian girls. It wasn’t just the poor girls, and you know – I keep in touch with them,
but I think I was pretty much the only one who went to college, even though they said they wanted to go. I want to know why they say they want to go, but they don’t. I mean, most of them are single.”

“I think that being married must help,” I said. “But this is new research, and I don’t really know if that’s a definite thing yet. I plan to keep studying this issue and find out; and I will let you know when I do. Now, do you think it could be other reasons that kept these girls you know from going to college? Do you think it has anything to do with people saying they can’t do it?” I asked.

Debbie thinks for a moment. “Maybe they are too dependent on others, and they don’t see a need to go get an education to take care of themselves. Maybe they stay home with their parents. And the grand mom becomes the mom. And they go out and party,” she paused. “And maybe if they are married, the husband doesn’t see any value in education. Maybe they don’t want to be independent from their husband.”

“Do you really think they don’t want the independence?” I asked. “Maybe they don’t know that an education can help a woman get independence. Or maybe it’s something else. We need to find out, don’t we?” I asked.

She sighed. “Some girls have too much support. It’s too easy for them to just rely on other people and not go to school.”

“Hmmmm…” I said. “Maybe. But I wonder if that’s easy in the long run – relying on others.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I am the only one out of all those girls who went. I just wonder why.”
“Me too,” I said. “Maybe I need to do another study sometime where I interview girls who say they wanted to go but they didn’t. Maybe I need to find out from them why.”

“That would be really good,” she said.

“Well, we have two more big questions,” I said. “This one’s kind of broad. Please tell me about the experience of being a teen mother who goes to college. If someone asked you to sum it all up, how would you do it?”

“It’s something that most people would think a woman would not be able to do. It doesn’t matter if you get pregnant before you go to college or after you go to college, you know – why do you go to college? Why don’t you just let your husband do everything while you take care of the baby? You could just live off of him or whatever. But I say, if I can, you know – if we have the resources to, then why not? Why not go to college? Your education is always important. Just because you get pregnant, it doesn’t mean your education is any less important. Maybe I would be happy with graduating and then never working at all. Just staying at home and having lots more kids, you know. But with an education, I have the option of going out to work if I decide I want to, and I want to have that option. I want to say, ‘Hey – an education is important, no matter what.’”

“So, do you think all teen moms think that way – that education is just as important after they have their babies as it was before they had their babies?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But it seems like it must be.”
“One more big question,” I said. “In what situations or contexts is the experience of being a teen mother who goes to college unique from the experiences of other people’s college experiences? Or other mother’s experiences?”

“Well, I did one semester before I had Michael. Being in college and having no children is more fun, I guess, but it just depends on how you define fun. If you define fun as hanging out with your family and playing with your son, teaching him things… well, that’s the way I define fun. But if you like to go out and party, you know – things like that, like a regular college student, then I guess they are really at liberty to do whatever is it that they want to do. Whereas, I cannot; I’m tied down. It’s not that I’m complaining. But it’s just a fact – I can’t. I cannot. So that aspect, being tied down to things; that is different. As far as being different from other moms, I think it’s less stressful if you are working and being a mom, maybe. Or even just staying at home, that would be less stress. I think school is a very stressful situation. You have the stress of performing well. Paying a ton of money if you don’t perform well. You want to fit in with your peers. You don’t want to look stupid. None of us want to look stupid. It’s the age where everyone wants to fit in. So, it’s a whole lot less pressure whenever you’re not in school.”

“Okay,” I said. “That whole sore thumb thing again,” I ask?

“Yes,” she said. “But I guess by this year, I’ve learned to just not worry so much or something.”

“Interesting,” I said. “This seems like a dumb question since it’s so obvious, but do you think that your experience has give you more maturity? Like you have had
eno experience now playing these different roles, and you’ve matured enough to handle it differently?”

“Oh yeah,” she laughed. “Like my parents were so worried when they first heard I was pregnant. I was fresh out of high school, you know. But now, it’s so different because I can do all this. Like Austin is looking at programs for his Ph.D., and we may have to move away from [this state]; we may not be living here. I don’t like the thought of moving out west. I like the South! But I know if I can get through this part of my life, I can handle anything.”

**Debbie: Summary**

Debbie was much more open in her interview than any participant. Perhaps it was because she knew me a little better as her teacher. Debbie seemed thrilled to share all that she shared with me, and she was also eager to see her transcript when I did her member checks. Debbie’s context is also rather unique. She has several factors that are different from the other mothers in the study. First of all, her husband is also a college student; the fact that he is a graduate student who plans to get a Ph.D. makes her story quite different from the stories of the other married participants. Debbie is also very open about her faith. Another factor that is quite different for Debbie is that she considers her in-laws to be supportive. Finally, Debbie struggles with her self-image and quite open about this struggle.
Melissa

I met Melissa a couple years ago, when my students did a service-learning project with the teenage pregnancy prevention organization where Melissa works. She is a 37-year old black woman who grew up in a county not far from my hometown. When we first met, she was still working on her master’s degree in human resource development. We immediately had a great deal in common. She is only a year younger than I am, and we both had our babies during our first year of college.

We agreed to meet for the interview in her office, at the teenage pregnancy prevention program. I noticed immediately that there were no negative posters depicting teen mothers as failures on the walls in these offices. Instead, this program seemed to focus on sex education for teenagers.

Melissa greeted me at the door, and we walked back to her office, which looked a lot like mine – filled with piles of paperwork waiting to be completed. Melissa was dressed professionally, in a tan suit that accentuates her chocolate brown skin. We settled into comfortable office chairs and began the interview.

Melissa began telling her story. “I graduated high school in 1990. I was 18. I had Chris in September of 1991, when I was 19. So, you know, I knew – I don’t have a job, I don’t have any money, and at that time there were a lot of plants and mills around the area and all my family had worked in those. My mom was working in a plant then. I had really watched her struggle as a single mom, you know. She raised three of us by herself, and I watched her, I watched her work third shift and have to struggle and not be there for us and not be able to attend things that we did in school, and I was like I don’t want to
take that path, so in December of 1991, Chris was three months old, and I started college at [a technical college]. So, that’s how it all started.”

“So, you were the first person in your family who went to college?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied.

“And you have a master’s now, right?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“Do you ever think about a Ph.D.?” I asked.

“Actually, I’m looking into possibly doing it after Chris graduates from high school,” she responded. “He’s a junior now.”

“So, what would you say were your biggest assets as you went to school when Chris was so young?” I asked. “I mean, what made it possible?”

“What made it possible is definitely my mama just being there for support. And she… well, at the time that I had Chris, she had gotten hurt, so she was on disability. She got hurt on her job and was no longer able to work. So, she was there, and I felt comfortable leaving him home there with her. And I had that support, and I didn’t have to worry about finding daycare, which I could have, you know, I could have gotten on the ABC voucher program, but you know, it was just easier for him to be with her, and I didn’t have to… I mean, I was scared about going to school, but I didn’t have to worry about how my child was doing. So, it was a lot easier because I had her there. And I just didn’t have to worry about getting him to daycare and then making it to school.

“Do you think you would have worried about him if he were in a daycare?” I asked.
“Probably,” she answered. “I mean, it’s hard to leave a baby with someone you don’t know, but I knew my mama would take very good care of him. So, I never had to worry about that.”

“What about personality-wise? I mean, do you think there are things about your personality that make it possible for you to overcome all that you have overcome and get a master’s degree?”

“With me, it was just that motivation of knowing, okay, I’ve got this child to take care of, and he didn’t ask to come here. It’s not his fault; it’s not fair to him to have to go do without in life. So, I want him to be able to have everything that a child with two parents would be able to have. I want him to be able to succeed,” she paused. “And I knew that working at Burger King or working in a mill I wasn’t going to be able to provide those things for him. So, that’s why – he was my sole motivation.”

“Now, along the way, if you met people who doubted that you could do it, how did it make you feel and how did you handle it?” I asked.

“Well, you know I had family members… I had an aunt that would make comments about me having two or three more babies and just being on the welfare system all of my life and she just,” Melissa paused, “Well, you know I started a community college first. She made the comment that an associate’s degree is all I would ever be able to obtain because I had a child. But I just let it go in one ear and out the other because it just fueled me and made me want to do even better just to prove her wrong.”

“Was there anybody else that you encountered along the way besides your aunt?” I asked.
“Well, I had a lot of friends who were going on the same path that I was,” she replied. “They lived in my neighborhood and they had their babies young. They didn’t pursue college. And they would make negative comments, and I lost a few friends. But that’s okay – I wasn’t doing it for them. I had to look at that – what my purpose was.”

“What kinds of things did they say?” I asked.

“Well, just like I was wasting my time and that I would not be able to make it. Maybe that I thought I was better than everyone else or something. I just had to ignore them,” she answered.

“What would you say were your biggest obstacles as you were going to college after having Chris?” I asked.

“Just confidence. You know, with me, raising a son by myself, you know – it’s just me doing this,” she paused. “Some days I would think I cannot do this, I just cannot do this. Along the way, I failed a lot of classes in college, and I would get discouraged. Even when I transferred on to [a small religious college near my university]. I mean, I was supposed to graduate in 1996. I failed a history class. I had mailed out invitations and everything and could not march! Could not march!” she laughed. “I had to go back. So, I cried and cried. I almost gave up, and my mama was like, ‘No! You came too far. You came too far to turn around and not get this.’”

“Would you say that it was your schedule that caused you to fail some classes?” I asked.

“Oh yeah, with work – it caused me to fail a lot of classes!” she laughed. “Once I transferred over and went to a four-year college, I decided that the $167 dollars a month I
was getting in welfare and I would get maybe two something in food stamps – it wasn’t enough. I couldn’t make it. By the time I bought enough Pampers for the month, I didn’t have any money left. So, I got a job waiting tables. So, going to school full time in the day and waiting tables at night and then coming home to take care of your child… some nights I would come home and if he’s sick, I had to take care of him. So I couldn’t study and do my assignments, and I had to work too. That caused me to fail a couple of classes. But as far as obstacles go, there’s that and confidence and then a lot of times I would look to my friends for support or sometimes to other people and you know, sometimes they just can’t handle you. If it’s someone you really look up to and they are not supporting you, it can hinder you. It hurts. It does hurt. And then, not having the money to… I mean, it was hard. I had finally gotten my own apartment and I had a car, so even with working, there was no money. Everything that I had coming in was going right back out to pay for bills, you know – do this, do this, so I didn’t have anything. I would see other students that were there, you know – no children, their parents were paying for everything and sending them spending money too. You know, they were able to go out. And they would say, ‘We’re going out here this weekend,’ and I couldn’t go,” she sighed.

“So, would you say that not being able to do things and not being part of a social group was an obstacle also?” I asked.

“Yeah, you just feel…” she paused for several seconds, “loneliness. And I felt isolated. You know, because I looked at the friends I made on campus, and they lived on campus. They just went back to their room after class and were living a regular college
life. But I had to go home and take care of my baby, you know. I had to go home and take care of my child and be a mama.”

“So, it was different – your life and the other students’ lives. What about your professors? Were they understanding?” I asked.

“I think… I don’t know how many of them actually knew. I mean, those that knew, I think they were. They would accommodate me as much as possible without giving me more than the other students because, like I said, I still failed that history class and didn’t get to march.” She laughed, “Me and my advisor both went to the professor to see if there was anything that we could do, and we pleaded, and I said, ‘What else can I do?’, and he said I had already done everything. But you know, I didn’t want special favors. That’s just how it happened, and it was okay. I mean, I think the ones who knew were understanding. I think they were.”

“What’s the difference between special favors and understanding?” I asked.

“Understanding would be if your baby is sick and you need to miss a class. I guess a special favor would be letting me retake a test that I had failed. That would have been going too far. But just knowing that I had to be there for my baby for doctor’s appointments and things that other students didn’t have to do. That is how I would define understanding,” she answered.

“Tell about what it was like when you went on for your master’s. What was that like?” I asked.

“Well, I recently got that in 2007. My son was a lot older during that time, and it was an online program at [the university that you attend]. I had a little more freedom
than having to physically go to class every day or every other day. But there was a lot more work involved. I was also working full time here at [a local teen pregnancy prevention program]. And I have a child who’s very involved in school, and I’m thoroughly involved in his life. He plays sports. The last year of my master’s program, he play on the J.V. football team and he was on the varsity football team as a sub, and as I look back at this, I was at every football game – Thursday and Friday night, away and home. And worked every day. And did every class, and this time, I didn’t fail a class. So, when I look back, I’m like, ‘Whooo!’” she laughed. “It just went by so quick. Because you know, I know, I always knew, I’m not going to give up my time with Chris. And I have to work. And this education is something I want to do. So, I just did it. I think I just did it without even thinking about it until after the fact.”

“You are describing something that I think is probably really important,” I said. “It sounds like you didn’t struggle academically as much in graduate school, even though it was obviously more work. What do you think happened there? How did you learn how to do it and not fail any classes?”

“I think maybe the time that I spent in a professional career helped me. I came [to the teen pregnancy prevention agency] after I got my four-year degree. I had to learn how to prioritize and make a to do list and get everything done,” she paused. “I learned how to do it on my job, so I think when I came back to graduate school, I just had to apply that to school too.”

“What do you mean when you say prioritize?” I asked.
“It’s all about putting your child first,” she said, without hesitation. “You know, you have to do that. Then, you think about all the other things that have to happen and you take care of them one at a time. You don’t let it all overwhelm you – you take on each task and get it done. But through it all, you have to put the child first. Always. You know?’

“Definitely,” I answered. “Okay, so, can you tell me about a really good day that you’ve had, as a teen mother going to college?”

“A rewarding day… hmmm… Well, this is after my teen years, but it’s when I got my master’s degree. That was 2007. It was really rewarding to me just to see the smile on my son’s face. It was after I got my diploma, and I was trying to find my family in the crowd, and he was like the first person I saw. You know – just to see that smile. And to see that he knows, ‘My mama did this. You know – she did it. And she did it being there for me. And you know (choking up) – THAT…”

She stopped to get us both a Kleenex, as her description of her graduation caused us both to tear up a little bit. We both laughed the whole time we are crying, laughing at ourselves, without really having to say anything. This is an experience that we have shared, and even though I don’t mention that, she looked at me with a lot of understanding in her eyes.

Finally, she continued the story. “You know with my other degrees, he was younger. He knew I was going to college, but he didn’t understand how hard it was then. But he’s a junior in high school now. So, he knows. He knows now, you know, that she’s still doing this all by herself. And with little to no help from his father. And
little to no interaction with his father. He sees that, and I know that it motivates him.
You know, he’s looking at colleges now and taking honors classes and taking the SAT
and ACT. And that’s what I wanted, you know, I wanted him to see how important this
all is – education. I wanted him to say ‘This is what I need to do; I need to follow in her
footsteps.’

“That’s exciting. I mean, you were the first to go to college, and now, he’ll be the
second?”

“Well, actually, I have another aunt out in California, not the one I mentioned
before, but she decided to go to college right after my first year at technical college. She
said that I inspired her to go back to school, even though she was a lot older then.
Anyway, she went straight on through and is finishing her Ph.D. now,” she explained.

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “So, you started a break in the cycle…”

She immediately broke in before I can explain what I mean by cycle. “Yes! I’m
glad you said that! You know I was talking to my brother the other day, and he was
saying we are all trapped here, you know, in this same cycle our grandparents and great
grandparents have all always been in. And he was saying that in front of his son, my
nephew, who was talking about school, and I said to my nephew, ‘No! You can break the
cycle!’ And my brother said, ‘No, we are all here and we all always will be.’ And I said,
‘Well, you can stay if that’s what you want to do, but we’re not. We are choosing to get
out of it. And your son can too.’”

“So, do you think that’s important to know for a teen mom going to college to
know, you know – to know that you can choose not to be part of the cycle? And I guess
to be sure we are talking about the same thing here - we should say the cycle of poverty?”

I asked.

“‘Yes!’ she exclaimed enthusiastically. “I can’t say that enough! It’s a choice. And we have it. It might not be as easy for us as it is for other people, but that doesn’t mean we can’t do it. And we are showing people that we can. And now, when I’m at work, I tell these girls every single day that they can too. They don’t have to get pregnant before they are out of high school. They don’t have to. But even if they do, they can still get out of the cycle. They can still go to college. I did it. You did it. Other women do it. So, it can be done. And more of us should do it.”

“Amen!” I said. “So, do you think the difference for us is that we saw education was a way out of the cycle of poverty? I mean, is that really the thing that’s different?”

“I think so. Maybe. It’s what was different about me and my other friends from high school who had babies young. They didn’t think education would get them out of the poverty. They didn’t think they would ever get out of the cycle, and so they didn’t fight for anything better.”

“Do you ever talk to them now?” I asked.

“A couple of them,” she replies. “But we’re not close friends now. I mean, we live very different lives now that I have a master’s degree.”

“Interesting. Okay, could you tell me about a challenging day that you have had as a teen mother going to college?” I asked.

“I guess I’ll have to go back to my master’s program again,” she laughed. “I don’t know why it was so difficult, but during the first month when I started the master’s
program, I’ll never forget, it was 2006 and it was Super Bowl Sunday. My son was at his friend’s house down the street watching the Super Bowl. And I was there, and I was working on my first paper, and I was working really hard and all of a sudden, I was like, ‘I can’t do this!’ And I just broke down. And I was just sitting there crying in the house, and I was like, ‘I can’t!’ I was just giving up. And I was like, ‘I’m not going to try. This is too much.’ And I was thinking about everything down the road and what I was going to have to sacrifice for the next two years and everything my son’s got going on, and I was like, ‘There’s no way.’ And I just sat there crying, and all the sudden my aunt in California called. Remember, she’s 64 and working on her Ph.D. She had just finished her master’s then. And she called to congratulate me on starting the program. And you know, she could just hear in my voice, you know, and she just really gave me a pep talk. She was like, ‘There’s no turning back. If I did it at my age, you can do it.’ And she just really encouraged me,” she smiled as she talks about her aunt. “But that was really challenging. I think I just… because I know I’ve always had time to be there for my son and to be involved and never missed a game, any game that he’s ever played, you know – if he looked in the stands, he saw his mama there cheering, even if he was sitting on the bench. He still saw Mama up there. And I know that’s important to him. And I just thought, you know, this is going to limit me, having to work so much on school. But it didn’t.”

“So, the other aunt, the one that doubted you, what did she think about the master’s degree?” I asked.
“Well, she’s never said she’s sorry or anything. When I graduated with my master’s, she came and brought her daughter. Her daughter looks up to me a lot,” again, Melissa smiles happily as she talks about this niece. “But anyway, she didn’t say much about getting the master’s, but she didn’t apologize for all she said when I first had Chris. I don’t know if she ever really noticed how much she hurt me, or if she even thought about what she said.”

“Okay, so what would a typical day in your life while going to college and being a mom be like?” I asked.

She answered, “For that, I should probably go back to younger years, when Chris was younger. After we moved into our own place, I would get up and get him ready and drop him at my mama’s. Then, I would go to school, and I would be in school from maybe 8 to 2:30. Then, I’d go to Mama’s and spend a little time with Chris, and then I would change clothes and go wait tables from maybe five to about ten or so. I would pick him up and go home, get him ready for bed, and then it would be time for homework or study for any tests,” she sighed a long sigh. “Then, I’d finally go to sleep and get back up and start it all over again.”

“How much sleep would you say you got on average?” I asked.

She immediately laughed. “Well, that’s a good question! I would probably get in bed about 12:30 or 1 and then, I’d have to be right back up at 6 or so.”

“So, not very much, I guess?” I asked.
“No, not much,” she laughed. “I mean, sometimes I was so tired, I couldn’t sleep. You know when you wait tables, you don’t just stand in one place. It’s really hard on the feet.”

“Oh yeah. It’s a hard job. I’m just now reaching the point where I’ve been a teacher more than a waitress, and I’m like ‘Finally!’” I laughed.

Melissa laughed.

“Okay, I think you kind of already answered this question throughout all your answers, but just to sum it up, what do you think is different about being a teen mom who goes to college? What makes it different from the lives of other college students or the lives of other teen mothers?” I asked.

“I guess a teen mother going to college verses the regular college students is different because a teen mom in college has a lot more responsibility,” she began. “Not only are you responsible for maintaining a certain G.P.A for college and doing certain assignments and passing tests, but you also have that responsibility of, ‘Okay, I have a child. I need to make sure that he has food, pampers, making doctor’s appointments, you know if he’s sick or if it’s just a well check up, and just making sure that I have time to interact with him so that he knows I’m Mama. Because that worried me too, with him spending so much time with my mama, and he still calls her mama. He calls us both mama to this day. And when we’re in the same room, and he says ‘Mama,’ we both look. He knows that’s grandma and I’m mama, but he still calls her ‘Mama.’ So, you gotta look at all that now… I mean, you have all the pressure of school, but you also have to make sure your child is being adequately cared for and provided for. So, that would be
the difference with the regular college students. Because when you’re a regular college student your responsibility is just, ‘Make sure I go to class, make sure I turn things in, make sure I’m there on time, I eat when I’m hungry’” she laughed. “You don’t have to worry about making sure someone else is eating. You’re just fending for yourself. And with a regular teen mom, not going to college, I mean, you’ve still got that responsibility of taking care of that child. So, that is like the sole responsibility – you have to make sure they have the necessities they have, as well as spending that quality time together and nurturing them. I guess that would be the difference – they wouldn’t have that added pressure of school. Which, to me, it’s all worth it in the end, because if you want to make sure your child has what they need in life, you need that, you need to go to college. You have to.”

“So, if someone came to you and said they wanted to quote you in a book and asked you for a summary of what it means to be a teen mom who goes to college, you know – what is the essence of the experience, what would you say?” I asked.

“What does it mean to be a teen mom who goes to college… uhmmmm…. I would say just dedication. You’re dedicated to your child first. And then to yourself. You wanna have something better in life. And just to know that… I mean, I don’t want to call a child a mistake, but you know, we make mistakes. We made bad choices. It’s just trying to make up for that bad choice you made. Just that dedication and determination,” she answered.

“So, would you say that dedication is the number one word there?” I asked.
“Yeah. It is,” she answered. “It takes a dedicated person. When you see them going on to pursue a degree, you know they are dedicated to pursuing life and having better things for that child.”

“Now, is there anything we haven’t talked about that you think is important about the experience of going to college and being a teen mom?” I asked.

“Just making sure you have your priorities straight. You know who you are doing this for. It makes a big difference. Because you know, look in that child’s eye, they did not ask to come here. They did not ask to come in this environment. They didn’t ask to be born to one parent, with no money. The child is young and doesn’t have a clue what is going on in life. They didn’t ask for all that – being poor and all that,” Melissa paused.

“You owe it to that child; you owe it to them to do better. That’s what motivated me and that’s how it felt. I owed it to him because he didn’t ask to be in the situation we were in at first. And that’s why I worked so hard to make sure he had the necessities. And now he cares about education, and he’s going to make it too.”

After I turned off the recorder, Melissa and I shared photos of our children. I tell her about a day that was even better for me than when I graduated and saw my kids’ faces. I tell her about the day I took my daughter to her first day of college. Melissa and I broke out the Kleenex once more and wished each other luck in our endeavors.

Melissa: Summary

As a 36-year old mother who just completed her Master’s degree, who’s child is a junior in high school, Melissa’s ability to reflect on her experiences as a teen mother may be slightly different than the other, younger participants. She went into greater detail
about how she feels about “breaking the cycle of poverty” for herself and her son. Like most the other participants, she struggled with naysayers, financial constraints, and alienation. Additionally, she feels that she did all that she did for her son, who was her primary motivation. As a single mother, her story is particularly moving because she talks about being there for all of her son’s extracurricular activities, even in the most difficult and challenging times of her academic career. Now, as her son begins to look at colleges, she feels like she has successfully managed to break the cycle of poverty for herself and her son.

Delimited Horizons

According to Moustakas (1994), after one constructs the narrative of the interviews with participants, the next step in the process of a phenomenology is to look across the composite textural descriptions and the composite structural descriptions and find the invariant themes that appear in the varying experiences of the participants. In order to do this, one must first identify significant statements made by the participants. Table 5 identifies these selected significant statements. In order to select significant statements, I used inductive reasoning (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2003); in other words, I used my own experiences to guide me as I determined which statements seemed important in describing the essence of the experience.

Table 5: Selected Significant Statements

- I never questioned whether or not I would go to college.
- My family and my friends were very supportive. They were actually proud of me.
for my decision. Even strangers are often impressed that I would choose to take on such a heavy load.

- I couldn’t do this without my husband. He’s my rock.
- Teen mothers need to be empowered, not shunned.
- [My professor] could care less.
- Teen mothers are willing to work harder.
- We are trying to make up for our past mistakes.
- I love being a mom.
- I am working twelve hours a day right now.
- I wanted to start college right after high school, but my priorities were being a wife and mother. I also worked a full-time job, so unfortunately there was no time for school. While online one day I saw an ad for the University of Phoenix, and it is a completely online school. I called and registered for the next block of classes.
- My biggest asset is my husband, who will let me lock myself in the bedroom and get my work done while he takes care of the kids.
- My children make me want to do my best at school. They see me doing homework and it makes them realize how important school is.
- The biggest obstacle I have found is lack of sleep. I end up working on homework most nights until 3:00 am… I really don't overcome the lack of sleep.
- There’s no way to do this if you don’t have your priorities in order.
- I sat down to do homework one day, not feeling like it at the time, and them Crystal and Teddy got out their homework to do with me. We all sat at the kitchen
table and talked about our work, and I helped them when they needed it. Just having that bit of time with them without television or bickering made it so wonderful.

- I do everything here, on my own. I don’t know any regular college students. I just don’t know how to answer. I’m always busy with my kids here. The only people I see are my family.

- I think that just having other moms who have been there to talk to would make a world of difference, so that the mother does not feel like she is alone.

- Even teachers are quick to judge you. I remember walking into my advanced level courses and teachers thinking I walked into the wrong room. Before ever meeting me, one teacher told me that I would be better off in a lower, on grade level course. Why? I’ve always taken higher-level courses. I told her I was fine right where I was, and I was thinking, ‘Bring it on!’” When I made an A on her first test, she called my mom, thinking that I had cheated. I was SHOCKED! I worked so hard to prove her wrong just so that she could insult my intelligence! Secretly I would love to go back to [this teacher who doubted me] once I graduate and introduce myself as ‘Dr. ______.’

- Since I had a 40-45 minute commute to school, I preferred to organize my days to where I had at least three or four classes on the same day so I could get them over with. A typical day would be getting up and getting myself ready for school, getting my daughter ready for my mom to take her to daycare and then getting on the road. I usually spent time in between classes doing homework and would
often not bring much homework home (if any) so I could have the nights to spend time with my daughter.

- You know, I have rarely stayed up past midnight to study for a test because I knew it was not worth it; I had someone else to take care of. Organization in my life has become huge because you do not like unplanned surprises when raising a child.

- I usually do a little retail therapy - get a pedicure or a new shirt. And then I just play with my daughter and forget school for the rest of the day.

- I know that I was able to [handle this stress] for two reasons: a wonderful support system and my drive and determination to get an education. Some people are more fortunate than others, and I agree 100% that I was fortunate, but I also know that it was my determination to be successful and not have a negative connotation attached to my name because I was a ‘teen mother.’

- My parents had enough money to help me with daycare and other expenses.

- I know people would judge and talk, but you have to brush it off because at the end of the day if you have a healthy baby and you are a creating a future for yourself, it does not matter what others think.

- I don’t know any other teen mothers; I can’t really speak for them. I know, for me, that college was an expectation rather than an option.

- I eventually settled with [our university]. At the time, I felt like I was sacrificing my choice of college because I got pregnant in high school. Fortunately, that feeling only lasted a few months.
• It came down to this: if you don’t think I can handle college right now, then what’s next for me? I already had the baby, so that’s not changing. I think I’ve always kept the attitude that [being a teen mother] is just one element of my life…not my whole life. I don’t have to sacrifice everything for my son.

• People’s praise that I actually managed to accomplish this goal actually bothers me a lot more than any doubt some initially expressed. I still get really uncomfortable when people say they respect me for it or are amazed at what I did. We all make mistakes and have to overcome the obstacles they create. This is the attitude that made college possible for me.

• Most professors were incredibly understanding – more than I would have been in that situation. I had a few professors (men without children) who seemed to go out of their way to make sure they treated me no differently than others. I almost appreciated that approach.

• Well, they didn’t give me any special favors. I don’t think I deserved special favors just because I had a baby.

• My son was an active four-year-old, and I have to admit that playing with him was more fun than writing papers! I would rather spend time with him until he went to bed and get up at three or four in the morning to do school work than stay up late.

• We would try to go to a lot of the low-key sporting events like baseball and soccer games in the afternoons and on the weekends. I think ________ is really a great place to have a young kid. You have tons of safe parks, high-profile games on
campus, and events like the circus and Barney at [our school coliseum].

• You can’t be on campus for more than an hour without hearing about the ‘________ Family.’ But it’s hard to enjoy that when every freshman is required to live on campus, and I didn’t. When every student eats together in the dining halls, and I didn’t. When classmates study together at night, and I couldn’t. I was living a lifestyle so different than theirs, but I was a freshman too. I was living away from home for the first time too. I was learning to deal with college-level classes too. I was going through so many of the same experiences; yet I couldn’t experience them in the same way. I was really lonely my first year.

• Needless to say, I have a lot of student loans.

• If you are constantly put down, you start to think that what they are saying may be true. As corny as it sounds, it’s important to believe in yourself in order to succeed.

• Sometimes I think my biggest flaws actually made college possible. I’m stubborn, opinionated, and at times completely unwilling to compromise. These characteristics absolutely suck in interactions with people on a superficial level because I come off as selfish and rude. But when you’re trying to accomplish something for only yourself and you have so many people and factors bringing you down, sometimes personality is the only thing that allows you to ignore them.

• Trying to function with no sleep is hard for anyone, but being alert enough to care for someone who is completely dependent on me is tough.

• I was very fortunate to have supportive parents. I know that a lot of teen mothers
don’t have that luxury. But I don’t know what to say to them. Keep your grades up, earn scholarships to cover tuition, take out loans to pay the bills. There’s got to be a better way, but I don’t know what it is.

• But I just didn’t want to leave her when she was very young. I felt like I had to wait [to go to college].

• My mother offered to babysit while I went to school, so I thought I should do it.

• But my in-laws felt like I was doing the wrong thing, like I would be hurting my relationship with Emma.

• But I knew that I wanted to be a teacher, you know. I feel like I still have a life outside of being Emma’s mom. I’m still a person.

• I stayed out with her when she was very sick, but when she was getting better, I went back. Anyway, my mother-in-law made me feel like it was my fault that Emma was sick.

• But my professors were actually really great about that. They let me make up what I missed. I really didn’t have any trouble then.

• There was this one history professor back at Tech… I mean, kids get sick a lot, you know? So, I had to be out a couple of classes when Emma got sick and my mom was sick too. Anyway, he was kinda mean about it. He didn’t let me make up some work, but I still got a B, so I wasn’t too worried about it. But he told me that I couldn’t have any special favors because I had a baby. That really made me mad. I didn’t want any special favors, you know? I was just telling him why I was out.
• And my husband believes in me, and he stuck by me when I got pregnant. He was only my boyfriend then, so he didn’t have to. That’s important.

• I’m really stubborn on the inside. I knew I was doing what was right for me and my family. We would have more money eventually, and Emma would see me as a professional person who cared about her enough to go back to school. To be honest, it has been kind of fun to prove my in-laws wrong. They used to say I would flunk out and stuff like that,” she paused. “Well, they were dead wrong on that.

• I thought of one other obstacle I have faced. I have a hard time finding time to hang out with my friends, especially now while I’m student teaching.

• I lost touch with a lot of people, like most of the girls I cheered with. We were good friends before, and we tried after I had Emma, but my life was so different than theirs.

• And my life is really different anyway. When everyone else in my class was talking about how drunk they got on the weekend, I was talking about potty training. It’s not like most twenty year olds wanna hear about potty training!

• But I guess I feel better now about me. I know I can do this now, and it doesn’t seem as hard as it used to.

• I remember just going in the bathroom and crying after I got a test back with a bad grade. I cried and cried and thought about dropping out. But then, I thought about Emma. When I went home and I looked in her eyes, I found the courage to go back to school the next day because I knew I was doing it all for her.
• But then, you do it because you want something good for your life. It doesn’t matter what other people think. You know it’s what you think that counts, and you know you can do it.

• We need to provide support groups for teens moms or even older moms who have babies in college. It’s lonely. We need to know we aren’t the only ones, you know?

• I was the first person in my family to graduate from high school. They were just happy for me to be a high school graduate!

• They couldn’t see why I would want to go [to college]. They felt like my focus should be on my baby. No one in my family could understand why I wanted to do such a crazy thing!

• His parents helped with some of his tuition and I qualify for a scholarship and the Pell grant, but we are both getting student loans too. Now that he’s a graduate student, he can get a big check every semester and he has an assistantship too. It will be a lot to pay back, but he’s going to get a Ph.D., so we should be okay.

• When [my husband and I] have schedules spread out all over the day, it’s a matter of waiting on each other or not having any time together. It’s very hard.

• I’ve already had one all-nighter this semester. I was so ill the next day! I usually don’t start my schoolwork until I put Michael to bed at 9 or 9:30. But sometimes that depends on how willing he is to go to sleep.

• I get in the worst mood whenever I’m running late. So a horrible day starts off with being late, and then everything just goes bad from there. You know how
most people just get in a funky mood where nothing can satisfy you, and you’re just complaining for no reason, well – I get in that mood, and I’m just like, ‘I wanna quit school!’ you know? ‘I have a family! I want to quit school! I don’t need to do this!’ I think I put myself in the mood. It’s kind of my own fault. Because I could be thinking on things that are good instead of moping around.

- I wouldn’t say it’s the schoolwork or anything to do with my professors; it’s mostly my attitude about it.

- I am making really good grades, and that makes me feel so, so good. I know I’m doing the right thing. I know I can do this.

- My biggest challenge is that I have a lot of work outside school. My son wants all my attention when he is awake. I tell him to go play in his room, and that’s okay because he has lots of toys, but he can only make it about five minutes before he’s back to get more of my attention. So, basically, I have to do my schoolwork after he goes to bed. That’s definitely a challenge because I’m always so tired.

- It was like I could feel God with me and I knew God approved of me going to school. When I’m tired and I pray, it really helps me refocus and know I’m going to be okay.

- I used to weigh 120 pounds, but I gained weight while I was pregnant and I cannot seem to lose it. My father-in-law, bless his heart, gave me this article about South Carolina teen moms gaining weight and not losing it. It made me feel so bad, like he was saying I’m fat. It’s a lot of pressure.

- I want to work out, but that would cut my sleep to 3-4 hours per night. Plus, if I
go to a gym, it needs to have a daycare. Gold’s gym does, but it costs too much.

Our university gym is free, but they have no daycare. I don’t know how to do it.

I want to be healthy… but there’s no support at our university for a student with a kid to be healthy.

• Actually, there’s no support at [our university] at all for a student with a child. At first, Austin and I looked at married housing. But it was so nasty. I would not take my baby there. Then, they took it away now, so there isn’t even anywhere for married people to live on campus.

• Another problem is the other students. I don’t feel like I connect to any of them. They are single. They might care about school, but their number one priority is partying. IF I am in a group – like the group in your class – my best time to meet is on Saturday morning. But they won’t do that because they get drunk on Friday night.

• Sometimes, I just feel like a sore thumb around them. I’d like to go to class bumming and wearing my pajamas, but I was talking to Austin, and he was saying sometimes people treat you better when you dress up more. I was feeling like people were treating me different for a while there, but I think it was just up to me to feel better about myself and then they would treat me better too. It’s that whole image thing – not wanting to stick out like a sore thumb.

• Mainly, people just didn’t understand why I wanted to do it. At my church, most of the women are stay at home moms. I guess they just enjoy being stay-at-home moms, and they couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t want to do that too.
• I’m very determined and stubborn. When I decided I wanted to go back to college, nothing could stop me.

• I mean that Michael and Austin are my top priority.

• I think another important thing to bring up is the faith aspect. I mean, if I didn’t have my faith, if I didn’t have a firm, strong belief in God then, I might not do it. I know this is the path that I’m supposed to be on. If I wasn’t sure about that, if I didn’t have that faith, I’m not sure that I could continue what it is that I’m doing.

• I know several girls I graduated high school who got pregnant and said they were going to college, like my town had the baby bug. There were black girls who had no money, white girls who had plenty of money, even some Asian girls. It wasn’t just the poor girls, and you know – I keep in touch with them, but I think I was pretty much the only one who went to college, even though they said they wanted to go. I want to know why they say they want to go, but they don’t.

• And maybe if [teen mothers who do not go to college] are married, the husband doesn’t see any value in education. Maybe they don’t want to be independent from their husband.

• Some girls have too much support. It’s too easy for them to just rely on other people and not go to school.

• It doesn’t matter if you get pregnant before you go to college or after you go to college, you know – why do you go to college? Why don’t you just let your husband do everything while you take care of the baby? You could just live off of him or whatever. But I say, if I can, you know – if we have the resources to, then
why not? Why not go to college? Your education is always important. Just because you get pregnant, it doesn’t mean your education is any less important.

- If you define fun as hanging out with your family and playing with your son, teaching him things… well, that’s the way I define fun. But if you like to go out and party, you know – things like that, like a regular college student, then I guess they are really at liberty to do whatever is it that they want to do. Whereas, I cannot; I’m tied down. It’s not that I’m complaining. But it’s just a fact – I can’t. I cannot.

- You have the stress of performing well. Paying a ton of money if you don’t perform well. You want to fit in with your peers. You don’t want to look stupid. None of us want to look stupid. It’s the age where everyone wants to fit in. So, it’s a whole lot less pressure whenever you’re not in school.

- I know if I can get through this part of my life, I can handle anything.

- What made it possible is definitely my mama just being there for support… I mean, it’s hard to leave a baby with someone you don’t know, but I knew my mama would take very good care of him. So, I never had to worry about that.

- With me, it was just that motivation of knowing, okay, I’ve got this child to take care of, and he didn’t ask to come here. It’s not his fault; it’s not fair to him to have to go do without in life. So, I want him to be able to have everything that a child with two parents would be able to have. I want him to be able to succeed. And I knew that working at Burger King or working in a mill I wasn’t going to be able to provide those things for him. So, that’s why – he was my sole motivation.
• But I just let [the words of my critical aunt] go in one ear and out the other because it just fueled me and made me want to do even better just to prove her wrong.”

• I had a lot of friends who were going on the same path that I was. They lived in my neighborhood and they had their babies young. They didn’t pursue college. And they would make negative comments, and I lost a few friends.

• Some days I would think I cannot do this; I just cannot do this. Along the way, I failed a lot of classes in college, and I would get discouraged.

• I almost gave up, and my mama was like, ‘No! You came too far. You came too far to turn around and not get this.

• Oh yeah, with work – it caused me to fail a lot of classes! … So, going to school full time in the day and waiting tables and night and then coming home to take care of your child… some nights I would come home and if he’s sick, I had to take care of him. So I couldn’t study and do my assignments, and I had to work too.

• But as far as obstacles go, there’s that and confidence and then a lot of times I would look to my friends for support or sometimes to other people and you know, sometimes they just can’t handle you. If it’s someone you really look up to and they are not supporting you, it can hinder you. It hurts. It does hurt.

• And then, not having the money to… I mean, it was hard. I had finally gotten my own apartment and I had a car, so even with working, there was no money. Everything that I had coming in was going right back out to pay for bills, you
know – do this, do this, so I didn’t have anything. I would see other students that were there, you know – no children, their parents were paying for everything and sending them spending money too. You know, they were able to go out. And they would say, ‘We’re going out here this weekend,’ and I couldn’t go.

• I felt isolated. You know, because I looked at the friends I made on campus, and they lived on campus. They just went back to their room after class and were living a regular college life. But I had to go home and take care of my baby, you know. I had to go home and take care of my child and be a mama.

• But you know, I didn’t want special favors… I guess a special favor would be letting me retake a test that I had failed. That would have been going too far. But just knowing that I had to be there for my baby for doctor’s appointments and things that other students didn’t have to do. That is how I would define understanding.

• My son was a lot older during that time, and it was an online program at [the university that you attend]. I had a little more freedom than having to physically go to class every day or every other day. But there was a lot more work involved.

• I look back at [my master’s degree], I was at every [one of my son’s] football game[s] – Thursday and Friday night, away and home. And worked every day. And did every class, and this time, I didn’t fail a class. So, when I look back, I’m like, ‘Whooo!

• I had to learn how to prioritize and make a to do list and get everything done. I learned how to do it on my job, so I think when I came back to graduate school, I
just had to apply that to school too.

• It’s all about putting your child first.

• We’re just trying to make up for our mistakes.

• It was really rewarding to me just to see the smile on my son’s face. It was after I got my diploma, and I was trying to find my family in the crowd, and he was like the first person I saw.

• You know, he’s looking at colleges now and taking honors classes and taking the SAT and ACT. And that’s what I wanted, you know, I wanted him to see how important this all is – education. I wanted him to say ‘This is what I need to do; I need to follow in her footsteps.

• Well, actually, I have another aunt out in California, not the one I mentioned before, but she decided to go to college right after my first year at technical college. She said that I inspired her to go back to school, even though she was a lot older then. Anyway, she went straight on through and is finishing her Ph.D. now.

• You know I was talking to my brother the other day, and he was saying we are all trapped here, you know, in this same cycle [of poverty] our grandparents and great grandparents have all always been in. And he was saying that in front of his son, my nephew, who was talking about school, and I said to my nephew, ‘No! You can break the cycle!’ And my brother said, ‘No, we are all here and we all always will be.’ And I said, ‘Well, you can stay if that’s what you want to do, but we’re not. We are choosing to get out of it. And your son can too.
• It’s a choice. And we have it. It might not be as easy for us as it is for other people, but that doesn’t mean we can’t do it. And we are showing people that we can.

• They don’t have to get pregnant before they are out of high school. They don’t have to. But even if they do, they can still get out of the cycle. They can still go to college. I did it. You did it. Other women do it. So, it can be done. And more of us should do it.

• It’s what was different about me and my other friends from high school who had babies young. They didn’t think education would get them out of the poverty. They didn’t think they would ever get out of the cycle, and so they didn’t fight for anything better.

• But we’re not close friends now. I mean, we live very different lives now that I have a master’s degree.

• And I was there, and I was working on my first paper, and I was working really hard and all of a sudden, I was like, ‘I can’t do this!’ And I just broke down. And I was just sitting there crying in the house, and I was like, ‘I can’t!’ I was just giving up.

• And I just sat there crying, and all the sudden my aunt in California called. Remember, she’s 64 and working on her Ph.D. She had just finished her master’s then. And she called to congratulate me on starting the program. And you know, she could just hear in my voice, you know, and she just really gave me a pep talk.

• Not only are you responsible for maintaining a certain G.P.A for college and
doing certain assignments and passing tests, but you also have that responsibility of, ‘Okay, I have a child. I need to make sure that he has food, pampers, making doctor’s appointments, you know if he’s sick or if it’s just a well check up, and just making sure that I have time to interact with him so that he knows I’m Mama.

• You’re dedicated to your child first. And then to yourself.

• I mean, I don’t want to call a child a mistake, but you know, we make mistakes. We made bad choices. It’s just trying to make up for that bad choice you made.

• Because you know, look in that child’s eye, they did not ask to come here. They did not ask to come in this environment. They didn’t ask to be born to one parent, with no money. The child is young and doesn’t have a clue what is going on in life. They didn’t ask for all that – being poor and all that. You owe it to that child; you owe it to them to do better. That’s what motivated me and that’s how it felt. I owed it to him because he didn’t ask to be in the situation we were in at first.

• [My mother] keeps my daughter for me every day while I go to class. We could not afford day care, and I’m not sure I would want my daughter in a day care anyway. My mom believes that I can do this so much that she’s will to give up her free time for me. That means the world to me.

• Austin’s mom by far has been the most supportive. She has always said, don’t you want to go to college? She understood why it was important. She had four kids and went back to work after she raised them.

• Your kids are always first – always.
• I have never missed a single game, and my son’s had plenty of them! If he was on a field or a court playing, he could always look in the stands and see me there.

• My high school boasted a 100% college matriculation rate.

• I look at all these single girls and I think about how their life is… and how my life is not.

• Most of my meltdowns were related to lack of sleep.

• Well, we don’t need special favors because we’re teen moms. Everyone else would hate us for that, and people don’t like us anyway. I think professors just need to understand that we are different from the other students, and we are actually willing to work harder most of the time. But we have to put our babies first no matter what, and there’s no negotiation on that for us.

• Finding a sense of community was my biggest obstacle.

• …when she couldn’t sleep one night and, thus, neither could I, and then I would have to sit through a 3-hour lab.

• The biggest obstacle I have found is lack of sleep. I end up working on homework most nights until 3:00 am.

Moustakas stated that the next step in the process of phenomenological interview analysis is to group significant statements into meaning clusters or themes. The following themes were identified: 1.) Family support of a teen mother’s efforts to go to college; 2.) Getting one’s priorities in order: “My baby comes first.”; 3.) Lack of sleep and
demanding schedules; 4.) Other people’s perceptions of a teen mother’s decision to go to college; 5.) Feelings of loneliness and alienation; 6.) Balancing demands outside of school and asking for “special favors”; 7.) Descriptions of breakdowns and stress during difficult times; 8.) Being motivated by the naysayers; 9.) Financial struggles brought on by the demands of supporting a family and going to college; 10.) Online classes and increased access to college; 11.) Being redeemed by getting a college degree; 12.) Setting an example for my child(ren); 13.) Internal locus of control (Rotter, 1954); and 14.) Reactions of teachers and professors to having teen mothers in their classes.

Table 6 shows the significant statements that were clustered together to create each of these units of meaning or themes.

**Table 6: Themes**

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<th>Themes</th>
<th>Clusters of Significant Statements</th>
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| **Theme 1:** Family support of a teen mother’s efforts to go to college (eight out of eight interviews) | • My family and my friends were very supportive. They were actually proud of me for my decision. Even strangers are often impressed that I would choose to take on such a heavy load.  
• I couldn’t do this without my husband. He’s my rock.  
• My biggest asset is my husband, who will let me lock myself in the |
bedroom and get my work done while he takes care of the kids.

- My parents had enough money to help me with daycare and other expenses.
- I was very fortunate to have supportive parents. I know that a lot of teen mothers don’t have that luxury. But I don’t know what to say to them.
- And my husband believes in me, and he stuck by me when I got pregnant. He was only my boyfriend then, so he didn’t have to. That’s important.
- What made it possible is definitely my mama just being there for support… I mean, it’s hard to leave a baby with someone you don’t know, but I knew my mama would take very good care of him. So, I never had to worry about that.
I was very fortunate to have supportive parents. I know that a lot of teen mothers don’t have that luxury.

I almost gave up, and my mama was like, ‘No! You came too far. You came too far to turn around and not get this.

And I just sat there crying, and all the sudden my aunt in California called. Remember, she’s 64 and working on her Ph.D. She had just finished her master’s then. And she called to congratulate me on starting the program. And you know, she could just hear in my voice, you know, and she just really gave me a pep talk.

[My mother] keeps my daughter for me every day while I go to class. We could not afford day care, and I’m not sure I would want my
daughter in a day care anyway. My mom believes that I can do this so much that she’s will to give up her free time for me. That means the world to me.

- Austin’s mom by far has been the most supportive. She has always said, don’t you want to go to college? She understood why it was important. She had four kids and went back to work after she raised them.
- My mother offered to babysit while I went to school, so I thought I should do it.

| Theme 2: Getting one’s priorities in order: |
| “My baby comes first.” (eight out of eight interviews) |
| • I wanted to start college right after high school, but my priorities were being a wife and mother. |
| • There’s no way to do this if you don’t have your priorities in order. |
| • My son was an active four-year-old, and I have to admit that playing |
with him was more fun than writing papers! I would rather spend time with him until he went to bed and get up at three or four in the morning to do school work than stay up late.

- But I just didn’t want to leave her when she was very young. I felt like I had to wait [to go to college].

- I mean that Michael and Austin are my top priority.

- With me, it was just that motivation of knowing, okay, I’ve got this child to take care of, and he didn’t ask to come here. It’s not his fault; it’s not fair to him to have to go do without in life. So, I want him to be able to have everything that a child with two parents would be able to have.

- I look back at [my master’s degree], I was at every [one of my son’s]
football game[s] – Thursday and Friday night, away and home. And worked every day. And did every class, and this time, I didn’t fail a class. So, when I look back, I’m like, ‘Whooo!

• I had to learn how to prioritize and make a to do list and get everything done. I learned how to do it on my job, so I think when I came back to graduate school, I just had to apply that to school too.

• It’s all about putting your child first.

• Not only are you responsible for maintaining a certain G.P.A for college and doing certain assignments and passing tests, but you also have that responsibility of, ‘Okay, I have a child. I need to make sure that he has food, pampers, making doctor’s
appointments, you know if he’s sick or if it’s just a well check up, and just making sure that I have time to interact with him so that he knows I’m Mama.

- You’re dedicated to your child first. And then to yourself.
- You owe it to that child; you owe it to them to do better.
- Your kids are always first – always.
- I have never missed a single game, and my son’s had plenty of them! If he was on a field or a court playing, he could always look in the stands and see me there.
- But we have to put our babies first no matter what, and there’s no negotiation on that for us.

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<th>Theme 3: Lack of sleep and demanding schedules (six out of eight interviews)</th>
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<tr>
<td>• The biggest obstacle I have found is lack of sleep. I end up working on homework most nights until 3:00 am… I really don't overcome the</td>
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lack of sleep.

- I’ve already had one all-nighter this semester. I was so ill the next day! I usually don’t start my schoolwork until I put Michael to bed at 9 or 9:30. But sometimes that depends on how willing he is to go to sleep.

- So, basically, I have to do my schoolwork after he goes to bed. That’s definitely a challenge because I’m always so tired.

- I want to work out, but that would cut my sleep to 3-4 hours per night.

- … So, going to school full time in the day and waiting tables and night and then coming home to take care of your child… some nights I would come home and if he’s sick, I had to take care of him. So I couldn’t study and do my assignments, and I had to work too.

- Most of my meltdowns were
related to lack of sleep.

- …when she couldn't sleep one night and, thus, neither could I, and then I would have to sit through a 3-hour lab.
- The biggest obstacle I have found is lack of sleep. I end up working on homework most nights until 3:00 am.
- Trying to function with no sleep is hard for anyone, but being alert enough to care for someone who is completely dependent on me is tough.

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<th>Theme 4: Other people’s perceptions of the decision to go to college after becoming a teen mother (four out of eight interviews)</th>
<th>I never questioned whether or not I would go to college because everyone around me went to college.</th>
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<tr>
<td>My family and my friends were very supportive. They were actually proud of me for my decision. Even strangers are often...</td>
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impressed that I would choose to take on such a heavy load.

- All my friends went to college.
- I went to a high school that boasted a 100% college matriculation rate.
- I was the first person in my family to graduate from high school. They were just happy for me to be a high school graduate!
- They couldn’t see why I would want to go [to college]. They felt like my focus should be on my baby. No one in my family could understand why I wanted to do such a crazy thing!
- Mainly, people just didn’t understand why I wanted to do it. At my church, most of the women are stay at home moms. I guess they just enjoy being stay-at-home moms, and they couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t want to
do that too.

- I had a lot of friends who were going on the same path that I was. They lived in my neighborhood and they had their babies young. They didn’t pursue college. And they would make negative comments, and I lost a few friends.

- But my in-laws felt like I was doing the wrong thing, like I would be hurting my relationship with Emma.

- Anyway, my mother-in-law made me feel like it was my fault that Emma was sick.

- But as far as obstacles go, there’s that and confidence and then a lot of times I would look to my friends for support or sometimes to other people and you know, sometimes they just can’t handle you. If it’s someone you really look up to and they are not supporting you, it can
| Theme 5: Feelings of loneliness and alienation (six out of eight interviews) | • Teen mothers need to be empowered, not shunned.  
• I do everything here, on my own. I don’t know any regular college students. I just don’t know how to answer. I’m always busy with my kids here. The only people I see are my family. You know?  
• I lost a few friends.  
• I think that just having other moms who have been there to talk to would make a world of difference, so that the mother does not feel like she is alone.  
• I don’t know any other teen mothers; I can’t really speak for them.  
• You can’t be on campus for more than an hour without hearing about the |

hinder you. It hurts. It does hurt.
‘_________ Family.’ But it’s hard to enjoy that when every freshman is required to live on campus, and I didn’t. When every student eats together in the dining halls, and I didn’t. When classmates study together at night, and I couldn’t. I was living a lifestyle so different than theirs, but I was a freshman too. I was living away from home for the first time too. I was learning to deal with college-level classes too. I was going through so many of the same experiences; yet I couldn’t experience them in the same way. I was really lonely my first year.

• I thought of one other obstacle I have faced. I have a hard time finding time to hang out with my friends, especially now while I’m student teaching.
And my life is really different anyway. When everyone else in my class was talking about how drunk they got on the weekend, I was talking about potty training. It’s not like most twenty year olds wanna hear about potty training!

We need to provide support groups for teens moms or even older moms who have babies in college. It’s lonely. We need to know we aren’t the only ones, you know?

Another problem is the other students. I don’t feel like I connect to any of them. They are single. They might care about school, but their number one priority is partying. IF I am in a group – like the group in your class – my best time to meet is on Saturday morning. But they won’t do that because they get drunk on Friday
night.

- Sometimes, I just feel like a sore thumb around them. I’d like to go to class bumming and wearing my pajamas, but I was talking to Austin, and he was saying sometimes people treat you better when you dress up more. I was feeling like people were treating me different for a while there, but I think it was just up to me to feel better about myself and then they would treat me better too. It’s that whole image thing – not wanting to stick out like a sore thumb.

- You have the stress of performing well. Paying a ton of money if you don’t perform well. You want to fit in with your peers. You don’t want to look stupid. None of us want to look stupid. It’s the age where everyone wants to fit in. So, it’s a
whole lot less pressure whenever you’re not in school.

- But as far as obstacles go, there’s that and confidence and then a lot of times I would look to my friends for support or sometimes to other people and you know, sometimes they just can’t handle you. If it’s someone you really look up to and they are not supporting you, it can hinder you. It hurts. It does hurt.

- You know, they were able to go out. And they would say, ‘We’re going out here this weekend,’ and I couldn’t go.

- I felt isolated. You know, because I looked at the friends I made on campus, and they lived on campus. They just went back to their room after class and were living a regular college life. But I had to go home and take care of my baby, you
know. I had to go home and take care of my child and be a mama.

- But we’re not close friends now. I mean, we live very different lives now that I have a master’s degree.
- I look at all these single girls and I think about how their life is… and how my life is not.

**Theme 6: Balancing demands outside of school and asking for “special favors” (four out of eight interviews)**

- Well, they didn’t give me any special favors. I don’t think I deserved special favors just because I had a baby.
- But you know, I didn’t want special favors… . I guess a special favor would be letting me retake a test that I had failed. That would have been going too far. But just knowing that I had to be there for my baby for doctor’s appointments and things that other students didn’t have to do. That is how I would
• Well, we don’t need special favors because we’re teen moms. Everyone else would hate us for that, and people don’t like us anyway. I think professors just need to understand that we are different from the other students, and we are actually willing to work harder most of the time.

• Most professors were incredibly understanding – more than I would have been in that situation. I had a few professors (men without children) who seemed to go out of their way to make sure they treated me no differently than others. I almost appreciated that approach.

• He didn’t let me make up some work, but I still got a B, so I wasn’t too worried about it. But he told me that I couldn’t have any special
favors because I had a baby. That really made me mad. I didn’t want any special favors, you know? I was just telling him why I was out.

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<th>Theme 7: Descriptions of breakdowns and stress during difficult times (three out of eight interviews)</th>
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<td>I remember just going in the bathroom and crying after I got a test back with a bad grade. I cried and cried and thought about dropping out.</td>
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<td>I get in the worst mood whenever I’m running late. So a horrible day starts off with being late, and then everything just goes bad from there. You know how most people just get in a funky mood where nothing can satisfy you, and you’re just complaining for no reason, well – I get in that mood, and I’m just like, ‘I wanna quit school!’ you know? ‘I have a family! I want to quit school! I don’t need to do this!’</td>
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<td>Some days I would think I cannot</td>
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Theme 8: Being motivated by the naysayers (four out of eight interviews)

- Sometimes I think my biggest flaws actually made college possible. I'm stubborn, opinionated, and at times completely unwilling to compromise. These characteristics were just giving up.

- And I was working really hard and all of a sudden, I was like, 'I can't do this!' I was just sitting there crying in the house, and I was like, 'I can't! I was just giving up.'

- And I was there, and I was working on my first paper, and I was just breaking down. And I was like, 'I can't do this!'

- I almost gave up, and my mama was like, 'No! You came too far. You came too far. You came. You came too far.'

- I was discouraged, and I was afraid of college, and I would get discouraged.

- Sometimes I think my biggest flaws actually made college possible. I'm stubborn, opinionated, and at times completely unwilling to compromise. These characteristics were just giving up.
people on a superficial level because I come off as selfish and rude. But when you’re trying to accomplish something for only yourself and you have so many people and factors bringing you down, sometimes personality is the only thing that allows you to ignore them.

• To be honest, it has been kind of fun to prove my in-laws wrong. They used to say I would flunk out and stuff like that,” she paused. “Well, they were dead wrong on that.

• But I just let [the words of my critical aunt] go in one ear and out the other because it just fueled me and made me want to do even better just to prove her wrong.”

• Even teachers are quick to judge you. I remember walking into my
advanced level courses and teachers thinking I walked into the wrong room. Before ever meeting me, one teacher told me that I would be better off in a lower, on grade level course. Why? I've always taken higher-level courses. I told her I was fine right where I was, and I was thinking, ‘Bring it on!’” When I made an A on her first test, she called my mom, thinking that I had cheated. I was SHOCKED! I worked so hard to prove her wrong just so that she could insult my intelligence! Secretly I would love to go back to [this teacher who doubted me] once I graduate and introduce myself as ‘Dr. ______.’

| Theme 9: Financial struggles brought on by the demands of supporting a family and going to college (four out of eight interviews) | • I am working twelve hours a day right now.  
• His parents helped with some of his tuition and I qualify for a Life |
scholarship and the Pell grant, but we are both getting student loans too. Now that he’s a graduate student, he can get a big check every semester and he has an assistantship too. It will be a lot to pay back, but he’s going to get a Ph.D., so we should be okay.

- And then, not having the money to… I mean, it was hard. I had finally gotten my own apartment and I had a car, so even with working, there was no money. Everything that I had coming in was going right back out to pay for bills, you know – do this, do this, so I didn’t have anything.

- Needless to say, I have a lot of student loans now.

**Theme 10:** Online classes and increased access to college (two out of eight interviews)

- I wanted to start college right after high school, but my priorities were being a wife and mother. I also
worked a full-time job, so unfortunately there was no time for school. While online one day I saw an ad for the University of Phoenix, and it is a completely online school. I called and registered for the next block of classes.

* My son was a lot older during that time, and it was an online program at [the university that you attend]. I had a little more freedom than having to physically go to class every day or every other day. But there was a lot more work involved.

**Theme 11: Being redeemed by getting a college degree (four out of eight interviews)**

* We are trying to make up for our past mistakes.

* I also know that it was my determination to be successful and not have a negative connotation attached to my name because I was a ‘teen mother.’

* People’s praise that I actually
managed to accomplish this goal actually bothers me a lot more than any doubt some initially expressed. I still get really uncomfortable when people say they respect me for it or are amazed at what I did. We all make mistakes and have to overcome the obstacles they create.

- I mean, I don’t want to call a child a mistake, but you know, we make mistakes. We made bad choices. It’s just trying to make up for that bad choice you made.

**Theme 12: Setting an example for my child/ren (four out of eight interviews)**

- I sat down to do homework one day, not feeling like it at the time, and them Crystal and Teddy got out their homework to do with me. We all sat at the kitchen table and talked about our work, and I helped them when they needed it. Just having that bit of time with them without television or bickering
made it so wonderful.

- My children make me want to do my best at school. They see me doing homework and it makes them realize how important school is.

- I knew I was doing what was right for me and my family. We would have more money eventually, and Emma would see me as a professional person who cared about her enough to go back to school.

- It was really rewarding to me just to see the smile on my son’s face. It was after I got my diploma, and I was trying to find my family in the crowd, and he was like the first person I saw.

- You know, he’s looking at colleges now and taking honors classes and taking the SAT and ACT. And that’s what I wanted, you know, I
wanted him to see how important this all is – education. I wanted him to say ‘This is what I need to do; I need to follow in her footsteps.

| Theme 13: Internal locus of control (Rotter, 1954) (seven out of eight interviews) | • I also know that it was my determination to be successful and not have a negative connotation attached to my name because I was a ‘teen mother.’  
• I know people would judge and talk, but you have to brush it off because at the end of the day if you have a healthy baby and you are a creating a future for yourself, it does not matter what others think.  
• It came down to this: if you don’t think I can handle college right now, then what’s next for me? I already had the baby, so that’s not changing. I think I’ve always kept the attitude that [being a teen mother] is just one element of my |
life…not my whole life. I don’t have to sacrifice everything for my son.

• Sometimes I think my biggest flaws actually made college possible. I’m stubborn, opinionated, and at times completely unwilling to compromise. These characteristics absolutely suck in interactions with people on a superficial level because I come off as selfish and rude. But when you’re trying to accomplish something for only yourself and you have so many people and factors bringing you down, sometimes personality is the only thing that allows you to ignore them.

• But I knew that I wanted to be a teacher, you know. I feel like I still have a life outside of being Emma’s
mom. I’m still a person.

- But I guess I feel better now about me. I know I can do this now, and it doesn’t seem as hard as it used to.
- You know it’s what you think that counts, and you know you can do it.
- I think I put myself in the mood. It’s kind of my own fault. Because I could be thinking on things that are good instead of moping around.
- I wouldn’t say it’s the schoolwork or anything to do with my professors; it’s mostly my attitude about it.
- I am making really good grades, and that makes me feel so, so good. I know I’m doing the right thing. I know I can do this.
- I’m very determined and stubborn. When I decided I wanted to go to back to college, nothing could stop me.
• It doesn’t matter if you get pregnant before you go to college or after you go to college, you know – why do you go to college? Why don’t you just let your husband do everything while you take care of the baby? You could just live off of him or whatever. But I say, if I can, you know – if we have the resources to, then why not? Why not go to college? Your education is always important. Just because you get pregnant, it doesn’t mean your education is any less important.

• I know if I can get through this part of my life, I can handle anything.

• and I said to my nephew, ‘No! You can break the cycle!’ And my brother said, ‘No, we are all here and we all always will be.’ And I said, ‘Well, you can stay if that’s what you want to do, but we’re not.
We are choosing to get out of it. And your son can too.

- It’s a choice. And we have it. It might not be as easy for us as it is for other people, but that doesn’t mean we can’t do it. And we are showing people that we can.

- They don’t have to get pregnant before they are out of high school. They don’t have to. But even if they do, they can still get out of the cycle. They can still go to college. I did it. You did it. Other women do it. So, it can be done. And more of us should do it.

- It’s what was different about me and my other friends from high school who had babies young. They didn’t think education would get them out of the poverty. They didn’t think they would ever get out of the cycle, and so they didn’t fight
for anything better.

- I wouldn’t say it’s the schoolwork or anything to do with my professors; it’s mostly my attitude about it.
- If you are constantly put down, you start to think that what they are saying may be true. As corny as it sounds, it’s important to believe in yourself in order to succeed.

**Theme 14: Reactions of teachers and professors to having teen mothers in their classes (five out of eight interviews)**

- Even teachers are quick to judge you. I remember walking into my advanced level courses and teachers thinking I walked into the wrong room. Before ever meeting me, one teacher told me that I would be better off in a lower, on grade level course.
- [My professor] could care less.
- Most professors were incredibly understanding – more than I would have been in that situation. I had a
few professors (men without children) who seemed to go out of their way to make sure they treated me no differently than others. I almost appreciated that approach.

• But my professors were actually really great about that. They let me make up what I missed. I really didn’t have any trouble then.

• There was this one history professor back at Tech… I mean, kids get sick a lot, you know? So, I had to be out a couple of classes when Emma got sick and my mom was sick too. Anyway, he was kinda mean about it. He didn’t let me make up some work, but I still got a B, so I wasn’t too worried about it.

Finally, the researcher must, according to Moustakas, analyze how these themes relate to the essence of this experience by creating composite textural and structural descriptions.
Theme 1: Family support of a teen mother’s efforts to go to college

While all eight of the participants mentioned at least one family member who was an integral part of her success as she went to college after becoming a teen mother, the family member who was most mentioned was the participant’s mother. Jackie stated, “[My mother] keeps my daughter for me every day while I go to class. We could not afford day care, and I’m not sure I would want my daughter in a day care anyway. My mom believes that I can do this so much that she’s willing to give up her free time for me. That means the world to me.” Other participants mentioned how their mothers were there to support them during their college experience. Melissa shared a similar sentiment regarding her mother when she stated, “What made it possible is definitely my mama just being there for support.”

Other participants named other family members as being their biggest supporters. Jackie also stated, “I couldn’t do this without my husband. He’s my rock. When I feel like I can’t do it, he encourages me and lets me know I can.” Debbie talked about her husband as a major supporter, but she also mentioned her mother-in-law, speaking of her the same way that many of the other girls spoke about their mothers. She explained, “Austin’s mom by far has been the most supportive. She has always said, don’t you want to go to college? She understood why it was important. She had four kids and went back to work after she raised them.”

Family support appears to be an important factor in these women’s success. Mothers were frequently babysitters who cared for children while daughters were taking classes or completing major assignments. For Kathy, whose family only has one car, her
father provides a trip home after working third shift at night, meaning her husband does not have to be alone at home carless with their three children. While Keely, Yvette, and Kira discussed financial support from their parents, the other participants talked about other types of support, such as believing in them. Therefore, socioeconomic status seems to impact the type of support that these mothers receive.

It is important to mention that some of the participants also discussed family members who were not supportive. Melissa, for example, mentions one aunt who was particularly critical of her decision to go to college, as well as a brother who did not believe going to college would help her break the cycle of poverty. Kira mentioned “well-intentioned” family members who were not supportive of her decision to take her baby with her to another state while she got her bachelor’s degree. Family seems to be an important part of this experience, whether family members are being supportive or critical.

**Theme 2: Getting one’s priorities in order: “My baby comes first.”**

While many people, influenced by the negative social construction of the teen mother might imagine that a teen mother who goes to college is leaving her baby completely with her parents, turning her responsibilities over to someone else while she continues her life as if she never had a baby, for these eight participants, this is absolutely untrue. Even though mothers may babysit during the day or mothers and their babies may live with their parents while they go to college, these participants indicated in their interviews that their children are their number one priority, the most important responsibility in their lives. When faced with a choice between their children’s well-
being or their school work, these mothers choose their children, even if it means they 
must suffer consequences at school. Kathy told the story of one such incident. She 
stated, “There was one day that I was trying to get a final assignment turned in for one 
[online] class, and the finals cannot be late, even a minute. [My husband] was watching 
the kids after dinner and I was in the bedroom. Tyler, being 2, could not understand why I 
would not let him in. He sat at the bedroom door and cried for 15 minutes. No matter 
what [my husband] and the kids tried, he would not quit crying for me. I ended up putting 
aside my homework, played with him, got him to sleep, and finished my assignment with 
only 5 minutes to spare. Thank goodness my Internet didn't freeze at the last minute! But 
you know, if I hadn’t stopped to be with him, I would have never been able to get that 
assignment done anyway. Your kids are always first – always.”

Debbie’s interview revealed her determination to ensure that her son never felt 
like his mother was sacrificing time with him to be in school. She explained, “I have 
ever missed a single game, and my son’s had plenty of them! If he was on a field or a 
court playing, he could always look in the stands and see me there. His father is not in 
his life, so it’s all on me. It meant staying up all night studying sometimes, but that was 
the right way to do it.”

Other participants talked about incidences when their babies were seriously ill, 
causing them to miss classes. Sometimes, if professors did not believe that this was a 
valid reason for missing class, they might receive zeros on their assignments. It is 
important to note that they are all still in school and still succeeding, despite the zeros 
that they received. Melissa in particular showed her resilience in the face of making bad
grades. She was the only participant who discussed failing multiple classes; she is also the only participant who has completed her master’s degree. Despite failing classes, her devotion to giving her son a good life helped her to keep going, no matter how many difficulties she faced along the way.

**Theme 3: Lack of sleep and demanding schedules**

Only one participant in this study felt she was getting adequate sleep at the time of the interview. Keely reported that her time management skills enable her to get enough sleep at night. She explained that she gets all of her schoolwork done during the day, between her classes. Meanwhile, Kira did not specifically discuss adequate sleep or a lack of sleep on a regular basis. She did say that she occasionally pulls all-nighters, but she did not list this as one of her greatest challenges. She said that she wakes up at 3 or 4 in the morning, but, as she is a morning person, this is okay.

All six of the other participants talked about lack of sleep as a tremendous obstacle as they attempt to take care of their children and go to college. Kathy, who takes classes online while she works full time plus overtime at a local plant, reported that she averages only three hours sleep per night. The five participants reported getting around five hours sleep per night. They talked about being unable to start their schoolwork until their children go to bed. Debbie talked about going home in the middle of the day to take naps when she is able, but shares a car with her husband, who is a graduate student, and she stated that he doesn’t like it when she wastes gas to go home to sleep.

It is important to note the way that socioeconomic status appeared to play a factor in how much sleep the participants reported getting. Kathy is from a low socioeconomic
background, and this meant that she worked over forty hours per week to support her family. Meanwhile, both Kira and Keely are upper middle class; they received financial support from their parents, and this appeared to impact their schedules in the form of fewer demands on their time. Lack of sleep played a tremendous role in health and emotional problems, so it was likely hurting these women more than they realize at this point in their lives.

Theme 4: Other people’s perceptions of a teen mother’s decision to go to college

Jackie, Keely, Yvette, and Kira all discussed being in environments where everyone around them was going to college. Kira reported that her high school “boasted a 100% matriculation rate.” She said that it would have been more shocking to others if she had decided not to go to college. Jackie, Keely, and Yvette also reported having friends and relatives who were going or who did go to college. They stated that they always knew they were going to go to college.

Interestingly, the other four participants did not mention anything about always knowing they were going to college. Jackie, Keely, Yvette, and Kira are all white, middle to upper middle class women. Meanwhile, Melissa is black and was the first person in her family to go to college. Debbie is bi-racial and was influenced by her in-laws, not her family members to go to college. She talked about how her friends from home who had babies said they were going to go to college, but they did not make it. Kathy, a white, poor mother decided to go to college only when she saw that it was possible in an online advertisement and said it would have been absolutely impossible for her to go to a college campus to take classes. And Lynley, a black teen mother who
married her white boyfriend after getting pregnant, is constantly discouraged and made to feel guilty about attending college by her mother-in-law.

Once again, socioeconomic status impacts the experiences of the participants. The more privileged participants do not seem to struggle with their decision to go to college as much as the less advantaged participants, who appeared to have added obstacles in making their decisions to get a college degree.

**Theme 5: Feelings of loneliness and alienation**

One theme that did not seem to be impacted by socioeconomic status was the theme of alienation. Kathy, Lynley, Melissa, Debbie, Kira all reported feelings of loneliness and isolation as they went to college and cared for this children. Debbie stated, “I look at all these single girls and I think about how their life is… and how my life is not. I don’t want to stick out like a sore thumb.” She discussed being afraid that her peers were treating her differently, after which her husband suggested she dress up for classes to get respect. Of course, anyone who has taught college classes knows that dressing up is not something that most students do on a regular basis. Debbie also discussed how she gets support from her friends at church; however, these friends are stay-at-home moms who do not comprehend her decision to go to college, leaving Debbie feeling misunderstood.

Kira described her feelings of alienation in a poignant matter, stating, “Finding a sense of community was my biggest obstacle. You can’t be on campus for more than an hour without hearing about the ‘________ Family.’ But it’s hard to enjoy that when every freshman is required to live on campus, and I didn’t. When every student eats
together in the dining halls, and I didn’t. When classmates study together at night, and I
couldn’t. I was living a lifestyle so different than theirs, but I was a freshman too. I was
living away from home for the first time too. I was learning to deal with college-level
classes too. I was going through so many of the same experiences; yet I couldn’t
experience them in the same way. I was really lonely my first year. It got better when I
started to learn in architecture and when more of my friends moved off campus. But that
first year was awful – it was a nightmare.”

Lynley talked about watching her friends go away to college and trying to stay in
touch with them, but ultimately failing. Debbie talked about making friends at school but
being unable to afford going places with them. It is easy to understand how these women
might feel isolated when there are so few teen mothers who go to college and so much
stigmatization working against them in meeting friends. Yvette talked about the need for
teen mothers who go to college to mentor other teen mothers, and Lynley talked about the
need for support groups for teen mothers who go to college. Clearly, the ability to reach
out to others going through similar challenges could help a teen mother going to college
deal with these feelings of isolation.

**Theme 6: Balancing demands outside of school and asking for “special favors”**

Jackie, Yvette, Lynley, Melissa all mentioned “special favors” in their interviews.
Jackie, for example, told the story of a professor who would not allow her to make up a
pop quiz when her mother had been sick and unable to keep her baby. She explained,
“‘Well, we don’t need special favors because we’re teen moms. Everyone else would
hate us for that, and people don’t like us anyway. I think professors just need to
understand that we are different from the other students, and we are actually willing to work harder most of the time. But we have to put our babies first no matter what, and there’s no negotiation on that for us.” In this case, Jackie used the term “special favors.” Yvette and Melissa also emphatically declared that they did not want any “special favors.” Meanwhile, Lynley talked about an incident in which she had to be out because of her baby’s illness, and the professor accused her of asking for “special favors.” She stated, “But he told me that I couldn’t have any special favors because I had a baby. That really made me mad. I didn’t want any special favors, you know? I was just telling him why I was out.”

Why is it that when teen mothers going to college need to talk with professors about problems related to the incredibly demanding lives that they have, they feel like they will be asking for “special favors”? Most college students feel free to come to their professors to explain extenuating circumstances that led to missed assignments with no problem at all. In fact, many students participating in Greek activities often believe that professors are naturally supposed to excuse missed classes and work when it is Pledge Week. Why would Pledge Week be seen as an acceptable reason to miss class when a hospitalized baby would not? Moreover, if a professor’s children are seriously ill, no one would question their right to take a sick day and cancel class.

This idea that teen mothers in college will ask for “special favors” most likely stems from the negative stigmatization associated with teen motherhood. Jackie indicates that teen mothers are actually willing to work harder than other students, and the eight women in this student do indicate that this may be true. However, if these women feel
that they are not entitled to ask for help when they need it, it could seriously impede their progress in college.

**Theme 7: Descriptions of breakdowns and stress during difficult times**

Kira, Debbie, Melissa, Lynley all describe moments in which they feel absolutely incapable of going any further in college; in these moments they questioned whether or not they wanted to continue with college. Kira’s description is the mildest of the four participants, but she explained that she believed most of her “meltdowns” were related to lack of sleep. Debbie and Lynley described moments in which they say they hated school and wanted to quit. Melissa described a moment in which, after she had begun her master’s work, she was unsure about whether or not she would be able to meet all of her son’s needs and take Master’s level classes. She explained that a relative who had been supportive of her decision to go to college called at just the right time and gave her a pep talk.

For whatever reason, each of these women found the courage to continue after these extremely difficult moments in their college experiences. The fact that Melissa had a relative who was there to encourage her might be a good indication of how it worked. Debbie also mentioned that her husband was there to encourage her when she was having a breakdown.

Kira and Lynley also describe themselves as “stubborn,” and this type of tenacious ability to hang on, even in times of great difficulty might explain how these women were able to overcome their moments of doubt. Kira stated, “Sometimes I think my biggest flaws actually made college possible. I’m stubborn, opinionated, and at times
completely unwilling to compromise. These characteristics absolutely suck in interactions with people on a superficial level because I come off as selfish and rude. But when you’re trying to accomplish something for only yourself and you have so many people and factors bringing you down, sometimes personality is the only thing that allows you to ignore them.”

**Theme 8: Being motivated by the naysayers**

Jackie, Yvette, Kira, Lynley, Debbie all talked about individuals who had made incredibly discouraging comments to them as they attempted to get their college degrees. Yvette told the story of a particularly discouraging high school teacher. She stated, “Even teachers are quick to judge you. I remember walking into my advanced level courses and teachers thinking I walked into the wrong room. Before ever meeting me, one teacher told me that I would be better off in a lower, on grade level course. Why? I've always taken higher-level courses. I told her I was fine right where I was, and I was thinking, ‘Bring it on!’” When I made an A on her first test, she called my mom, thinking that I had cheated. I was SHOCKED! I worked so hard to prove her wrong just so that she could insult my intelligence! Secretly I would love to go back to [this teacher who doubted me] once I graduate and introduce myself as ‘Dr. ______.’

Melissa described a similar sort of tenacity when she talked about her response to people who doubted her ability to go to college after becoming a teen mother. “When people said things to me, I just let their words roll off me,” she said. “They don’t know me, and they don’t know how smart I am. Their words are like fuel to me, and all they do is make me work even harder!”
These women used the doubt of others as “fuel” when they were feeling especially challenged by the demands of motherhood and college. It is interesting to note that Yvette, who is an upper middle class white graduate student, had an experience that is quite similar to Melissa’s, a black mother who recently got her Master’s degree, but who grew up poor. Apparently, this tenacity in the face of the doubt of others is not limited to one socioeconomic or racial context.

**Theme 9: Financial struggles brought on by the demands of supporting a family and going to college**

Jackie, Kathy, Melissa all described the difficulty that comes from working while going to college and taking care of a baby. At the time of the interview, Kathy was working twelve hours a day, taking care of three children, and taking online classes full time. As previously mentioned, she was only getting three hours sleep per night.

Meanwhile, even though Jackie is middle class and only works part time, she talked about receiving W.I.C and Medicaid for her child. She elects to work part time, in addition to all her duties as wife, mother, and full time college student, over applying for food stamps.

Melissa described in detail the experience of being a teen mother on government assistance, going to college. She talked about how the $167 that she received in welfare was not enough for her to support her son well. She explained that once she paid the bills and bought diapers for the month, all her money was gone. For that reason, she began waitressing full time in the evenings. For that reason, she was often unable to complete all her assignments; as a result, she failed several classes.
Theme 10: Online classes and increased access to college

For Kathy, going to college online was the only way that she could get her degree. She explained, “I wanted to start college right after high school, but my priorities were being a wife and mother. I also worked a full-time job, so unfortunately there was no time for school. While online one day I saw an ad for the University of ________, and it is a completely online school. I called and registered for the next block of classes to get my Associate's degree in Elementary Education. I have been attending for one year and have about nine months left. I will then continue attending to get my Bachelor's degree, and possibly my Master's. Not sure how far I am planning to go yet.”

Melissa did not discuss this in her interview, but in a member check, we discussed that her Master’s program involved a number of online classes, which enabled her to be at all her son’s sporting events, something that she believed was deeply important since her son’s father was not involved in his life.

Theme 11: Being redeemed by getting a college degree

Jackie, Melissa, Lynley all made interesting statements regarding “making up for” past mistakes. For Jackie, she felt that “working harder” than all of the other students would help her make up for her mistakes.

Meanwhile, Melissa made the following statement: “And just to know that… I mean, I don’t want to call a child a mistake, but you know, we make mistakes. We made bad choices. It’s just trying to make up for that bad choice you made.” It is interesting
that Melissa is taking sole responsibility for her son, with no help from his father, but she feels like she is the one who has to make up for past mistakes. Lynley made similar comments, indicating that she could make up for her mistakes by working hard and going to college.

It is interesting that these three women feel that an education will redeem them in some way. But exactly what will it redeem them from? The stereotype associated with teen motherhood?

**Theme 12: Setting an example for my child/ren**

Kathy, Keely, Yvette, and Melissa all discussed the importance of setting a good example for their children, and it appears that this is a motivating factor for them. Keely mentioned that her daughter would see her as a “professional” person. Kathy talked about doing her own homework alongside her children and how special that time was because she knew she was showing them that school is important; she said that her children say they want to go to college “on the computer,” like she is currently doing. Yvette said the best that she had while being a mother in college was her son’s first day of school. Meanwhile, Melissa talked about how important it was for her son to see her graduate from high school. She talked about seeing his face first when she graduated and how that was such a powerful moment for her. Finally, she talked about how he is looking at colleges now, and she knows that this is important for him to break the cycle of poverty.

**Theme 13: Internal locus of control (Rotter, 1954)**
According to Rotter (1954), a person who believes that he or she can control the things that happen to him or her has an “internal locus of control”; meanwhile, an individual who believes that he or she has no control over what happens to him or her has an “external locus of control” because he or she attributes events to outside factors. Yvette, Melissa, Keely, Kira, Lynley, and Debbie all used phrases that indicate they have an internal locus of control when it comes to their feelings about their success in school. For example, Yvette made the comment, “I also know that it was my determination to be successful and not have a negative connotation attached to my name because I was a ‘teen mother.’” An internal locus of control also seemed to play a role in the ability to ignore the naysayers. Yvette also commented, “I know people would judge and talk, but you have to brush it off because at the end of the day if you have a healthy baby and you are a creating a future for yourself, it does not matter what others think.” Kira described a similar situation when she stated, “…sometimes personality is the only thing that allows you to ignore them.”

Debbie talked reflected on bad days and said that she feels she put herself in bad moods; she had the ability to think about better things and be more positive. Meanwhile, Melissa talked about the ability to break the cycle of poverty and how she felt it was a choice to break the cycle; she felt that she had the power to overcome poverty for herself and for her son; even when other family members argued that she was going to stay in this cycle of poverty, because she attributed the ability to go to college to herself – calling it her choice, she was able to ignore the naysayers around her and meet her goals.
Theme 14: Reactions of teachers and professors to having teen mothers in their classes

Yvette, Lynley, Kira, Keely, and Melissa all discussed their teachers or professors during their interviews. Yvette told the story of a teacher who believed she should drop out of honors classes after she became a teen mother. Lynley talked about one professor who had not allowed her to make up work when her child had been ill. Melissa told the story of missing classes due to her work schedule; however, she also talked about how the professor felt she had done everything that she could do to pass the class.

For the most part the participants seem to feel their professors in college were supportive, IF they told them about their children. However, they also all seemed to struggle with specific professors or teachers who had negative perceptions of teen mothers, and who demonstrated this by making comments about “special favors” and teen mothers.
“New blood joins this earth/ and quickly [she’s] subdued/ Through constant pained disgrace/ The young [girl] learns their rules./ With time the child draws in/ This whipping [girl] done wrong./ Deprived of all [her] thoughts/ The young [girl] struggles on and on and on./ A vow unto her own/ That never from this day,/ Her will they’ll take away…” Metallica, “The Unforgiven”

CHAPTER 5: TOWARD A NEW NARRATIVE

The first chapter of this dissertation introduced the reasons why an alternative narrative of teenage motherhood is important, as well as my own reasons for doing this research. I used this chapter to reflect on my own experiences with the phenomenon of being a teen mother who went to college in the rural southeast; additionally, in Chapter 1, I explained why a critical feminist Burkean lens is a good strategy for examining the dominant narrative of teenage motherhood in the United States. In the second chapter, I discussed the negative social construction of the teen mother in the United States, using that critical feminist Burkean lens. Chapters 3 explained how a phenomenological investigation of the experiences of teen mothers who go to college in the rural southeast could be used to present an alternative narrative of teenage motherhood, as well as outlining the specific steps I used in the implementation of this phenomenology. Finally, Chapter 4 presented the results of the data that I gathered during my phenomenological investigation. This final chapter will demonstrate how the experiences described by my participants and synthesized in Chapter 4 stands in stark contrast to the dominant narrative of teenage motherhood in the United States.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to answer the following two research questions:
1.) What does it mean to be a teen mother who goes to college in the rural Southeast?

2.) How does the context of the rural Southeast impact the Dasein of the teen mother, as well as her intentionality toward getting a college degree?

Eight participants participated in semi-structured interviews. The participants included five white women, two black women, and one bi-racial woman. Their ages ranged from 19 to 36. Two of them were upper middle class, two were middle class, and four came from low SES backgrounds. Four were married, and four were single. One participant was attending a technical college, three were attending four-year universities, one was in graduate school, one was in medical school, one is an architect, and one has a master’s degree and works in teen pregnancy prevention. During the interviews, they responded to the following questions:

1. Please tell me about the experience of being a teen mother who goes to college.

2. In what situations or contexts is the experience of being a teen mother who goes to college unique from the experiences of other people?

3. Describe a typical day in your life when you were a teen mother going to college.

4. Describe a challenging day that you had experienced as a teen mother going to college.

5. Describe a rewarding day that you had as a teen mother going to college.

6. What were the biggest obstacles you faced as a teen mother going to college and how did you overcome them?

7. If other people doubted you could go to college as a teen mother, how did this make you feel?
8. What were your biggest assets as a teen mother going to college?

Interviews were transcribed and uploaded into NVIVO-8 for qualitative analysis. Meaningful statements within individual interviews were identified. These meaningful statements were clustered together into units of meaning or themes that appeared across interviews, independent of individual context, and will now be used to describe the experience of what it means to be a teen mother who goes to college in the rural southeast.

Discussion of the Findings

The eight interviews with the participants in this study provided a rich framework for understanding the experience of being a teen mother who goes to college in the rural southeast. The themes that emerged across the various contexts in which these women live present a narrative that is vastly different from the widely accepted dominant view of teenage mothers’ and their children’s lives.

The Essence of the Experience

The first research question that I sought to answer was, “What does it mean to be a teen mother who goes to college in the rural Southeast?” The themes that emerged from the data provided an interesting look at the meaning of this experience, especially when one considers the dominant narrative of the experience of teenage motherhood.

The Pendulum of Support and Alienation

In the dominant narrative of teen motherhood, teen mothers are irresponsible women who rely on everyone else to take care of themselves and their children. In many
cases, their parents become primary caregivers of their children. They drop out of school and rely on the taxpayers to provide them with welfare, food stamps, government housing, and other forms of government assistance. They bemoan the fact that they no longer go out to party with their friends, while lamenting all the diapers that they now have to change. The women in this study indicate that their experiences are quite different. While they do name support from others as one of the most important assets in their lives while going to college and raising their children, the type of support is not what the dominant narrative argues it is. Quite the contrary, these women are primarily self-sufficient, handling most of the pressure in their lives on their own, relying on friends and family in ways that the dominant narrative does not mention. Moreover, while they discuss feeling alienated from their peers, they do not seem to resent having to care for their children. In fact, they talk about spending time with their children as one of the happiest times in their busy days.

The women in this study indicate that while they have a supportive network, usually involving family members, they also feel incredibly alienated while at school. Some participants described most of their professors as being supportive, while also describing at least one professor who was not. Debbie talked about how there was nothing at her school to support a mother with children, not even family housing. Therefore, as these women are playing or have played the very different roles of college student and mother at the same time, they face or have faced a world that is in constant flux – one that rocks to and fro, wavering from sometimes giving support and sometimes turning a cold shoulder, leaving them feeling alone.
All eight participants discussed the importance of family support as one of their biggest assets as they went to or are going to college. The type of support varied, with some participants receiving financial assistance, some having family members who were willing to babysit while they were in classes, and others receiving emotional support. This theme is important because it shows that the participants in this study, who successfully navigate through the challenges associated with going to college after becoming a teen mother, have a support system. While they may feel alienated from their peers in college, a theme that was discussed by six out of eight participants, they do have people in their lives who believe in them. Some of the participants talked about how they would not be able to do this without the support of their husbands or their mothers. Jackie, for example, described her husband as “her rock.” The issue of a support network seems particularly important when one considers how lonely these women appear to feel at school. Debbie, for example, talked about how she felt like a “sore thumb.” So, even though these women’s lives appear to be so different from their peers’ lives, some of them find their families as a place where they can get the support they might not get at school.

From my own experiences with this phenomenon, I can concur that this contrast between support at home and lack of understanding or even acknowledgement at school is a part of the experience of being a teen mother who goes to college. While I was in school, my mother, my mother-in-law, and my sister-in-law babysat for me, meaning that I did not have to worry about daycare. Moreover, when I had had a particularly challenging day at school, where I too often felt alienated from my peers, home was a
place of refuge in which I no longer had to feel like a “sore thumb.” I would unlock the
door to our little apartment to see my mother rocking my daughter or reading to her. And
the burdens of the day would, at least for a moment, subside, as I was once again
reminded that I was doing what was best for my family by going to school.

Yet, I wonder, how many girls would like to go to college but do not have any
support from family members or other individuals outside of school. For the middle to
upper middle class girls in this study, the expectation to go to college remained constant,
regardless of their status as mothers; meanwhile, for the women from lower
socioeconomic brackets, making the decision to go to college was often not seen as
normal or even needed. These women did have support regardless of how their families
perceived the need for them to go to college. But one cannot help but wonder about how
the girls who do not have a family to support their decisions might make it in college,
especially when college is a place that hardly welcomes them.

For those women, the negative stigma associated with teenage motherhood in the
United States might while discourage them from even attempting to go to school at all.
For example, the mission statement from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and
Unplanned Pregnancies includes this statement: “If we are successful [at delaying
childbearing in young or unmarried women], child and family well-being will improve.
There will be less poverty, more opportunities for young men and women to complete
their education or achieve other life goals, fewer abortions, and a stronger nation.”
(http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/about-us/our-mission.aspx). This statement implies
that teen mothers and college are mutually exclusive entities, that women only have
educational opportunities by delaying childbearing. Hotz et al. (1997) found that “failure to delay childbearing […] has a negative and lasting effect on a teen mother’s marriage prospects” (p. 71). They also found that “failure of teen mothers to delay their childbearing [adversely affects] their rates of high school graduation (p. 74). Studies like this contribute to the dominant narrative of teen motherhood, one in which a mother is essentially condemned, with no hope of changing her prospects for a happy life.

However, while Hotz et al. seem to think that getting married is the most important step in a young women’s becoming happy or successful, the women in this study felt that an education was essential to their own well-being and their children’s well-being. For that reason, even in a world in which support from others was limited and in which they might feel incredibly alone, these women forged ahead with their college degrees, married or not, in the effort to better their lives, a important part of this alternate narrative. In other words, even if they do not feel they connect with the people around them, these women do not accept the verdict that they are “rejects” (as implied by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy’s poster seen in Figure 6).

**Stress and “Working Harder”**

The dominant narrative of teen motherhood presents a woman who would rather live off welfare than work, who would rather give birth to additional babies while living in poverty than to get a job. Ironically, the women in this study couldn’t be further from the stereotype of teen mothers presented in the dominant narrative. If anything, these women are willing to work far harder than the typical college student.
The women in this study, for the most part, have or had extremely demanding schedules while going to college and taking care of their children. Most of them work or worked, in addition to going to school, and most appear or appeared to do most of the housework and child care while at home, even if married. Jackie indicated that she believes teen mothers are willing to “work harder” than everyone else, and the stories that these women told in their interviews show that this must be necessary for a teen mother who goes to college. Socioeconomic factors seem to be directly related to the amount of stress and extra work that a mother going to college might face. Kathy, for example, was working twelve hour shifts in a plant while going to school online full time and taking care of three kids; meanwhile, Kira had the time and the money to take her child to many of the events that took place on her college campus, event such as baseball games.

According to the experiences described by my participants, poorer teen mothers who go to college face incredible obstacles as they attempt to get their degrees while raising their young children. Hotz et al. also found that “teen mothers work less than other teens before the age of twenty, but they work 130 to 150 hours more per year in their 20s and early 30s” (p. 74-75). This might seem to validate a somewhat different version of the dominant narrative of teen motherhood – that by sheer virtue of becoming a teen mother, a woman is destined for a life of working more hours per week than other women. The fact that the poorer women in this study work so much would appear to support the dominant narrative to which researchers like Hotz et al. have contributed with their work. And, as a former teen mother now in her 30s who has worked 60 hours a
week during the majority of the time that she has written this dissertation, I too appear to fulfill the dismal prophecy perpetrated by the dominant narrative.

What is different from the dominant narrative, however, is the fact that the women in this study persevere with their college plans despite the amount of work outside of school with which they are faced. Regardless of whether or not they have to work twice as much (or more) as their peers, regardless of whether or not they are barely getting any sleep at all – like Kathy, who was averaging three hours sleep per night at the time of her interview, these women keep going. They don’t drop out of school. They don’t quit their jobs. They don’t expect their families to be the primary caregivers for their children. These women forge ahead, regardless of the physical and emotional tolls that the stress might take on them.

**My Baby Comes First**

The dominant narrative paints a picture of teen mothers who bemoan the loss of friends and a social life and detest the chores associated with motherhood, such as changing dirty diapers. The poster from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy seen in Figure 5 illustrates this notion.

2 While getting my undergraduate degree, I did the type of work that some of the participants from working class backgrounds describe – waitressing, for example. However, while getting my Ph.D. the work that I did was academic in nature, which made it easier.
However, the women in this study stand strong as examples of mothers who are not at all like the dominant narrative of teenage motherhood would have them be. The women in this study described putting their baby’s needs over their own, even when it meant they would go without sleep or, in the case of one participant, it meant failing a class. Eight out of eight participants emphatically argued that one’s baby always comes first – above studies, above classes, above a social life, above all else. The women in this study went as far as to say that a woman could not be a teen mother going to college successfully if she did not have her priorities in order, with the baby always at the top of those priorities.

Moore et al. (1997; 2008) were clearly influenced by the negative stigma associated with teenage motherhood when they investigated the impact of teenage childbearing on the children of teen mothers. Their work sought to answer three questions:

To what extent are children disadvantaged by being born to a teen mother? Are the consequences of teen childbearing specific to certain aspects of child well-being? Do the negative consequences of being born to a teen mother vary across a child’s life stage? That is, do risks to positive development increase or decline as the children of teen mothers grow up? Are race differences found in the effects of being born to a teen mother? [And] are the subsequent children born to a teen other at a disadvantage, or just the firstborn?” (1997, p. 145-146)
An application of Burke’s terministic screens theory shows that the language used in their questions reflects their assumptions about teenage mothers, assumptions derived from the dominant narrative of teenage motherhood. They automatically assume that there are only “consequences” and “disadvantages” for the children of teen mothers. They do not ask if there are any benefits. They made a myriad of negative predictions about the children of teen mothers, but the women in this study show a level of commitment to their children that would be seen as ideal, were they only older when they became mothers. For example, Debbie never missed one of her sons extracurricular events, even though she was working and going to school; now, in contrast to the predictions about his educational prospects as a black male born to a teen mother (Moore et al, 1997), this young man is looking at colleges and doing quite well in life. Grogger (1997) found that “the sons of young teen mothers are 2.7 times more likely to be incarcerated at some point during their 20s than the sons of older mothers” (p. 253). Meanwhile, Debbie’s son is an honors student who appears to be going anywhere but prison.

While the other children of participants in this study are too young to think about college, I believe that their children will also defy the dominant narrative about them. I agree with these women that putting our children first was essential to our success as teen mothers going to college, and my own children, honors students in both high school and college, can serve as examples of success in this alternate narrative. Like teen mothers, the children of teen mothers do not have to accept the dismal statistics shackled around their tiny ankles at the moment of their births, and the loving support of their mothers is a driving force in their ability to do so.
Instrumentality Towards Going to College

The second research question that I sought to answer through this phenomenology was “How does the context of the rural Southeast impact the Dasein of the teen mother, as well as her intentionality toward getting a college degree?” The following components of the experience seem to be related to a teen mother’s intentionality toward going to college.

Tenacious Southern Women

The dominant narrative of teenage motherhood presents a young woman who readily gives up on her dreams when she becomes pregnant. Other people in society seem to accept this as truth and often encourage teen mothers to give up whatever it was they wanted to do besides coming a teen mother. For example, Keely talked about a teacher who wanted her to drop out of the honors track in high school after becoming a teen mother, who later accused her of cheating when she exceeding this teacher’s expectations on a test. Despite that the fact that the dominant narrative might encourage many teachers, professors, social workers, and health care professional to accept the idea that teen mothers should give up on their educational plans after becoming pregnant, the women in this study exhibit a tendency that is the very opposite of the dominant narrative’s portrayal of the teen mother as a passive woman who accepts her dismal fate without putting up a fight for something better.

I have struggled with the right way to describe this essential part of being a teen mother who goes to college in the rural southeast. Five of the women in this study described experiences in which, when faced with seemingly insurmountable odds, they
somehow summoned the strength to overcome those odds and succeed, often while hearing words of doubt or disdain all around them. While this surviving by sheer force of will may not be unique to Southern culture, it is certainly a trait that shows up frequently in stories about Southern women. In William Faulkner’s *The Unvanquished* (1990), Rosa Millard protected her grandson and the child of a slave while setting up an outlandish mule-stealing scheme in which she got money from Northern soldiers to support the children. In Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* (1939), Scarlet O’Hara laid in a garden, while

“Hunger gnawed at her empty stomach again and she said aloud:

’As God is my witness, and God is my witness, the Yankees aren't going to lick me. I'm going to live through this, and when it's over, I'm never going to be hungry again. No, nor any of my folks. If I have to steal or kill - as God is my witness, I'm never going to be hungry again.’” (p. #)

In Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), Celie overcame rape and years of physical and emotional abuse to finally find her voice, standing up to her husband and overcoming remarkable odds to find happiness. When Celie’s husband shouted at her, “Who you think you is? You can curse nobody. Look at you. You’re black. You're poor. You're ugly. You're a woman. You're nothing at all!” (p. 950), Celie marched right by the man who had beat her for years with her head held high, ignoring his vicious words and doing exactly what she had chosen to do. In my own family, stories about the time that my great-grandmother, Rosemary Miller, dug a cabbage from the frozen mountain ground in
the dead of winter, with one arm in a sling, to feed her elderly neighbor (Mama Miller was in her late 60s at the time) and her grandchildren on a night when they had no food in the kitchen, are frequently told at family gatherings. While these types of stories are often told in Southern culture (Cash, 2010) and are often aimed at valorizing the protagonists in the stories, the bases for the stories often come from truth, situations in which Southern women, faced with challenge, set their eyes on some goal, often a goal that involves caring for children or family, and stop at nothing to achieve the goal.

This dissertation is aimed at understanding the experience of being a teen mother who goes to college, not writing biographical sketches that highlight the heroic qualities of the women whom I interviewed, the tenacity that these women displayed in the face of great challenge is, to some degree, heroic in nature. However, I shall attempt to focus only on the way that this “stubbornness” described by these women was an essential part of this experience.

Five out of eight of the participants in this study talked about how the words of those who doubted them propelled them forward, especially in times of doubt. When Keely talked about the aforementioned high school teacher who argued she should be moved out of the honors track when she became a teen mom and who accused her of cheating when she did well on a test; she said that she dreamed of someday introducing herself as “Dr. _________” to this teacher. Melissa talked about how she would let the words of people who doubted her “roll off of her,” and how she would remember them and use them as motivation in moments of self-doubt. Kira stated that her stubbornness
might “suck in interactions with other people” but might have been one of her most valuable personality traits as she struggled to go to college and take care of her child.

The fact that many of these women faced little sleep and tremendous stress while getting their degrees in indicative of how dedicated to their goals that they were. Moreover, the fact that they argued, again and again, that they always make their babies their top priorities, shows that they were doing what they were doing FOR their children – to give them better lives. Regardless of how difficult it might have been, these women persevered; Melissa had the unfortunate task of calling relatives who had doubted her to tell them to ignore the graduation invitations she had sent because she had failed a class and would not be graduating with her bachelor’s degree at the time she’d originally planned. After having heard some of those family members tell her again and again that she could not be successful in college, it would have been incredibly difficult for her to continue with school after dealing with that type of humiliation and disappointment.

Nonetheless, being the tenacious southern women that she is, Melissa held on to her dream of going to college and went on to finish her bachelor’s degree… and a master’s degree. Melissa said that she did all this because her son did not ask to be born into poverty; she wanted to give him something better, and so, no matter what it took for her to accomplish it, she would get a college degree and give him a better life and an example to emulate.

These tenacious Southern women could not be further from the depiction of the dominant narrative’s welfare queen, a phrase coined by Ronald Reagan and perpetuated today through such politicians as Andre Bauer, who believes that poor women reproduce
in order to increase their welfare benefits. These women’s tenacity, or “stubbornness” as some of them called it, seems to be a key personality trait in their ability to overcome the challenges that they faced. Their stories are brutal contrasts to the dominant narrative’s weak-willed, wanton women who, at least according to Andre Bauer, reproduce like stray animals.

**Redemption**

A final important component in the discussion of the instrumentality of teen mothers for going to college is the notion of redemption that was reported in three of the interviews. Three of the participants reported that they felt the need to make up for past mistakes by going to college. In other words, they seemed to feel that they owed society some debt after becoming teen mothers and that going to college would help them pay off this debt.

It is no wonder that these women imagine that they owe something to society when the dominant narrative of teenage motherhood portrays them as being such a tremendous cost to taxpayers. In the *Kids Having Kids* series, which investigates the various consequences of teen motherhood in the United States, Hoffman and Maynard (2008) explain why they included so much discussion of the cost of teen motherhood: “Policymakers and the public want to know how much adolescent childbearing and parenting is costing, and, thus, what level of investment in prevention is warranted on economic grounds” (p. 359). They found that teen motherhood costs taxpayers $7.3 billion annually; however, they also state that “a major source of these costs is the forgone income and consumption taxes resulting from the lower earnings of the teen
mothers and the fathers of their children ($3 billion)” (p. 266). In other words, teen parents are just too poor to pay what the authors believe to be their fair share of the taxes and to buy their fair share of material goods. They wrote about the children of teen parents, stating that “children born to teen parents contribute an estimated $2.5 billion less annually in income and consumption taxes than if their mothers hand delayed childbearing” (p. 266). (How shocking to learn that the poor are poor!) Unfortunately, policy makers and the general public read that teen parents and their children together cost our country $9.8 billion dollars and assume that all of this is being paid to teen parents and their children in the form of public assistance, without ever realizing that most of it is just hypothetical money that never made it into the pockets of teen parents and their children.

The dominant, socially constructed idea that teen mothers are a tremendous tax burden and that they live off welfare because they don’t want to work seems so out of place in a discussion about the experiences of the women in this study, women who work far more than their typical peers in college. Nonetheless, it appears that at least three of the women in this study believe this part of the dominant narrative. They feel they need to make up for the cost they have placed on others and that they can do so by getting their college degrees. So, for at least three of the women in this study, they face the added pressure of paying off hypothetical debts to society, while they also handle the myriad of other responsibilities that come with being and mother and going to college.
Theoretical Educational Implications

With specific regard to educational research, the issue of locus of control is of particular importance; the women in this study frequently exhibited an internal locus of control during their interviews regarding their educational attainment. The term locus of control comes from Weiner’s (1974) research on how people look at their achievements. When an individual attributes his or his success or lack of success to his or her own efforts, the individual has an internal locus of control. In other words, the person believes, as the women in this study, that individuals have the power to control the outcomes of their own lives. By contrast, the women in this study did not appear to have an external locus of control in regard to their educational attainment. Even though the message that they would fail was plastered all around them in society, both implicitly and explicitly, these women did not believe that external factors could control their destinies. According to Weiner, a person who believes that external factors, such as the statistical likelihood that a teen mother will graduate from high school (much less college!), govern the outcome of their lives regardless of how hard they themselves work, have an external locus of control.

Other educational theories that warrant consideration as we consider the locus of control of the women in this study are theories of motivation. The fact that these women have an internal locus of control regarding their educational attainment is a positive factor, and yet, it is not enough by itself to motivate them to go to college. A theory that is helpful in understanding what might cause these women to be so driven about getting their college degrees, what causes them to value the idea of being college-educated so
deeply is Vroom’s “VIE” Theory (1964). In VIE theory, the “V” represents “valence,” which is the value that an individual places on performing a task. The women in this study clearly valued attending college at a high level since they were willing to deal with some of the challenges that faced to do so. The “I” stands for “instrumentality,” or the individual’s belief that he or she will be able to complete the task by completing certain steps or following a certain path. Some of these women seemed to struggle with instrumentality at various points during their journeys. For example, Melissa faced the challenge of not graduating from her undergraduate program and having to call her relatives who had doubted her to tell them. She talked about not knowing if she could continue at moments such as this. Her instrumentality for completing the task was obviously shaken; she was not completing the task in the manner in which she had originally planned, and this also impacted her expectancy. In VIE theory, the “E” stands for “expectancy,” or one’s belief that one CAN complete the task, that one is actually capable of completing the task. Melissa described sitting at her kitchen table one night crying, saying, “I just can’t do this. I just can’t do it.” When her instrumentality was shaken, her expectancy also dropped.

An yet, according to VIE theory, these three items work together in an equation to equal a person’s motivation for completing a task. The formula is motivation equals valence X expectancy (instrumentality) (Vroom 1964). In other words, if any of the three ever drops to zero, motivation for completing the task will also become zero. When one imagines what it must have been like for Melissa to call her naysaying family members to tell them that she had failed a class and would not be walking at graduation, one can
imagine how low her expectancy and instrumentality for finishing her degree must have fallen. And yet, there was one part of the equation that was high enough to keep her going – valence. The value that Melissa placed on getting her degree was so high, it seems it was enough to carry her through this incredibly difficult time in her college career. That combine with her internal locus of control helped her make it not only to her bachelor’s degree - but to her master’s degree!

**Implications and Recommendations for Further Research**

The dominant narrative of teenage motherhood in the United States presents a dismal picture. There are consequences for the mother, who will most likely drop out of high school and live in poverty (Hotz et al., 1997, 2008). There are consequences for the fathers of teen mothers’ babies, but only if they remain in their children’s lives (Brien and Willis, 1997; 2008). There are consequences for the children, who will live in “less stimulating homes” (Moore et al., 1997; 2008), are more likely to be abused or neglected (Goerge and Lee, 1997; Goerge et al., 2008), and receive less health care (Wolfe and Perozek, 1997; Wolfe and Rivers, 2008). The daughters of teen mothers are more likely to become teen mothers, and the sons are more likely to be incarcerated (Grogger, 1997). While all of the studies cited here to support the dominant narrative of teenage motherhood may have statistical power, what is not explored is the why behind these statistical findings. A number of researchers (Pillow, 2004; Luker, 1996; Luttrell, 2003, 2008; Davis, 2004; Musick, 1993; and Kelly, 2000) have found that the negative stigma
associated with becoming a mother at a young age negatively impacts her educational opportunities and acts as a barrier to her success.

For these reasons, the implications of this study are important in education, as well as other settings. The women in this study present an alternative narrative that shows them to be much the opposite of what is described in the dominant narrative. They are strongly committed to being good mothers. They want very much to be self-sufficient and to avoid dependence on anyone else. And they believe that education is a bridge between them and success, that getting a college education can help them break the cycle of poverty that binds them and their children.

Moreover, some of the women in this study describe incidents in which they were actively discouraged by others, such as Keely’s high school teacher, to continue their educations. If it is true that teen mothers are a tremendous tax burden, then it is completely illogical to discourage them from doing as well in school as they possibly can. Moreover, if college professors perceive teen mothers as asking for special favors when they need to attend to the same duties as parents as many college professors attend, then this presents an unnecessary barrier in between teen mothers and a college degree. Again, if the primary concern that most people have over teen mothers is the tax burden that they cause, then the last thing we should want to do is to keep them from being college educated.

The results of this study could lead to a number of additional studies. For example, a researcher might continue this type of work in a grounded theory aimed at explaining how teen mothers successfully go to college, and that theory might be used to
develop a program to help more teen mothers go to college. Since the perceptions of K-12 teachers and professors played important roles in some of these teen mothers’ experiences, research geared toward understanding the perceptions of educators about teen mothers who want to go to college might be useful in understand why so few of them actually make it to college and graduate with a degree. A phenomenology of the educational experiences of teen mothers in high schools might also shed some light on what additional barriers exist that keep teen mothers who would like to go to college from doing so. Studies of the educational experiences of teen fathers who remain in their children’s lives might also be useful, as the dominant narrative of teen mothers paints them in negative ways; and this dominant narrative may not necessarily reflect the truth in every situation. Finally, longitudinal studies examining the educational outcomes of the children of teen mothers who go to college would be useful in determining how important a mother’s educational attainment can be in influencing children to go to college.

The women in this study indicate that they go to school for their children and that their children are their top priority. Previous research by Zachry (2005) indicated that becoming a teen mother may actually motivate a teen mother to want to do well in school; however, the drop out rate for teen mothers remains incredibly high. Other studies might explore what is happening to keep teen mothers from getting high school diplomas and from going to college. This work might involve both quantitative and qualitative studies, such as a survey of teen mothers who drop out of high school or interviews with teen mothers who drop out of high school.
Overall, what makes these findings important is that they present a new way of looking at teen motherhood and education. While other studies have looked at teen mothers in G.E.D programs or in alternate educational settings, the women in this study have gone well beyond those more limiting educational settings to get bachelors and graduate degrees. The literature up to this point has overlooked these teen mothers entirely. These women’s stories show that it IS possible for a teen mother to go to college, just like any other teen. To interject this idea into the public discussion on teen motherhood is a key step in deconstructing the negative social construction of the teen mother.

Conclusion

When asked about what it means to be a teen mother who goes to college, my participants used a number of similar adjectives – strong, determined, powerful, stubborn, and tough. They believe that being a mother going to college gives them a unique but important perspective on the world. They believe that people who criticize them or who try to keep them from reaching their goals should be ignored or even used as a source of motivation for reaching a goal. They believe that teen mothers who go to college thrive on proving the naysayers wrong because they know that they are doing what is right for themselves and for their babies. They believe, regardless of their race or socioeconomic status, that an education will enable them to give their children a good life. And as a teen mother who has almost completed her Ph.D., I wholehearted agree with all that these amazing young women have to say about the experience that I share with them.
The phenomenological investigation of the experience of going to college after becoming a teen mother gives us a great deal of insight into the experience. We see the common obstacles of doubtful, discouraging teachers and professors emerging in some of the interviews. We see that family support is a key asset to young women who want to go to college after having babies. We see that loneliness, lack of sleep, and financial worries challenge these young women as they fight to make life better for their babies.

Above all, I believe we see that these young women are nothing like Arlene Sue from the trailer for the movie “Teenage Mother.” We see caring young women who want very much to be productive citizens and good mothers.

Clearly, there are things that the women in the phenomenological strand have in place, support such as that provided by family, that enables them to overcome obstacles. Many of them call their unwillingness to change course away from a college degree despite serious obstacles “stubbornness.” But if this tenacity that they describe enables them to achieve the seemingly impossible, then perhaps it is an asset we need to study more, so that we might teach it to the high school teen mothers who want to go to college.

My ultimate goal, in doing this work, is to engage in the first step of Paolo Freire’s process of liberation. This study is the “prise de conscience” phase – the awakening to what the limiting, alienating, disempowering situation truly is. I have studied in great detail the experiences of the nine participants in my phenomenology. I have reflected on how their experiences relate to my own experiences as a teen mother who went to college. I would like to use these results to move ahead in the process of liberation of teen mothers from the social construction that binds them and their babies to
a never-ending cycle of poverty. Above all else, I believe that these women’s voices have come together to present an alternate narrative of teenage motherhood that is profoundly different from the socially accepted view that teenage mothers are a societal burden, a far cry from the empowered, efficacious, triumphant women whose stories have brought the pages of this dissertation to life.
REFERENCES


