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This is a qualitative study that explores the lived experiences of Black women who were pregnant teens. I specifically examined how the women described their interactions with school-based personnel and how the concept of controlling images of Black women (Collins, 2000) could contextualize their experiences. I interviewed three Black women and analyzed their narratives within the Black feminist thought conceptual framework. I utilized two analytical techniques to organize and present the findings: thematic analysis and research poetics. These analytical techniques allowed me to uncover deeper meaning in the participants' words and phrases. Findings from this study highlight how school-based personnel can better support pregnant teens and how the concept of controlling images can assist in contextualizing the lived experiences of Black women.

BLACK WOMEN WHO EXPERIENCED PREGNANCY AS TEENS

by

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In my research, I explored the perceptions of Black women who experienced teen pregnancy in high school. This dissertation adds to the literature regarding the intersectional experiences of Black women who, as pregnant Black teens, were marginalized due to an intersection of race, gender, age, socio-economic status (SES), and pregnancy status (Anastas, 2017; Basch, 2011; Luttrell, 2003; M. Morris, 2016; SmithBattle, 2007b; SmithBattle et al., 2020). In general, social discourse has been about preventing teen pregnancy and framing it as a social problem (Basch, 2011; Luttrell, 2003). However, the stigma of teen pregnancy for Black teens is further exacerbated by the prevailing racial pathologies that view Blacks as deviant and immoral. Therefore, social discourse regarding teen pregnancy, Black reproduction, and Black morality creates a unique experience for pregnant Black teens.

Additional to the general experiences of Black women who were pregnant teens, I wanted to particularly explore how Black women who experienced teen pregnancy perceived the interactions, verbally and non-verbally, between themselves and their secondary school-based personnel (Peterson & Bonell, 2018). I broadly define school-based personnel as any adult authority figure within a school system, such as teachers, administrators, principals, nurses, secretaries, school counselors, janitors, bus drivers, and cafeteria staff. I chose to utilize a broad definition of school-based personnel because

students interact with various school-based personnel, and I did not want to limit their experience to persons within a narrow set of roles.

To further contextualize the experiences of my participants, I utilized the concept of controlling images. As expressed in Black feminist thought, the term *controlling image* stems from the ideology created during the Black enslavement era in the United States (Collins, 2000). Controlling images are social constructions that can serve to maintain the subordination of Black women by reducing the complexity of a Black woman into a simplistic caricature to justify our oppression (Collins, 2000). The benefit of analyzing the experiences of pregnant and parenting Black teens through the concept of controlling images is that it can help to reveal deeper meaning in their intersectional experience.

### **Positionality**

Before I present my research more fully, I must introduce myself. I am an American Black woman. It is important that you, the reader, know who I am so that my use of pronouns and identification with the literature is understood in context. By identifying myself before my research, I am in line with the Black feminist epistemological concept of the *ethic of personal accountability* (Collins, 2000). The ethic of personal accountability holds me responsible for any knowledge claims I make. According to Collins (2000),

Assessments of an individual's knowledge claims simultaneously evaluate an individual's character, values, and ethics. Within this logic, many African-Americans reject prevailing beliefs that probing into an individual's personal viewpoint is outside the boundaries of discussion. (p. 265)

Therefore, before the reader can evaluate my research, the reader must evaluate me to determine if my personal being is credible enough to produce credible research. Just being an American Black woman does not give me credibility, but placing that identity on the table before anything else does give you, the reader, a starting place to begin your assessment of my credibility.

Since I am a member of the studied population, American Black women, I utilized first-person plural pronouns (“we,” “us,” “our”) and not third-person pronouns (“they,” “them,” “their”) to avoid “distancing” myself from my own identity (Collins, 2000, p. ix). When I discussed experiences or identities that do not apply to me, I utilized third-person pronouns. I am also utilizing the term *American Black* to distinguish myself from Americans of African descent who are considered “Black ethnics” (Cottom, 2019, Location No. 1140). Black ethnics are African Americans whose ancestry is not rooted in Antebellum America. Cottom (2019) noted that the term Black ethnic is problematic because it implies American Blacks “do not have ethnicity”; however, it is important to distinguish groups to avoid the ideology of a monolithic Black identity (Location No. 1140).

Because I identify as an American Black woman, the experiences of this population are personal to me. I neither had the experience of being a pregnant teen nor being placed in a category that was considered socially deviant—even though by virtue of being an American Black, I am inherently framed as deviant. During my high school experience, I was given the good girl title, or the “Black Lady” controlling image, according to Collins (2000). The Black Lady controlling image is associated with high

academic achievement, moral purity, and such an extreme focus on success that a social life is largely neglected. I was considered a role model of how a Black female student should behave by my family, church, school, and the greater community. I took on that identity and achieved success in line with my image.

Even though I was assigned a seemingly positive and benign controlling image, each controlling image is meant to contain us and deny us the freedom of being an individual with a wide range of emotions, dreams, and talents. I chose to conduct this line of research because people, regardless of social positionality and intersectional identity, have the right to define their lives, speak their truths, and create their experiences. And if a Black woman's authenticity is not controllable, categorical, or conventional, your discomfort is not our problem.

It may present as a curiosity why I chose to explore the experiences of Black women who were pregnant teens in high school when that was not my personal experience. It is difficult to say that was not my experience entirely, because as a Black teen, I was reduced by controlling images to the default image of being sexually deviant until proven otherwise. I had to work to attain the position of the *Black Lady* so that I would not be considered a *Jezebel* (a controlling image associated with promiscuity; see Collins, 2000).

I ended my high school career as the pride of the Black community by becoming the first Black valedictorian of the high school since integration (Doss-Raines, 2002; Edwards, 2011, 2014; Kerr, 2018). It was not that I was smarter than my Black predecessors—I just came from a family that enjoyed flexing their powerful social

standing, and I was a *good Black girl*. And my *goodness* was highly protected, for I was sheltered by my peers and adults alike. To loosely quote Maya Angelou—*one is only as virtuous as her options*—and everyone made certain that I had no options (Angelou & Oprah, 2015).

My success largely involved the controlling images thrust upon other women in my family: my grandmother and my mother. My grandmother was one of the most powerful women in the school system and the city in general. And my mother . . . well, she was an educated force of nature. Both my grandmother and mother knew how to play their controlling images to their advantage. My grandmother could easily have been seen as a respectable Black Lady and a Matriarch (one who controls and cares for her own family). She achieved high social standing through her ability to get things done for others while her own needs and health suffered. Her power did not come *from* self-sacrifice; it came *because* of self-sacrifice. My mother is a Sapphire—*every day, all day, twice on Sunday* (I am utilizing the rich description of Black colloquialism). She exudes an anger that strikes fear and action. And no one questioned her anger out of fear of upsetting my grandmother. All I had to do was play my part as the Black Lady and make indisputably perfect grades.

Therefore, instead of saying that teen pregnancy was not my experience, I will say it was not my direct experience. And, I will say, the concept of controlling images is definitely a significant part of my experience. Additionally, my extensive volunteer work over the past two years with various community programs that serve pregnant and parenting teens has brought me into proximity to the current plight of this particular

population. Thus, I consider myself an inside/outside researcher (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). I am inside the subject matter as an American Black woman and a volunteer for programs that support pregnant and parenting teens, but I am outside the subject matter since I did not directly experience teen pregnancy.

Therefore, based on my positionality as an insider/outsider researcher and being an educated and privileged American Black woman, I utilized a reflexive writing strategy to process my relationship with the research. Pelias (2011) stated that “reflexive writing strategies allow researchers to turn back on themselves, to examine how their presence or stance functions in relationship to their subject. Reflexive writers, ethically and politically self-aware, make themselves part of their own inquiry” (p. 662). I consider my positionality as an American Black woman who is culturally and academically aware of controlling images to be my greatest strength, but I also recognize that it is a possible limitation. Therefore, I employed the “reflexive writing strategies [that] include[d] how [I] emerged as a *contaminant*, how [my] insider status was revelatory or blinding, and how [I was] *implicated* in the problem being addressed” (p. 662). As much as I genuinely want to tear down oppressive social structures and give voice to silenced, marginalized experiences, I had to recognize my privilege even to think that I can tear down oppressive social structures or that I have the power to be able to give voice to silenced, marginalized experiences. I was raised in a White supremacist patriarchal society, I have internalized White supremacist patriarchal values, and I have helped maintain White supremacist patriarchal social structures. And I own that. However, by my willingness to trouble my insider status and recognize my privilege, I held myself accountable to do a

*good work and do right* by the research (another taste of the richness of Black colloquialism).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Teen pregnancy is problematized in the literature as a pathology contributing to societal ills such as economic instability and financial dependence on the government (Basch, 2011; Luttrell, 2003). My stance is that the systemic treatment of pregnant teens, especially Black pregnant teens, is the actual problem that ultimately reflects larger societal problems of racism, classism, and sexism. My sentiments echo Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010), who stated, “young [Black] women’s existence at the margins presents both constraints and possibilities for all educational reform efforts and overall societal transformation” (p. 22). Therefore, my research focus on the broad experiences of Black women who were pregnant teens was a way to investigate teen pregnancy. And I specifically focused on their experiences with school-based personnel to explore the impact of the educational system on their experience.

By adding to literature that examines the experiences of Black women who were pregnant teens, I also hope to create an opportunity to see how they are being treated within the educational system and learn what type of support they need in the school setting. Black girls’ experiences in schools are often left unexplored by scholars who favor researching Black boys’ experiences. Patton et al. (2016) noted how “the challenges facing Black people and Black men and boys are treated as one and the same. As a result, an asymmetrical solidarity is perpetuated among Black people, relegating the lived experiences of Black women and girls to the margins” (p. 194). Therefore, while “Black

girls are stymied by many of the race-based policies and practices that impede the success of [our] male counterparts . . . Black boys remain at the center of research efforts and national initiatives aimed to improve their educational outcomes” (Watson, 2016, p. 239).

There needs to be an intersectional approach to research in order to uncover the lives of Black women and girls. M. Morris (2016) called for the utilization of a “race-conscious gender analysis,” which is “the process of acknowledging that Black women never stop being Black people, nor do [we] stop being women” (p. 180). Additionally, M. Morris (2016) called for the recognition that “an agenda for Black female achievement does not undermine or preclude any agenda or narrative on Black male achievement” and not to “assume that by supporting men and boys only, our schools and other institutions are meeting the needs of young women and girls” (p. 181). Therefore, Black girls and women deserve to be researched in a manner that centers us and our unique experiences rather than as an addendum to the Black male experience or the White female experience.

Watson (2016) did note that while there has been an increase in the research into the schooling experiences of Black girls, there is a tendency for the research to use a deficit model and lack a culturally relevant framework such as Black Feminist Theory. As a result, the intersectional identity of being a Black, female, teenager experiencing pregnancy in a high school setting results in a thinly researched demographic that is often viewed through the stigmatized lens of teenage pregnancy. And to further complicate the problematic nature of researching this demographic are the controlling images through which Black women, in general, are stigmatized. M. Morris (2016) stated that “Black girls need teachers, administrators, and school policies that do not see their Black identity

as inferior or something to fear” (p. 178). The fear is of the image of the Black girl, not the Black girl herself. And what we fear, we seek to control; hence, controlling images. This is why it is important to understand where this fear is coming from so that it can be addressed, and the Black girl can be seen as an individual person. However, Black girls do not need to be feared; we need to be understood. Therefore, this study addressed the need for more culturally relevant research centered on the experiences of Black girls.

The problem explored in this study is in line with the statement from Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) that there

is a need for scholarly endeavors that not only serve to empirically validate the experiences of girls of African descent, but also make use of such findings to strengthen coalitions across academic genres and communities, transform pedagogical practices in classrooms; and, actively promote social and educational policies at the micro- and macro-level, with those in mind who exist at the intersections of race, class, and gender. (p. 15)

Therefore, it is my sincerest hope that this study will benefit the educational experience of Black girls in general and Black girls who experience teen pregnancy in particular. Moreover, I hope to contribute to the scholarly research regarding the schooling experiences of Black girls and women.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to amplify the voices and visibility of Black women who experienced pregnancy while in high school. I was particularly interested in their overall experiences with pregnancy and early parenting (Anastas, 2017; Basch, 2011; Luttrell, 2003; SmithBattle et al., 2020). I also hoped to examine how pregnant Black women interacted with school-based personnel (Peterson & Bonell, 2018). Finally, I

wished to understand how the idea of controlling images (Collins, 2000) related to their experiences.

Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) acknowledge the declaration in Regina Austin's 1995 article "Sapphire Bound!" that "calls for minority female scholars in the legal field to straightforwardly, unapologetically, and strategically use their intellectual pursuits to advocate on behalf of poor and working class minority women" (p. 11). Additionally, Austin "encourages minority female scholars to redefine the Sapphire [controlling image] to testify to the social and political circumstances impacting minority women" (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p. 12). Even though I am in the educational field and not legal studies, I am a minoritized female scholar, and I believe that I have a duty to ensure that any published scholarship I produce is a work of advocacy for my racial gender. By exploring how Black women who were pregnant teens experienced their interactions with their school-based high school personnel, I am utilizing my privileged position as a doctoral student to amplify marginalized voices that are often ignored or degraded within the social discourse.

### **Research Questions**

I crafted the first research question to gain a broad understanding of the participants' experiences with pregnancy as a teen. In the specific research questions, I gleaned information regarding their interactions with school-based personnel and ways the concept of controlling images related to their experiences in general. The following are my research questions:

What are the stories of Black women who experienced pregnancy during high school?

- How do Black women who were pregnant teens in high school characterize their interactions with school-based personnel when they were pregnant?
- How does the concept of controlling images help us understand their experiences?

### **Background Context**

In this section, I define the term teenager and what it means for Black women and review the Title IX literature regarding teen pregnancy. Exploring the background context of being a teenager and Title IX helped me understand the experiences of pregnant Black teens in high school.

#### **Definition of Teenager**

It is important to exactly define what I mean by the term *teenager* and how that definition is applied to Black women. In this study, I use the term teenager to describe high school students in Grades 9-12 and not people aged 13-19.

The creation of high schools is the context that created the social construction of the teenager. High school attendance increased dramatically in the early 20th century. According to Spring (2011), “between 1900 and 1940, the percentage in high school of those between fourteen and seventeen years old increased from 11 to 80 percent” (p. 350). High schools served as a way to control teenage sexuality and channel it into civil service and extracurricular activities, in addition to serving as a way to simultaneously suspend entry into and train a potential labor force (Spring, 2011). Marketers recognized

the potential consumer power of high school students and constructed the term “teenager” (Spring, 2011, p. 350) to advertise to this new consumer demographic.

However, it is important to note that Black females are not always viewed on an age continuum but rather experience *age compression*. M. Morris (2016) defined age compression as “the assignment of more adultlike characteristics to the expressions of young Black girls” (p. 24). M. Morris (2016) stated that Black girls experience age compression when

they are likened more to adults than to children and are treated as if they are willfully engaging in behavior typically expected of Black women—sexual involvement, parenting or primary caregiving, workforce participation, and other adult behaviors and responsibilities. (p. 34)

Age compression is a “reflection of deeply entrenched biases that have stripped Black girls of their childhood freedoms” (M. Morris, 2016, p. 34). According to Evans-Winters (2017), “Girlhood is a designation and theorization grounded in Eurocentric Western White middle-class understandings of what it means to be a girl and woman in a White male patriarchal society” (p. 415). Therefore, a Black girl’s teenage experience may differ from that of her White counterparts because a Black girl is viewed as an adult at an earlier age.

### **Title IX**

Title IX is a federal civil rights law passed as part of the Education Amendments of 1972. This law notes that “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial

assistance” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Therefore, under Title IX, pregnant teens have the right to attend school in the same manner as they did before pregnancy, which includes remaining in honor’s courses, school clubs, and activities (such as prom), and the school must make accommodations for their pregnancy so they can participate. Thus, it is illegal for schools to force any pregnant teen into a certain course level, specialized programs, and/or homebound schooling. However, just because it is against the law does not mean it does not occur.

### *Experiences Before Title IX*

Before 1972, there were no official rules governing how pregnant students were to be educated, making the pregnant student’s education subject to her school’s decision and/or her parents. Therefore, when a student became pregnant, she ceased to be a student and became a problem to be solved. Often the “driving policy implemented to rid society of teen pregnancy was to abolish the pregnant teen from school, where, the theory went, she would be seen and copied by other teens” (Fershee, 2009, p. 79). The combination of the stigma of premarital sex, especially in high schools, and the ideology that pregnancy was contagious led to the expulsion and hiding of pregnant teens.

**Pregnancy as Stigma.** Teen pregnancy in high school was not just stigmatizing to the pregnant student. According to Fershee (2009), “the stigma pregnancy cast on an unmarried girl could reach far beyond her as an individual; it could also stain the reputation of the school she attended and her family name” (p. 82). High schools are a space for suspended adulthood. And in line with this concept of suspended adulthood, “the reputation of the school as a place where teens were pure and innocent was of

paramount importance to school administrators during the pre-Title IX years” (Fershee, 2009, p. 87). Therefore, if a student became pregnant, that was an indication that sexual relationships were occurring, and the high school environment was no longer pure.

Additionally, “image was such a part of survival in American society in the 1940s and 1950s that it is easy to imagine that a principal would go to great lengths to avoid being perceived as running a school where young girls got themselves into trouble” (Fershee, 2009, p. 82).

Black girls who became pregnant in high school before Title IX were not just subject to the shame imposed on all girls who became pregnant in school; they were also subject to fulfilling the stereotype that Black girls are oversexed Jezebels (Collins, 2000). Moreover, the emergence of the pregnant teen profiled “as poor, African-American, and at high risk for academic failure” began due to a 1955-1959 study by the New York City Bureau of Attendance that “found the highest rates of pregnancy and school dropout among low-income African-American teenage girls” (Ling, 2002, p. 2394). And once a Black girl became pregnant, any respectability she could claim through education was now destroyed. Her respectability was not lost in the dominant community by virtue of being a Black female; she was already considered hypersexual. Her respectability was lost within the Black community because there was a concerted communal effort to counter negative stereotypes such as being hypersexual (Harris-Perry, 2011).

An illustration of how the politics of respectability in the Black community affected pregnant Black teens before 1972 (and arguably still to this day) is the civil rights story of Claudette Colvin. M. Morris (2016) presented Colvin’s story to illustrate

the history of how Black girls who advocate for their rights are maligned. M. Morris (2016) explained how in 1955, 9 months before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a White passenger and the launch of the Montgomery bus boycott, “fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin protested the segregation of Montgomery buses by refusing to give up her seat to a White passenger” (p. 22). However, her name and protest are largely forgotten because “she didn’t fit the profile of a ‘perfect’ protester” (p. 22). Colvin, who “was a member of the Youth Council of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)” became “so incensed by the demand to give up her seat that she shouted. She resisted with her body. And she was arrested” (p. 22). However, Colvin was discredited because she was deemed to be “belligerent and unreliable” (p. 22) and because she was an unwed, pregnant teen. Therefore, “Colvin was cast as a troublemaker and pushed out of one of the country’s most vivid civil rights memories, as well as public and private discourse on the role of poor Black girls in the shaping of American democracy” (p. 22).

Colvin was a Black girl who advocated for civil rights but was abandoned by the Black community due to her status as an unwed pregnant teen. Therefore, in this period (before 1972), where Blacks, women, or pregnant teens did not enjoy full civil rights (either de facto or de jure), a pregnant Black girl trying to advocate for her education would have been shamed into silence and hiding.

**Expulsion and Hiding.** Due to the shame of having a visibly pregnant student in high school (married or unmarried) and the fear that pregnancy was contagious and would therefore spread to other students, pregnant teens were expelled from school for

the duration of their pregnancy and often hidden from the outside world by their families (Fershee, 2009). Every effort was spent maintaining the school's image, the teen's family—and to some extent—the pregnant teen herself.

### *Experiences After Title IX*

In 1972, the U.S. Congress gave girls the expressed right to an equal education through Title IX. According to Fershee (2009), “Congress began to recognize rampant unequal treatment of girls educated in America and addressed the inequities by guaranteeing all girls a right to equal education” (p. 83). This right to an equal education extended to pregnant girls. The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) “enacted Regulations to clarify the rights and responsibilities of the schools and students, including pregnant students, governed by Title IX” (Fershee, 2009, p. 79) to implement and enforce Title IX.

De jure, the Title IX Regulations would guarantee pregnant students an equal education; de facto, the Regulations are weak in helping pregnant students achieve an equal education. According to Fershee (2009),

In theory the Regulations do three things. First, they guarantee a pregnant student's right to public education. Second, they promise that the education she receives will be equal to the education she would receive if she were not pregnant. Third, they give her the option of staying in her mainstream school or going to an alternative school during her pregnancy that provides an equivalent education to her mainstream school. In reality, the weak and incomplete Regulations leave pregnant students at the mercy of their educators who may, through animus or ignorance, treat pregnant students unlawfully with few or no legal repercussions. (p. 80)

Luttrell (2003) highlighted the conflicting de jure and de facto nature of Title IX's impact on the education of pregnant teens. Luttrell (2003), who researched women regarding teen pregnancy before Title IX, had expected that her research on the experiences of pregnant teens post-Title IX would reveal improvements to educators' response to teen pregnancy. However, she "found the end of de jure but not de facto discrimination against pregnant students—discrimination by way of subtle forms of discipline, punishment, and racial segregation" (Luttrell, 2003, p. 15). In her ethnographic study, which was comprised of predominantly Black pregnant teens, she noted how the pregnant teens were segregated into an academic program for pregnant students and how the teachers often disciplined them based on subjective measures of behaving and dressing respectably. Moreover, Luttrell (2003) noted how White pregnant teens were noticeably absent from the program because they chose to do a homebound program seemingly to "disassociate themselves from Black girls" (p. 20). Thus,

special programs that tend to target one segment of students (often low-income, urban, African American students) can serve to restigmatize those who enroll. This pattern reinforces the public perception that teen pregnancy/teen parenthood is a poor and minority problem and constructs a dynamic of self-selection into and out of the programs. (p. 20).

## **Summary**

Teen pregnancy is still a social struggle and a stigmatized condition that can be further compounded by racism. And, while under Title IX, pregnant teens have the legal right to an equal education of their choice, there is no impetus for schools to honor their

rights. Therefore, the high school experience of pregnant Black teens presents the possibility of a unique intersectional experience.

### **Research Methods**

My research design is a basic qualitative study with narrative elements. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 6). Narrative analysis is an “additional dimension” to the qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that “narrative analysis uses the stories people tell, analyzing them in various ways, to understand the meaning of the experiences as revealed in the story” (p. 25). Additionally, narrative analysis allows for a holistic portrayal of participants by focusing on the “temporality, sociality, and place” within their stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479).

In conducting my study, I collected data via open-ended interviews with three Black women who had experienced pregnancy as teenagers. By spending over two years volunteering with community organizations that supported pregnant and parenting Black teens before conducting my study, I also incorporated elements of accidental ethnography defined as “moments of insight [that] arise by happenstance or chance” where “the researcher cannot control their content or timing” (Fujii, 2015, p. 527). This approach helped me understand the variety of experiences that pregnant Black teens encounter and the supports they may receive. I analyzed my transcribed interviews via coding to surface themes central to each participant’s narrative (Saldaña, 2013). I also sought a deeper

understanding of my data by applying the analytical technique of research poetics, a methodological technique that uses poetry to analyze and present data (Glesne, 1997; Nichols et al., 2015).

### **Conceptual Framework**

I grounded my research within the conceptual framework of Black feminist thought. Black feminist thought examines American Black women's experiences, knowledge, and values in scholarship. According to Collins (2000), "Black feminist thought aims to empower African-American women within the context of social justice sustained by intersecting oppressions" (p. 22). Thus, Black feminist thought not only allows for the examination of intersectional identities and resulting oppressions, but there is an added element of the promotion of activism for social justice. Additionally, Black feminist thought creates a space for the "cocreation of knowledge with informants, consciousness raising, and empowerment" (Few, 2007, p. 455) as well as the use of nontraditional methodologies such as poetry, photography, and other mediums of creative expression. One of the distinguishing features of Black feminist thought is the recognition that due to different social identities, there can be a "diverse response to common challenges" (Collins, 2000, p. 25). I explain my conceptual framework more extensively in Chapter II, where I specifically delve into the intersectionality and controlling images elements.

### **Significance of Study**

This study's significance is that it adds to the literature the experiences of pregnant teens utilizing an intersectional perspective (Filter, 2015; Kaplan, 1997; Luttrell,

2003; Merrick, 2001; Oxley & Weekes, 1997; SmithBattle, 2007b). More specifically, this study adds the underexplored intersectional experiences of pregnant teens who are Black and from middle SES backgrounds (Kaplan, 1997).

Intersectionality is a part of the Black feminist conceptual framework. I utilized the concept of intersectionality to locate the intersecting identities of the participants so that I can further contextualize their experiences and find deeper meaning within their experiences. Filter (2015) discussed how “the intersection of being a teen, being African American and being pregnant provides an individual that is not like other people” (p. 20). However, Anastas (2017) noted that of the 41 qualitative studies she reviewed regarding teen pregnancy, only four contained intersectional perspectives of race and gender. Therefore, my study adds to research that promotes an intersectional perspective regarding teen pregnancy.

Furthermore, my study adds to the literature the intersectional experience of pregnant Black teens from middle SES backgrounds. While I did not intentionally seek participants with a middle SES background, the three participants in this study conveyed behaviors and experiences in line with middle SES backgrounds, such as having access to family financial support and demonstrating ease in navigating medical and educational systems (Lareau, 2002). Peterson and Bonell (2018) reviewed 28 qualitative studies regarding teen pregnancy and specifically examined the social class of the pregnant teens. Only four of the studies interviewed middle SES pregnant teens, but none of the studies interviewed middle SES Black pregnant teens. While the majority of the studies I reviewed either explicitly stated or implied that the pregnant Black teens were from lower

SES backgrounds or seemed to imply they were (Filter, 2015; Luttrell, 2003; Merrick, 2001; Oxley & Weekes, 1997), only Kaplan (1997) explicitly included the experiences of middle SES pregnant Black teens. Barnes and Bynum (2010) noted that “research on African American adolescent female sexual behavior in the United States tends to focus on the experiences of the poor” and that “few studies consider the sexual behavior of African American females from middle-class families in the United States” (p. 1). Therefore, my study increases the visibility of Black women who were pregnant teens and from middle SES backgrounds.

By contributing to these under-researched areas, my study makes a significant contribution to the literature. I sincerely hope that this study will amplify the need to explore social issues and human experiences through an intersectional perspective.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I introduced the significance and goals of my research and introduced myself within the context of my research. To echo the words of Collins (2000), I am just “one voice in a dialogue among people who have been silenced” (p. ix). My goal is to use this dissertation platform to amplify the need for more conversations regarding the experiences of Black women who were pregnant teens utilizing historical, educational, and human perspectives.

In the next chapter, I discuss my overarching conceptual framework, Black feminist thought, and further delve into two particular concepts of the conceptual framework—intersectionality and controlling images. I then discuss the disciplinary

experiences of American Black girls in high school and the experiences of American women who were pregnant in high school.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this chapter, I review three bodies of literature. First, I review Black feminist thought, specifically intersectionality and controlling images, which constitutes my conceptual framework. Second, I explore the disciplinary experiences of American Black girls in school. Third, I explore the experiences of American women who were pregnant teens in high school.

The first body of literature relates to two central concepts of the Black feminist thought conceptual framework: intersectionality and controlling images. This section discusses the historical context, definitions, and use of each concept. I chose to explore these two concepts because intersectionality provides a social location for the experience of Black women who were pregnant teens in high school, and controlling images helps one to understand further their experience within the stigmatized discourse regarding American Black women.

In the second body of literature, I explore American Black girls' disciplinary experiences in school, which provides a context for understanding how American Black girls are perceived by and interact with school-based personnel. In this section, I discuss our experiences in terms of how we are disciplined and how the concept of controlling images can help us to understand our disciplinary experiences. I chose to review this body of literature because before the participants were pregnant students, they were

students. Therefore, expanding the literature to review American Black girls' experiences in schools, particularly in terms of discipline and controlling images, provides a background to the experiences of American women who were pregnant in high school.

In the third body of literature, I explore the experiences of American women who were pregnant in high school, which provides a context for understanding the experiences of Black women who were pregnant teens. I chose to incorporate literature that discussed American teen pregnancy from a wide variety of experiences that discussed not only race but also social class. Additionally, some studies on teen pregnancy experiences did not explicitly state the race, but they presented rich narratives relevant to my own research.

These three bodies of literature lay the necessary groundwork for understanding the stories of the participants in Chapter IV and the analysis of the stories in Chapter V. In the next section, I discuss the Black feminist thought conceptual framework with specific attention given to intersectionality and controlling images.

### **Black Feminist Thought: Conceptual Framework**

Black feminist thought examines American Black women's experiences, knowledge, and values in scholarship. In conceiving my conceptual framework, I utilized two specific ideas drawn from Black feminist thought: intersectionality and controlling images. I chose to include intersectionality because the population I am studying, American Black women who experienced teen pregnancy, occupy a specific social location based on the intersecting identities of race, ethnicity, gender, age, teen pregnancy status, and socioeconomic status. And this specific location has not only unique lived experiences but also unique stereotypes and stigmas associated with it. Thus, I chose to

include the idea of controlling images in my conceptual framework because it provides insight into the stereotypes and stigmas associated with Black women. Therefore, by focusing on the participants' intersecting identities and applying the related concept of controlling images, I was better able to analyze and contextualize my participants' lived experiences.

## **Intersectionality**

### *History*

Intersectionality finds its origins in Black feminist thought. It was born out of the 1977 Combahee River Collective through a group of American Black feminist lesbians who “issued a stirring and highly influential manifesto in which they argued that gender, race, class, and sexuality should be integral to any feminist analysis of power and domination” (Davis, 2008, p. 73). However, intersectional thinking can be located in earlier texts such as Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech “Ain't I a Woman,” in which she contrasted her lived experience as an enslaved Black woman with the concept of female fragility used to justify the suppression of White women.

One of the reasons intersectionality originated in the literature authored by Black women is because it renders us visible. In 1989, Kimberle Crenshaw officially coined the term intersectionality “to address the fact that the experiences and struggles of women of color fell between the cracks of both feminist and anti-racist discourse” (as cited in Davis, 2008, p. 68). Black women are often caught in a world where race focuses on masculinity, and gender focuses on Whiteness, which leaves our issues as Black women invisible or further marginalized. Through intersectionality, a person does not have to

silence one identity to give voice to another because all of a person's identities are allowed to speak together and be honored in their unique language. Therefore, intersectionality serves to promote social justice because it "is not simply used to explain how intersecting marginalized identities operate, but rather it has a political undertone that highlights how the intersection of identities can leave particular groups oppressed" (Harrison, 2017, p. 1025).

***Definition***

Within the literature, intersectionality has been framed as an ambiguous tool in the critical thinking discourse. It is a conceptual tool that can be utilized as a theory, a methodology, and an analytical tool. Davis (2008) addressed the ambiguity of intersectionality by stating that

it is precisely because intersectionality is so imperfect—ambiguous and open ended—that it has been so productive for contemporary feminist scholarship. Its lack of a clear-cut definition or even specific parameters has enabled it to be drawn upon in nearly any context of inquiry. (p. 77)

Additionally, Davis (2008) noted how intersectionality could be useful for the researcher because it "offers endless opportunities for interrogating one's own blind spots and transforming them into analytic resources for further critical analysis" (p. 77).

Due to intersectionality's ambiguous place among theory, methodology, and analysis, I find its purpose best defines it. According to Davis (2008), intersectionality "refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and

the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (p. 68). According to Collins (2000),

intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nationality. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice. (p. 18)

Intersectionality recognizes that a person’s social identities (i.e., ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation) are “neither exclusive nor discrete” and that even though the identities are individualistic, “they operate within and are affected by structures of power” (Few-Demo, 2014, p. 170). Critical theories (such as Black feminism) assert that social identities are indicators of positionality (a person’s relational position in a situation based on social identities) (Few-Demo, 2014). And social identities are neither essential nor additive qualities; thus, there is no universal definition for Blackness, and “Black women are not White women plus color or Black men plus gender” (Few, 2007, p. 456).

### ***Utilization***

Researchers generally utilize intersectionality to explore the intersection of race, gender, and class identities. One identity that is not often explored with intersectionality is age. Harrison (2017) discussed how “intersectionality theory has not traditionally been used to make sense of youth’s lived experiences” (p. 1049). However, it “can be helpful in illuminating how the intersection of various cultural constructions can reproduce racial and gender hierarchies and disparities among youth” (p. 1026). In my study, I utilized

intersectionality to explore pregnant Black teens' experience, which incorporates age, race, gender, and class identities.

Choo and Ferree (2010) discussed utilizing intersectionality as a theoretical lens and methodological tool. The authors noted that intersectionality should be “approached methodologically as relational rather than locational” to assess the power dynamics that “flow” across social groups (p. 146). Additionally, the authors discussed that “if inclusion and voice are priorities for a specific study, then the issue of how much the mainstream itself is problematized needs to come to the fore and be as explicitly addressed as possible” (p. 146).

Thus, to minimize the potential of measuring marginalized participants by the rubric of mainstream values, they thought

that theoretically considering the challenges of intersectionality would direct attention to methodological choices that might avoid placing an unmarked standard in the position of exercising normative power, for example, by questioning the values that readers might bring to the account of these ‘different’ groups. (p. 146)

An example Choo and Ferree (2010) give of problematizing mainstream values regards the concept of early childbearing. Instead of questioning why women in poverty would have children early, the researcher should disrupt normalized thinking by asking, “what is absent in middle-class, college-aged women’s lives that would lower the cost of early childbearing for them?” (p. 139). My research addressed this line of problematized questioning by presenting the narratives of middle-class college-bound women who were pregnant teens.

## **Controlling Images**

### ***Controlling Images of Black Women***

Controlling images dehumanize Black women and limit our space and opportunities by justifying our oppression. According to Collins (2000), “controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (p. 69). Additionally, controlling images “reveal the specific contours of Black women’s objectification as well as the ways in which oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class intersect” (Collins, 2000, p. 72). The controlling images explored in this section are the Mammy, the Matriarch, the Welfare Mother, the Black Lady, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire.

**The Mammy.** Collins (2000) refers to the Mammy image as “the good Black mother” (p. 75). She is deferential to Whites and White dominant culture, and she recognizes and accepts her place in the oppressive hierarchical structure. Not only does she accept her place in oppression, but she also teaches her children to be deferential to Whites and to accept oppressive positions. The purpose of the Mammy is to assist in the maintenance of White supremacist and patriarchal hierarchies. Therefore, “Mammy is the public face that Whites expect Black women to assume for them” (Collins, 2000, p. 73).

Another element of the Mammy image is that she is asexual and committed to working in low-income jobs that service Whites. Harris-Perry (2011) noted that the Mammy image not only had “no personal needs or desires,” but she is the “maternal ideal” (p. 72). Mammy is the ideal mother in that “her love, doting, advice, correction, and supervision were reserved exclusively for White women and children. Her loyal

affection to White men, women, and children was entirely devoid of sexual desire” (Harris-Perry, 2011, pp. 72–73). Therefore, her role in White Supremacy is to provide cheap labor and loyalty to Whites and produce children who will continue to be a source of cheap labor and loyalty, but not so many children as to need government assistance.

**The Matriarch.** Collins (2000) refers to the Matriarch image as “the bad Black mother” (p. 75). The Matriarch fails as a mother because she is away from her children due to work and therefore can “not properly supervise [her] children and thus [is] a major contributing factor to [her] children’s failure at school” (Collins, 2000, p. 75). Additionally, she is a single mother because she is “overly aggressive” and unfeminine, and she “emasculates [her] lovers and husbands” (Collins, 2000, p. 75). Thus, it is understandable if men desert her or refuse to marry her when she is the mother of their children (Collins, 2000). The Matriarch is the controlling image that Moynihan (1965) drew upon to help explain the poverty of Black Americans (Harris-Perry, 2011).

The goal of the Moynihan (1965) report was to analyze the cause and possible solution to decrease the use of government assistance by Black Americans. In his report, Moynihan (1965) acknowledged the impact of the atrocities of slavery and segregation on Black American prosperity. However, he did not call for a national systemic shift to reduce social inequalities but rather recommended a closer adherence to a patriarchal social and family structure. Moynihan (1965) blamed the matriarchal family structure for the poverty experienced by some Black Americans.

**The Welfare Mother.** The Welfare Mother controlling image, also known as the Welfare Queen, reduces a systemic social problem into an individualized moral failure.

Collins (2000) discussed how this image was solidified in the 1980s by the Reagan administration. The Welfare Mother is a bad mother who is portrayed to have multiple children (generally out of wedlock and with multiple men) and needs financial assistance from the government to support them. She is not a “worthy recipient of government aid,” for she is “lazy, dishonest, and irresponsible” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 114). This characterization not only allowed the nation to blame Black mothers utilizing welfare for the nation’s financial difficulties, but also to legitimize the “bureaucratic supervision of poor mothers by public assistance agencies” (Harris-Perry, 2011, pp. 114–115). Additionally, the Welfare Mother is pathologized because she is not aggressive enough and because she is home all the time “passing on her bad values to her offspring” (Collins, 2000, p. 79).

**The Black Lady.** The Black Lady is the good Black woman. She is the image of “middle-class professional Black women who represent a modern version of the politics of respectability” (Collins, 2000, p. 81). The Black Lady is the image of the woman who “stayed in school, worked hard, and [has] achieved much” (Collins, 2000, pp. 81–82). However, what makes the Black Lady is what keeps her from being a “‘True’ Woman,” which is associated with White femininity. A “‘True’ Woman [possesses] four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Collins, 2000, p. 72). In contrast, a Black Lady,

is a hard-working Black woman professional who works twice as hard as everyone else . . . have jobs that are so all consuming that they have no time for men or have forgotten how to treat them. Because they so routinely compete with men and are successful at it, they become less feminine. Highly educated Black

ladies are deemed to be too assertive—that’s why they cannot get men to marry them. (Collins, 2000, p. 81)

Therefore, the Black Lady is demonized for being so successful that she disrupts the White supremacist patriarchal hierarchy in the workspace.

**The Jezebel.** The Jezebel controlling image reduces human sexuality into a pathology. Collins (2000) discussed how the Jezebel character is considered to have an insatiable and promiscuous sexual appetite. This character has its roots in slavery and was used to justify the sexual assault, the sexual abuse, and the coercive sexual relationships inflicted upon Black women. Her body exists for the heterosexual gratification of all men. M. Morris (2016) demonstrated how Black girls understand how their bodies are reduced to sexualized objects that serve as a distraction to the education of boys by how dress codes are enforced. One student explained it in the following way:

I think the reason they do that [stigmatize the way the girls dress] is the boys . . . sometimes boys could be more attracted to the Black girls, especially when it comes to body shape, and they think it’s going to distract the boys, so they tell the Black girls to cover up, because that’s who the boys are looking at. They are looking at the Black girls. They are looking at the White girls [too], but they’re looking at their faces. They’re not finna [going to] really cover up the White girls. (M. Morris, 2016, p. 128)

In the above example, the Black teenaged girl recognized that her body was controlled to not distract males. She also grappled with the ideology that not only was her body objectified, but it was also faceless and that having a face was a privilege of Whiteness. M. Morris (2016) noted that “teen girls who wear tight or revealing clothing, who are parenting [or pregnant], who are ‘slut-shamed’ and bullied, who express gender

along a continuum, and/or who are sexually assaulted are all living under the cloak of Jezebel” (pp. 153–154).

**The Sapphire.** The Sapphire is also known as the “Angry Black” woman. While this image is closely aligned with the matriarch, it deserves its own category because it is an image applied to Black women regardless of parenting status. The Sapphire controlling image pathologizes a universal emotion, which is anger. This controlling image “presumes all Black women to be irate, irrational, hostile, and negative despite the circumstances” (Ashley, 2014, p. 28). The associated traits are “typically described as aggressive, unfeminine, undesirable, overbearing, attitudinal, bitter, mean, and hell raising” (Ashley, 2014, p. 28).

M. Morris (2016) discussed how the angry Black woman controlling image became known as Sapphire. She noted that Sapphire was

a character on The Amos ‘n’ Andy Show from the 1940s and 1950s. In the broadcasts, Sapphire was nagging and combative with her husband, Kingfish. Their relationship reinforced a narrative about Black femininity as dominant, overbearing, and unreasonably demanding of Black men—an idea that stands directly in opposition to the norms of what White femininity is supposed to be, which is passive, frail, and deferential to men. Both notions are incorrect and harmful exaggerations. (p. 79)

An Angry Black woman is a Black woman who does not accept her place in the White supremacist patriarchal hierarchy. Because she uses her voice to advocate for herself or question the status quo, the utterance from her body is read as angry. By labeling her as angry, she is reduced to being seen as irrational and emotional, thus effectively silencing her voice and keeping her *in her place* (Harris-Perry, 2011). M.

Morris (2016) stated that “The angry Black woman meme—a neck-rolling, finger-in-your-face, hands-on-hips posturing is at the center of public misunderstanding of what it means to be Black and female in America” (p. 79).

### ***Summary***

All of these controlling images are designed to contain and pathologize so that no matter what a Black woman socially achieves, we are still considered socially deviant. We are the over-educated Black Lady, the underachieving Welfare Mother—who might as well be a Jezebel, the subservient Mammy, the overbearing Matriarch, and when in doubt, just say that we are angry Sapphires. These controlling images are the lens through which all Black American women are seen regardless of age. In the next section, I discuss the experiences of American Black girls in schools.

### **Disciplinary Experiences of American Black Girls in Schools**

On January 15, 2019, four Black 12-year-old girls were forced by their middle school vice principal and the school nurse to strip down to their underwear as they were searched for drugs; however, no drugs were found (Hill, 2019). These vulnerable and impressionable young girls were forced to expose themselves to adults without the presence of a parent or guardian because they were acting “hyper and giddy” during their lunch period. These girls were not disrupting class instruction or breaking any rules; instead, their crime was being happy while Black. This sexual assault perpetrated on these young girls can easily be linked to the stereotype that Black women’s natural demeanor is a bad attitude. Therefore, utilizing this stereotypical logic, when a Black girl expresses happiness, we must be high on drugs.

One of the areas where there is a gap in the literature is the experience of American Black girls in schools and our particular needs. Harrison (2017) states, “As a collective group, Black young adolescent girls have been largely neglected in much of the research literature and by school-based personnel who often direct their attention toward their Black male counterparts” (p. 1024). Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) also noted how

there is a need for more scholarship in the field of education that looks at the educational experiences and schooling processes of African American girls. Because feminist epistemologies tend to be concerned with the education of White girls and women, and raced-based epistemologies tend to be consumed with the educational barriers negatively [affecting] Black boys, the educational needs of Black girls have fallen through the cracks. (p. 12)

This section specifically explores Black girls’ experiences of discipline in schools. Additionally, I show how the intersection of race, gender, and age, as well as the concept of controlling images, affect our disciplinary experiences in school.

### **Experiences with Discipline and Controlling Images**

In the literature, the policing, or controlling, of the Black female body and attitude appears to be central to the experience of Black girls’ interaction with their school-based personnel. In this section, I discuss five studies that demonstrate how the intersection of race and gender and how the concept of controlling images influences the discipline of Black girls in school.

E. W. Morris (2007) wrote an article discussing how Black girls experience discipline unique to their intersection of gender and race. The research was conducted in a school comprised primarily of racial minorities. Morris challenged the notion that Black

females are disciplined less than their Black males by observing that Black females were disciplined differently. While Black males were disciplined for perceived behavioral violations by being taken out of the classroom, Black females were disciplined within the classroom.

Moreover, E. W. Morris (2007) found that Black girls were disciplined based on their violation of White standards of femininity. Black females were more likely to be outspoken and loud but on task. However, since White standards of femininity value being quiet and speaking when spoken to, the Black females were disciplined into silence. Also, Black females were disciplined more on the way they dressed because they were perceived as looking more sexually mature than their White counterparts.

Additionally, E. W. Morris (2007) found that Black school-based personnel disciplined Black female students' behavior to help them succeed by keeping them from being stereotyped as loud, domineering, and hypersexual-stereotypical behaviors associated with the controlling images of Black women. However, E. W. Morris (2007) noted that disciplining Black girls to fit into a dominant cultural ideal of femininity could adversely affect Black girls' chances of success because "educators often unintentionally stifled the outspokenness and assertiveness that forged academic success for many African American girls" (p. 509). Thus, if Black girls remain silent, they may not receive the attention and the educational opportunities they need. Therefore, by analyzing the discipline experiences through an intersectional lens, E. W. Morris (2007) discovered that Black females are just as punished as Black males, so there was no gender advantage. E. W. Morris (2007) further noted that encouraging Black girls to conform to dominant

ideals of femininity would not work in their favor because they did not have the racial advantage of Whiteness to ensure that they would have their academic needs met.

The concept of controlling images influencing the discipline of Black girls was further explored in Blake et al. (2011). Blake et al. (2011) focused on the exclusionary discipline, defined as in-school-suspension and out-of-school-suspension, of Black females in an urban Midwest elementary and secondary school environment. They found that Black females experienced exclusionary discipline twice as often as their White and Latina counterparts. Black girls were disciplined mainly for defiance, which is based on the teacher's subjective opinion, followed by inappropriate dress. The authors concluded that "many of the behaviors that Black girls were cited for seemed to defy traditional standards of femininity and closely paralleled the behaviors of stereotypical images of Black women as hypersexualized, angry, and hostile" (Blake et al., 2011, p. 100).

Blake et al. (2011) reiterated the need to study the discipline experiences of Black girls. The authors noted that when the literature reports the discipline sanctions of Black females, it "seems to serve as a means to further highlight the inequitable discipline experiences of Black males rather than to demonstrate how disproportionate discipline practices might also negatively impact the school experiences of Black girls" (Blake et al., 2011, p. 91). The authors believe that

the lack of emphasis on the discipline experiences of Black girls may in part be due to the perception that girls in general pose less risk for behavior problems given their greater academic achievement and to gendered racial bias, in favor of Black boys, in discipline referrals and sanctions. (Blake et al., 2011, p. 91)

They found that Black girls from elementary school to high school experience a disproportionately higher rate of discipline, and “research suggests that teacher referral bias rather than students’ actual behavior is associated with disproportionate discipline sanctions and referrals” (p. 92). According to Blake et al. (2011), teachers are policing the femininity of Black girls, and

teachers may subconsciously use stereotypical images of Black females (e.g., the Sapphire and Jezebel) to interpret Black girls’ behaviors and respond more harshly to Black girls who display behaviors that do not align with traditional standards of femininity in which girls are expected to be docile, diffident and selfless. (p. 93)

The discipline of the Black female body, in addition to behavior, was discussed in Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010). Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) discussed how the

research shows that African American girls are more likely to be reprimanded or praised for social behaviors in the classroom as opposed to academic pursuits, teacher expectations are lower for Black girls than White girls, and Black girls are more likely to experience racist remarks from peers. (p. 20)

Additionally, research has shown that the Black female body exists in a space where it is “simultaneously policed, controlled, and heckled, while at the same time a site of spectacle” (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p. 20). This enduring ideology and behavior surrounding the Black female body “spills over into the school system, with young women reporting strict dress codes and negative remarks about their presumed sexual innuendos” (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p. 20). Therefore, Black girls go to school where they must face “stereotypical beliefs about their attitudes and behaviors from

teachers and peers” as well as “harsh disciplinary actions in schools” (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p. 20).

The discipline of Black females based on their behavior and body in relationship to controlling images was explored in M. Morris (2016). M. Morris (2016) examined Black girls’ experiences that led them to be disengaged mentally and physically from the school system. Two experiences especially relevant to my research are how Black girls are deemed disrespectful and overly sexualized by their school-based personnel. One of the ways a Black girl is labeled disrespectful is by asking questions. A question from a Black female body can be seen as challenging authority. Morris (2016) gave an example of a 15-year-old Black girl dealing with being labeled disrespectful. The young girl expressed confusion about how her teachers become angry when she asked questions.

I always question. And then sometimes, teachers get mad off of that. Questioning them about why they doing this in they classroom or why they doing that . . . I don’t understand how you get frustrated off of a question if I’m not being disrespectful . . . why you get mad? They say I’m disrespectful. That’s my label, *disrespectful*, ‘cause I always got something to say . . . [They keep] telling me, ‘Sometimes you got to bite your tongue’ . . . I don’t know how to do that, though. (M. Morris, 2016, p. 55)

The above example displays how the controlling images of Black women, particularly the Sapphire (the angry Black woman) controlling image, may have influenced how the Black girl’s voice was interpreted. M. Morris (2016) discussed how “the ‘angry Black woman’ cliché . . . serves no one particularly well” (p. 79). She described how regulating Black girls’ tone of speech and questions “leaves both the student and the teacher harmed” (p. 79).

It usually ends with the removal of the student from the classroom, thus beginning or continuing a negative school experience that can have lasting effects on her relationship with teachers, her faith in her ability to perform well academically, and commitment to school. (p. 79)

M. Morris (2016) also explored how Black girls experience sexualization in the schools, such as through the dress code. M. Morris (2016) gives an example of how a Black girl was sexualized through a double standard in the dress code. The Black girl, who had worn clothing that would allow her to be comfortable on a hot day, was being prevented from going to class because an attendance lady found her clothing to be too revealing. However, according to the Black girl,

A [White] girl walked in the office and her shorts were shorter than mine, and she was kinda thicker than me so, like you could see everything, like her butt cheeks were hanging out kinda and everything. And then they gave her a pass to class! I was like, “You didn’t just see what she had on?” And they then they was like, “Yeah.” So I was like, “Why do I have to get sent home for wearing shorts and she just had shorts on and she way thicker than me?” And they were like, “That’s not the case here. I’m trying to help you” . . . I said, “Well you need to be trying to help her out, too, ‘cause my shorts are not even that bad.” (p. 126)

Eventually, the Black girl persuaded the principal to allow her to attend class without having her grandmother come to the school and bring her a change of clothing. In allowing her to attend class, the principal stated (in the Black girl’s words), “I’m going to give you a pass this one time, but please don’t be letting the boys feel all on you and stuff” (p. 127).

The above example demonstrates how a young Black girl who just wanted to go to school nearly missed an instructional day due to the sexualization of her Black body through the sexually deviant Jezebel controlling image. M. Morris (2016) noted that

the educational domain today is infused with the prevailing stigma of 'jezebel' primarily in the form of concerns among school officials about the moral decency of girls. The regulation of this so-called decency often happens through dress codes and other comments and behaviors that sexualize girls in school. (p. 154)

It was not her clothing that was in violation, but her Blackness. This example highlights how school-based personnel's subjective interpretation of defiance and dress code violation can lead to Black girls disproportionately receiving exclusionary discipline. The young girl was not being disciplined for her own safety but so that she would not be a distraction to boys. The school would rather her miss class than distract a boy. The young girl was not being seen as a student but rather a sexual object. Additionally, the girl violated White femininity standards by questioning her treatment and going to class against the attendance lady's wishes. This act of advocacy could have been interpreted as an act of defiance and justification of exclusionary discipline. I used this example to highlight how seemingly harmless behavior such as trying to dress comfortably to learn can be read as innocent on a White female body and deviant on a Black female body.

These examples of inappropriate discipline and chastisement of Black girl behavior highlight why it is important to understand how Black girls characterize their interactions with school-based personnel. M. Morris (2016) noted that "while it has been found that Black parents who are more involved in their children's education have children who perform better in school, Black student achievement is largely a function of the expectation and interactions they share with teachers" (p. 48). Furthermore

Black girls are quickly cast as undisciplined deviants who reflect the most negative stereotypes of Black femininity. The punitive and marginalizing

responses from teachers and others with Black girls under their charge go unchallenged as justified or even necessary. (M. Morris, 2016, p. 44)

More recently, Annamma et al. (2019) provided quantitative and qualitative data exposing how Black girls are more likely to be subjectively disciplined than their White counterparts due to controlling images of Black women. Black girls were significantly more likely to be disciplined for detrimental behavior, disobedience and defiance, and third-degree assault—violations based on the perceptions of school personnel.

Additionally, the definition of detrimental behavior, disobedience and defiance, and third-degree assault is so subjective that “it provides the language the school personnel need to punish once the child has been deemed a problem” (p. 229). Annamma et al. (2019) also found that Black girls were significantly less likely to be punished for objective reasons such as drug or alcohol possession or distribution. However, White girls were significantly more likely to be suspended for drug or alcohol possession or distribution.

Annamma et al. (2019) linked the subjective discipline of Black girls to the controlling images of Black women. Two particular controlling images of Black women (the angry, unlady-like Sapphire and the conniving, entitled Welfare queen) were the lenses through which these young girls were seen when educators were deciding if the child’s behavior constituted a problem. Annamma et al. (2019) noted that Black girls are raised to be more assertive and speak up for themselves, which is outside of the dominant ideology of femininity, and that their self-care measures can be viewed as problematic instead of a strength. Additionally, no discipline measures were found when a Black girl

showed nurturing characteristics in line with the Mammy. Therefore, a Black girl's behavior is controlled so that she may act in service to others, but she is a problem if she acts in service to herself.

### **Summary**

In this section, I focused on the disciplinary experiences of American Black girls in schools, especially as those experiences that are related to intersectionality and controlling images. I presented research that showed how controlling images of Black women could influence the lens through which school-based personnel see the being and behaviors of Black girls. And the research also showed how this skewed view could lead to disciplinary measures that are not only inappropriate but can impede the educational trajectory of these young girls.

In the next section, I explore the experiences of American Women who were pregnant in high school. I discuss their experiences as pregnant and parenting teens in high school and their experiences after high school.

### **Experiences of American Women Who Were Pregnant in High School**

The experience of teen pregnancy is not a single story. The experiences are as unique as the individual and can have both seemingly positive and negative impacts on the person's life. SmithBattle et al. (2020), in their systematic review of qualitative research regarding teen pregnancy, noted that "Teen mothering simultaneously transforms and imperils" (p. 3). This conflicted nature of teen pregnancy is illustrated in the reviewed literature.

The literature I reviewed regarding the experiences of American women who were pregnant in high school predominantly focused on Black women's experiences. I rely heavily on the works of Dr. SmithBattle, who is a prolific researcher on teen pregnancy, and Kaplan (1997), which is a foundational work regarding Black teen pregnancy.

SmithBattle et al. (2020) discussed how available opportunities might affect the path of lower and middle SES youth.

Teen mothering contrasts sharply with the trajectory that middle class youth secure through lengthy postsecondary education, followed by employment, adult independence, marriage, and parenthood, typically in that order. In contrast, for teens who grow up in disadvantaged families and segregated, low-income neighborhoods, unequal life chances begin in childhood and contribute to growing up faster, feeling older, and assuming adult roles and responsibilities earlier than middle class youth whose risk-taking is mitigated by family and community resources. (SmithBattle et al., 2020, p. 7)

There appears to be a tendency in the literature regarding race and SES to associate lower SES with Blacks and middle and higher SES with Whites. However, Lareau (2002), a highly cited researcher regarding socioeconomic status and race, noted that White and Black families of similar SES tend to raise their children similarly. Therefore, I included various teen pregnancy experiences from women of various racial and socioeconomic statuses (SES). I found that exploring the experiences of White or racially unidentified women in various SES brackets yielded valuable insight into the experiences of their Black SES counterparts.

In this section, I review literature regarding the general experiences of pregnant high school women in terms of social support and perceptions of stigma. Then I explore

literature regarding their interactions with school-based personnel and their post-high school experiences.

### **General Experiences**

The literature regarding the general experiences of women who were pregnant in high school includes interactions with family members, the father of the child, and community organizations, as well as their feelings regarding the stigma of being a pregnant teen. In this section, I focus on the literature regarding the general experiences of pregnant Black teens.

### ***Sources of Support***

Various studies explored how Black pregnant teens perceived their sources of support. Family members, the father of the child, and community organizations were identified as potential sources of support during the pregnancy. The conflicted nature of teen pregnancy is displayed through the process of maturing into a parent yet still being children themselves in need of support.

**Family and Father of the Child.** Oxley and Weekes (1997) conducted a study with 21 Black pregnant teens aged 13-19 (SES was not disclosed). The authors found that “disclosing the pregnancy to the significant people in their lives was identified as stressful” (p. 174) for 85% of the participants. This stress was due to “uncertainty about their mother’s response, confusion, worry, and fear of rejection by family and peers” (pp. 174–175). Oxley and Weekes (1997) also noted that 71% of adolescents viewed pregnancy “as making them more mature because it meant having more mature roles that brought greater satisfaction and more positive view of life” (p. 175). Also, it was found

that 28% of the participants wanted to become pregnant and were excited about loving and caring for their child. However, for some teens (66%), balancing school and pregnancy caused feelings of distress.

Oxley and Weekes (1997) discussed how social support greatly influenced whether teens perceived their pregnancies as easy or hard. A perceived easy pregnancy came from receiving “attention and help” (p. 177) from family and the child’s father. Also, receiving “help with transportation to visits with doctors and the expectation that help with child care would be available when needed contributed to a sense of security” (p. 176). A perceived hard pregnancy was influenced by

conditions [that] ranged from lack of provision of basic needs (food, housing, transportation) and arguments with family members and boyfriends, to physical limitations and long-term responsibilities that gave rise to physical, emotional, and economic stress. (p. 177)

Also, a “perceived negative societal view of teenage pregnancy” and “issues of racial discrimination in relation to the community and school environments were also discussed as contributing to the experience of pregnancy as hard” (pp. 177–178).

Filter (2015) conducted a qualitative study with thirteen pregnant Black teens between the ages of 16 and 19 who lived in an urban area (SES was not disclosed). The purpose of her study was to understand the perceived assets of the teens. She found that the participants considered their unborn baby to be the most important asset. They discussed how their babies made them “want to mature more” and “be somebody positive” (Filter, 2015, p. 22). Participants also cited the women in their lives, such as their mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts (either biological or close family friend), and

female friends as assets. Only one participant described her father as a positive supportive figure. Filter (2015) noted that while many described the child's father as a current positive supportive asset, many did not see the child's father as being supportive in the future. Only one participant included the child's father when discussing the future.

Kaplan (1997) conducted a foundational qualitative study that is widely cited in the teen pregnancy literature. This study involved 32 Black women who had experienced teen pregnancy with an ethnographic focus on seven of the women. Kaplan (1997) presented the interactions of lower and middle SES Black women who experienced teen pregnancy and their mothers. She noted that regardless of class, the mothers were disappointed that their daughters became teen mothers.

Lower [SES] mothers . . . felt their pregnant teenage daughters had failed them. Until their daughters' pregnancies, this group had hoped their daughters would do better with their lives than they had and through educational achievement attain a higher class status. The mothers hoped their daughter's success would trickle down to them. The [middle SES] mothers . . . had come from humble beginnings and had worked hard to achieve and preserve their image of middle-class respectability. These middle-class mothers felt cheated when their daughters became pregnant. They tended to believe that teenage pregnancy reflected the kind of sexual behavior associated with the lower classes. (p. 69)

Therefore, while family members and the child's father provided sources of support, in some cases, the pregnant or parenting teen mother had to temper their expectation of the long-term level of support they would receive. Also, pregnant and parenting teen mothers had to grapple with receiving support from family knowing that their family members may be disappointed or disapproving of their pregnancy.

**Community.** Community organizations, including religious organizations and community-based non-profit programs located in the community and schools, were places where pregnant teens either found support or wanted to find support. However, the stigma of teen pregnancy impacted the level of support community members were willing to give.

Religious organizations such as the Christian church were places where pregnant and parenting teens received varying levels of support. Oxley and Weekes (1997) and Filter (2015) noted that participants in their studies found support in religious organizations, especially in pastors and female church members. Oxley and Weekes (1997) described how one participant stated, “The church and the pastor welcomed me with open arms” (p. 184). However, Kaplan (1997) discussed how in her study that while pregnant and parenting teen mothers “hoped for ‘unending’ support from the church, maybe because of an idealism that they had learned from a religious philosophy promoting forgiveness . . . [they] were ultimately disappointed and hurt by church members’ reactions” (p. 160). Kaplan (1997) described how her participants said church members shamed the pregnant and parenting teen mothers by stigmatizing them as sinners and having low morals.

Community-based non-profit organizations are potentially positive sources of support for pregnant and parenting teen mothers. Basch (2011) discussed how “school-based programs have the potential to help teens acquire the knowledge and skills needed to postpone sex, practice safer sex, avoid unintended pregnancy, and, if pregnant, to complete high school and pursue postsecondary education” (p. 617). However, staff

members of the non-profit community-based organizations sometimes have to grapple with their negative feelings regarding teen pregnancy as they try to provide support to pregnant and parenting teens. Kaplan (1997) stated that

One major problem for these teenage mothers, which the counselors unwittingly supported and were unable to change (even with all of their expertise), was the weight of the morally deviant stigma. It was this stigma that hindered the counselors' ability to respond more positively to the teen mothers. (p. 169)

Therefore, while community organizations can expand the sources of support for a pregnant or parenting teen mother, they can also be sources of stigmatizing experiences. And these stigmatizing experiences can potentially further isolate and marginalize these young women who are already in a vulnerable social position.

Family and community support greatly impact the general experiences of pregnant and parenting teens. Due to their young age and limited resources, pregnant and parenting teens must rely on the family and community to provide for themselves and their child. However, the stigma of being a teen parent can greatly impact their interactions with their family and their community. SmithBattle et al. (2020) noted how “at the same time that mothering offers transformative possibilities and social inclusion in families and communities, teen mothers face exclusion and stigma from the broader society” (p. 7).

In this section, I discussed perceived sources of support within pregnant and parenting teens' family and community. In the next section, I explore the perception of stigma on the general experiences of women who were pregnant teens.

### *Perceptions of Stigma*

The perceptions of stigma also impacted the general experiences of women who were pregnant teens. The pregnant teens perceived that they were judged negatively by others due to them being Black and experiencing teen pregnancy, and some struggled with negatively judging themselves. Kaplan (1997) noted that

One issue . . . that is often overlooked by politicians and various studies on Black teenage mothers, is that these teenagers know what constitutes a successful life. Black teenage mothers . . . struggle against being considered morally deviant, underclass, and unworthy. (p. xxiii)

To combat this negative social judgment, SmithBattle et al. (2020) discussed how qualitative studies in their review described how “teen mothers highlight their aspirations and competence to defend themselves against stereotypes” (p. 7). Therefore, the conflicted nature of teen pregnancy is displayed in knowing one is being negatively judged while trying to positively view oneself.

Filter (2015) discussed how the participants “perceived that people outside of their inner circle of family and friends judged them poorly” (p. 29). Some of the stigmatized perceptions are expressed below.

One teen explained, “Some people judge us a lot . . . Being young and pregnant . . . just a lot of things like they call us names and stuff.” Another participant supported this perception, “Well, with me being African American, people seem to put us down a lot and that we can never accomplish anything. A lot of people think [being young and pregnant] is bad, but I don’t know.” One young woman thought that people in general thought less of her for being young and pregnant. (p. 29)

Merrick (2001), who conducted a qualitative study on six lower SES Black pregnant teens, noted how one participant struggled with feeling like a “statistic” (p. 73).

The participant stated,

I used to look down on girls who used to get pregnant, especially the Black females. That’s what everybody expects from them, to have babies . . . My Black female friends always ended up getting into trouble or pregnant, having kids or dropping out of school. Now I’m going to be another statistic . . . I didn’t want to see myself like that. (p. 33)

The need to utilize financial assistance from the government, also known as welfare, created stigmatizing experiences where pregnant and parenting teens saw how others viewed them negatively and impacted the way they viewed themselves. Kaplan (1997) stated that “once these teenagers became involved in the welfare system, they had to struggle with a pervasive and demoralizing image of themselves as welfare mothers and cheats—in exchange for the monthly stipend” (p. 136). Kaplan (1997) described how

As a group, the teen mothers believed that the ostracism and contempt started in the welfare office, when they went through the application procedure and had to confront the workers’ demeaning attitudes. This demeaning process, which began in the welfare office, continued in their own community. The teen mothers pointed to the many neighbors and friends who became hostile to them, stereotyping them as scheming, lazy, “welfare cheats,” who used their bodies as baby-making machines for profit. (p. 137)

Kaplan (1997) noted that

people who believe the stereotype of these young mothers do not consider how these mothers, many of whom are just beginning their adolescent years, feel about such constant assaults on them, and how hard many of them work to overcome the negative labeling of them. (p. 137)

The teen mothers who utilize government financial assistance tend to do so to provide for their children. Utilizing government assistance allowed them and their children to receive health care and for the mothers to stay home with their children (Kaplan, 1997). However, Kaplan (1997) discussed how the participants in her study “believed that working for a living was better than receiving welfare” and that “all the teen mothers stressed a strong work ethic” (p. 142) when talking about welfare. Kaplan (1997) further discussed how her “interviews revealed a common pattern among welfare recipients that is noted by sociologists: most used [government financial assistance] for support during the baby’s early years and again when they confronted a crisis such as a job loss or health problems” (p. 143). Finally, Kaplan (1997) described how

None of the teen mothers enjoyed being on welfare or had children to increase their welfare payments. Instead, they expressed deeply felt resentment about having to raise children with little money, with no child care, no alternative way to provide health care for their children, and no alternative to living in neighborhoods controlled by drug dealers. Instead of wishing for more children or more welfare aid, the teen mothers spend their time reshaping their images and worrying about their lives. What I saw was the failure of the teen mothers to establish relationships with their social workers or anyone else who would understand that they were, after all, teenage girls in need of compassion and understanding. (pp. 151–152)

Black women who were pregnant and parenting teens were keenly aware of the stigma surrounding the intersection of them being Black and experiencing teen pregnancy. And those who needed to utilize financial assistance from the government felt the added stigma of being considered a *welfare mother*. However, what is often forgotten is that these pregnant and parenting teens are still children themselves who are coping with an extremely isolating, marginalizing, and stigmatizing experience.

In this section, I discussed the general experiences of Black women concerning the social support they received from family, the father of their child, and the community, as well as the impact of stigma on their experiences. In the next section, I specifically discuss the interactions of pregnant teens with school-based personnel.

### **Interactions With School-Based Personnel**

Another example of the conflicted nature of teen pregnancy is the teen's renewed desire to complete their education in contrast to school-based personnel believing pregnant teens have a lower chance of succeeding academically. It has been found that teens who become pregnant often renew their commitment to their education (M. Morris, 2016; SmithBattle, 2007a; SmithBattle et al., 2020). Pillow (2004) noted that "60 percent of girls who become teen mothers drop out before pregnancy. Thus, contrary to popular belief, a large percentage of teen pregnancies occur when the teen girl is already disenfranchised from schooling" (p. 118). Pillow (2004) noted that "up to 25 percent of female dropouts return to school when they are pregnant" (p. 118), and that during her qualitative research, girls often explained that they returned to school because of their baby. Additionally, Sadler et al. (2007) discussed how school-based support programs could support schools in helping pregnant and parenting students stay academically engaged and achieve graduation. However, school-based personnel often espouse the ideology that teens who become pregnant have made a poor decision and will have a future of limited options and hardships (SmithBattle, 2007a). Anastas (2017) noted that

there is much evidence that 'regular' schools often push disadvantaged young women out before and after they become pregnant, and there are questions about the quality of the education that young women receive in some alternative

programs as well. Meaningful and progressive reform of our educational systems will have to ensure that there is inclusion and adequate support for all kinds of 'different' students, including pregnant teens. (p. 165)

Many of the difficulties pregnant teens experience in receiving an education is in their interactions with school-based personnel. This could be due to schools not having a home-schooling option, placing pregnant students in a less rigorous alternative school, not accommodating pregnant students experiencing morning sickness, not providing college counseling, and/or creating difficulties through bureaucracy (SmithBattle, 2007a).

The inadequacy of the alternative pregnancy schools was further emphasized by Luttrell (2003), who conducted an ethnographic study on an alternative school program for pregnant students comprised primarily of lower SES Black teens. She noted that the location of the alternative school program was "wholly inadequate" for "it lacked sufficient heat, had no carpeted or comfortable spaces," and the desks were "too small for most pregnant girls" (p. 11). The program "was isolated from important resources (i.e. library, computers, and science labs)," and the "textbooks were outdated" (p. 11). One teacher "described these textbooks as being like the students who had been 'dumped at the [alternative program] because there was no better place for them'" (p. 11).

Kaplan (1997) presented the experience of a lower SES pregnant Black teen, De Vonya, who was told to transfer to an alternative school for pregnant teens by her school counselor and vice-principal. De Vonya, an academically engaged student earning As and Bs in college prep courses, refused to transfer to an alternative school because "those are pregnancy schools where all they teach is courses on parenting. They just go half days. That's a lot of hours you be missin' learnin'" (p. 48). To remain at her current school,

“several of her teachers defied the school officials by letting her take classes” (Kaplan, 1997, p. 49).

SmithBattle (2007a) gave an account of two racially unidentified pregnant teens, Kate and Jenna, who gave up trying to receive an education during pregnancy. Kate gave up due to morning sickness resulting in multiple school absences and the difficulty she and her mother encountered in trying to enroll in the pregnancy school. In exasperation, Kate’s mother stated, “We just gave up” (SmithBattle, 2007a, p. 361). Jenna decided to just drop out of school for a whole year because of the pregnancy program’s “poor academic reputation” and “home schooling was not offered” (SmithBattle, 2007a, p. 361).

SmithBattle (2007a) presented another racially unidentified pregnant teen, Pam, who was embraced by her school-based personnel and succeeded academically. Pam was able to continue her education without disruptions by receiving homeschooling near the end of her pregnancy. Her school-based personnel were flexible with her while she was pregnant and when she became a parenting teen. One possible reason for the school-based personnel being supportive was that it was a small school district that facilitated school-based personnel making personal commitments to students.

The stories of De Vonya, Kate, Jenna, and Pam echo the stories of many teens who experience pregnancy in schools. It is not necessarily the pregnancy that jeopardizes the teen’s educational future but rather a combination of family of origin SES and educator response.

## Experiences After High School

The social discourse regarding teen pregnancy is one of underachievement, poverty, and social dependence. From its invention in the 1970s “as a social and public health problem in the United States,” there has been a “high cost” associated with teen pregnancy that was “substantial for the mother, child, and society” (SmithBattle et al., 2020, p. 1). SmithBattle (2007b) stated that “the popular press and professional literature have described teen pregnancy as the beginning of a downward spiral that includes dropping out of school, depending on welfare or minimum wage jobs, and remaining single, poor mothers” (p. 409). However, “a growing number of studies indicate that the negative outcomes usually attributed to teen mothering have been overexaggerated” (SmithBattle, 2007b, p. 409). SmithBattle et al. (2020) discussed how

by the 1990s, researchers began noting that early studies had exaggerated the poor outcomes and high costs of teen mothering by failing to adjust for the significant pre-pregnancy differences between teen and older mothers; when later studies controlled for this selection bias into teen mothering, the poor outcomes typically attributed to young maternal age were greatly reduced. (p. 1)

Thus, the childhood SES level of the woman and her support system can greatly affect her experience as a teen mom.

The trajectory narratives of women in the literature simultaneously express the transformation and perils of teen moms. SmithBattle et al. (2020) discussed how the literature agreed that becoming a mother was a transformative experience in that “mothering [provided] meaning and fulfillment, and [served] as a catalyst for becoming mature, reducing risky behavior, repairing relationships, reinventing the self, and seeking

a better life anchored by the baby” (p. 3). However, this transformation was met with the perils of experiencing “mothering as demanding, challenging, and stressful,” especially when “attempts to breastfeed, continue schooling, or to leave risky situations were often thwarted by limited resources in housing, education, childcare, and gainful employment” (SmithBattle et al., 2020, p. 6). In this section, I discuss the longitudinal experiences of women who were pregnant teens in high school.

SmithBattle (2007b) conducted a longitudinal study to understand the life trajectory of teen mothers. She discussed how teen mothers who had grown up in middle SES environments tended to achieve middle SES lifestyles as adults. She noted that “their subsequent trajectories were powerfully shaped by what had been publicly available to them as children and later as adults” (p. 416). In this study, SmithBattle (2007b) interviewed the women who experienced teen pregnancy at 4-year intervals over 16 years. At Time 1, the women were less than 19 years old and had a child who was 8 to 10 months old. At Time 5, the women were entering their thirties. There were 16 participants at Time 1 and 10 participants at Time 2. Two of the areas that SmithBattle (2007b) analyzed were their educational attainment and SES level.

SmithBattle (2007b) noted how their educational attainment differed based on their childhood SES. Of the 16 teen mothers who initially entered the study at Time 1, seven had dropped out of high school before or during their pregnancy. Those who had dropped out were living in a lower SES environment with lower-quality schools. This contrasts with the nine teens who had graduated or were on track to graduate by the end of Time 1. SmithBattle (2007b) discussed how “all but 1 of these 9 teens lived in more

prosperous communities and attended schools that provided on-site childcare, parenting classes, and transportation” (p. 413). Of the seven who had dropped out of school, only one had achieved her General Equivalency Diploma (GED) by Time 2. The efforts of the other participants who had dropped out to return to school were “complicated by economic hardships, family obligations, unreliable childcare, and memories from past school failures” (SmithBattle, 2007b, p. 413). However, “the teens who were attending school at Time 1 (who resided in better school districts, had better educated families, and had stronger academic records) had received a high school diploma or a GED by Time 2 and [two] were enrolled in community colleges” (SmithBattle, 2007b, p. 413). Of the 10 remaining participants at Time 5, one of the three lower SES participants had obtained a GED. Of those who were higher SES, four had a high school diploma only, while three had completed at least one year of college. SmithBattle (2007b) further noted that a middle SES “mother with the most educated parents had completed a bachelor’s degree by Time 5 and intended to enroll in a master’s program” (p. 413).

SmithBattle (2007b) evaluated the participants’ SES levels regarding their finances and family structure. SmithBattle (2007b) discussed how

By Time 5, teen mothers in all but one case replicated the class positions of their families of origin; that is, middle-class teens at Time 1 were solidly middle class by Time 5; teens from working-class backgrounds were working class at Time 5 (with one exception), and teens with impoverished childhoods were poor at Time 5. (p. 413)

Of the 10 participants at Time 5, five were married, and five were single. The five middle SES women who were married with their husbands being the primary income

earners were White. They reported annual income levels above \$75,000. These participants maintained a flexible work schedule to supplement their husbands' income and care for their children. SmithBattle (2007b) described these families as "the nuclear family ideal" because "they had the financial security to reside in safe neighborhoods with good schools and mothers had the time, flexibility, and financial means to promote their children's academic progress" (p. 413).

Of the five single participants, four were Black, and one was White. The single mother participants stated that their children's fathers were in their children's lives, but the men were not desirable life partners. Instead, the children's fathers "had significant liabilities as partners or fathers; they were poorly educated, and prison records or poor work histories limited their ability to support families" (SmithBattle, 2007b, p. 415). Two of the Black single mothers worked full-time with at least one year of college and had an annual income of \$31,000 to \$45,000. The three lowest SES participants reported an income level of less than \$10,000. SmithBattle (2007b) discussed how for the lowest SES participants

Economic survival was a high priority for these women and often eclipsed other goals. One of these women was working part-time and two relied on welfare benefits. Subsidized housing and food stamps were crucial resources for these women. In addition, two of these mothers co-resided with parents to stretch their meager income. (p. 413)

Therefore, even though each of the 10 participants had experienced teen pregnancy, the SES level of their family of origin tended to be a predictor of their adult SES level.

Within the same longitudinal study, SmithBattle (2005) created composite narratives to highlight the different levels of personal agency and life satisfaction that women who experienced teen pregnancy had developed. These narratives were created at Time 4 of her longitudinal study, 12 years after Time 1. While SmithBattle (2005) assigns an SES status to the composite identities, she does not assign the composite identities a race.

The first composite identity was assigned the name Lily. SmithBattle (2005) described Lily as follows:

Lily grew up in a two-parent, middle-class home in a suburban neighborhood. Both of her parents worked full-time. In her first interviews 12 years earlier, she described her father as an alcoholic and her mother as an appeaser. In high school, Lily was class president and valedictorian and was voted the student who was most fun to be with. Few people knew that she had considered suicide before becoming pregnant.

At Time 4, Lily was a married 31-year-old mother with two daughters and provided daycare in her home. She found satisfaction in mothering, her occupation as a daycare provider, and in her marriage. Becoming a mother “transformed her world and created a new direction” (p. 839). Lily found her voice, and “her new voice and agency led her to imagine and live up to new expectations for the future” (p. 839). SmithBattle (2005) noted that “mothering did not foreclose her future but propelled her to imagine a better life for herself and her children” (p. 839). Lily’s mother echoed this sentiment, stating, “I think that Lily would have been dead if she had not become a mother 12 years ago” (SmithBattle, 2005, p. 839).

The second composite identity was assigned the name Cary. SmithBattle (2005) described Cary as someone who had grown up in an abusive household, became pregnant at 17 years old, married the father of her child, went on to have three more children, and provided daycare in her home to supplement her husband's income. While Cary found strong identity in being a mother and expressed her agency by advocating for her children and their well-being, Cary had not developed her voice to advocate for herself. This lack of personal agency in advocating for herself resulted in Cary not finding satisfaction and purpose in her marriage or career as Lily had.

The third composite identity was assigned the name Meg. SmithBattle (2005) described Meg as someone who became pregnant at 17 years old and lived with her mother after her first child's birth. Meg continued to live with her mother, and at times Meg's partners/fathers of her three sons lived with them. Meg's mother consistently criticized her parenting, and her partners had been physically abusive. These negative experiences undermined Meg's confidence and sense of personal agency, resulting in her feelings of "resignation and avoidance" (p. 842) in motherhood and life in general. Even her occupation in "entry-level health and legal positions served primarily as an emotional refuge from the conflicts at home, rather than as a source of identity or meaning" (p. 842).

These narratives were utilized to show how there are multiple life trajectories for women who experienced teen pregnancy and how one interacts with her environment can affect those trajectories. SmithBattle (2005) stated that

[m]othering often provides a pathway to adulthood for teenage girls and can promote a new sense of purpose, meaning, and responsibility. These meanings may be fragile and undermined by oppressive relationships or stigmatizing policies, or they may be supported and enlarged by positive experiences that support the weaving of a narrative structure and an enlarged horizon. (p. 847)

Teen pregnancy is stigmatized as creating a negative foreclosed future with little to no possibility for a positive outcome. However, these two studies that occurred over a decade after teen pregnancy show that the futures of these women are not predictable and that childhood SES, environmental support, and personal agency can greatly influence life outcomes. SmithBattle (2005) noted that

the future is not as predictable or controllable as we might like to imagine, we must remain open to narrative accounts from the life world, even when they contradict popular stereotypes, or when women's accounts reveal contradictions, the loss of horizon, or diminished agency. (p. 847)

Thus, some life trajectories may seem to confirm stereotypes, and some life trajectories may seem to defy stereotypes. Therefore, we must recognize and honor the complexity of people and their stories.

### **Summary**

Teen pregnancy is a complex experience that can result in complex life trajectories. As I noted previously, becoming a pregnant and parenting teen “simultaneously transforms and imperils” (SmithBattle et al., 2020, p. 3). This section highlighted the conflicted nature of teen pregnancy regarding general experiences, interactions with school-based personnel in high school, and post-high school

experiences. Additionally, the impact of SES levels on teen pregnancy experiences was explored to demonstrate further the diversity of the experience.

### **Overall Summary**

These bodies of literature I have reviewed illuminate how Black women are viewed and how we experience our position in American society. By adding the intersectional identity of teen pregnancy, I am complicating the narrative to render further expression of controlling images in the experiences of American Black women who were pregnant teens. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology utilized in this study.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, I outline my research questions, research design, participant criteria, data collection techniques, and data analysis. I utilize elements of Black feminist thought to link the methodology to the conceptual framework.

#### **Research Questions**

My study is intended to contribute to the conversation regarding the experiences of pregnant teens in high school presented in research such as Anastas (2017), Kaplan (1997), Oxley and Weekes (1997), Luttrell (2003), Pillow (2004), SmithBattle (2005), SmithBattle (2007a), SmithBattle (2007b), Filter (2015), Morris (2016), and SmithBattle et al. (2020). I also planned through my research to add to literature regarding the concept of controlling images of Black women presented in Collins (2000), Harris-Perry (2011), and M. Morris (2016). I utilized the following set of research questions:

What are the stories of Black women who experienced pregnancy during high school?

- How do Black women who were pregnant teens in high school characterize their interactions with school-based personnel when they were pregnant?
- How does the concept of controlling images help us understand their experiences?

## **Research Design**

The research design I utilized was a basic qualitative study with narrative elements. I chose this specific design because I wanted a methodology that would allow the stories and the voices of the participants to be heard. In this section, I explain the qualitative nature of the study and how adding narrative elements enhanced research design. I also describe how I gained familiarity with my topic through what Fujii (2015) called “accidental ethnography” (p. 526), which in my case consisted of two years of volunteering in programs that support pregnant teens.

### **Basic Qualitative Study**

This study is a basic qualitative study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “all qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. The primary goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings” (p. 25). In general, “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). As the researcher, qualitative research placed me as “the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 16). This was apt “since understanding is the goal of [qualitative] research, [thus] the human instrument, which is able to be immediately responsive and adaptive, would seem to be the ideal means of collecting and analyzing data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 16). And as the primary instrument during the in-depth interviews, I was constantly probing the participants for deeper meaning by asking appropriate follow-up questions and inquiring about any

contradictory statements. Lastly, qualitative research yields data that is “richly descriptive” through the use of words rather than numbers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 18). The three interviews I conducted yielded extremely rich data that conveyed the participants’ unique experiences, which would not have been readily apparent if reduced to a number.

### **Narrative Elements**

I enhanced my basic qualitative approach with narrative elements. Narrative analysis is an “additional dimension” to the qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that “narrative analysis uses the stories people tell, analyzing them in various ways, to understand the meaning of the experiences as revealed in the story” (p. 25).

My study focused on the reflections of Black women who experienced teen pregnancy. The stories they gave presented their experiences before their pregnancy, their experiences during pregnancy, and their experiences after pregnancy. Their stories were full of their personal beliefs and social influences. And their stories were located in a specific place—a suburban city in the Southeastern United States. Therefore, my study is in alignment with what Connelly and Clandinin (2006) noted as the “three commonplaces of narrative inquiry,” which are “temporality, sociality, and place” (p. 479). Temporality recognizes that people have a past, a present, and a future. Therefore,

narrative inquirers would not say “a person is such and such a way.” They would, rather, say that a particular person had a certain kind of history, associated with particular present behaviors or actions that might seem to be projecting in particular ways into the future. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479)

Sociality focuses on personal conditions and social conditions. Personal conditions are described as “the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions of the person, whether inquirer or participant” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). Social conditions are “the existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors and forces, people and otherwise, that form the individual’s context” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). Place is the “specific concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of place where the inquiry and events take place,” and that it is important to recognize “that all events take place some place” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, pp. 480–481).

### **Gaining Familiarity with My Topic**

My interest in this topic grew through volunteering with various community-based programs that served adolescent and young adult mothers in the Southeastern United States for approximately 10 hours a month for over two years. This allowed me to be familiar with not only the potential participants but also the level of emotional support that the participants were receiving from the program. Over the two years, I volunteered at the community-based programs as a doula and a mentor for teen mothers. I consistently attended programs that were at times weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly and I interacted with approximately 50 participants. During the programs, I had the opportunity to informally speak with participants who were or had been pregnant or parenting teens. I listened to their experiences, their concerns, and their goals for their futures. They freely expressed difficulties in navigating the educational system as a pregnant/parenting student and how the stigma of teen pregnancy has affected their experience and self-esteem. I also spoke informally with staff members at the community-based program

about their roles in advocating for pregnant/parenting teens and how they perceived teen mothers' experiences.

The years I spent volunteering at the community-based programs and informally gathering data that led to the construction of my formal research project connects directly to the concept of accidental ethnography described by Fujii (2015). The term describes the “moments of insight [that] arise by happenstance or chance” and “the researcher cannot control their content or timing” (Fujii, 2015, p. 527). Accidental ethnography allows for one to be “able to deepen and systematize [one's] understanding of the local, research context in a way [one] could not if [one] had relied solely on interview data or primary sources” (Fujii, 2015, p. 536). Furthermore, Fujii (2015) noted how

Once the researcher begins to pay closer attention to accidental moments, she might begin to make discoveries. She might become aware of expectations she did not know she had. She might notice the different ways that people type her. She might detect similarities in social dynamics across dissimilar sites. These smaller, less dramatic moments can reveal patterns, logics, and practices that other, more procedure-driven methods cannot. (p. 527)

Thus, in keeping with the concept of accidental ethnography, my extensive informal interactions and observations not only led to me creating a formal research design but also led to me becoming more aware of my bias, my positionality, and the context of the participants' experiences.

## **Participants**

### **Participant Criteria**

For this study, I interviewed three American Black women: Andrea, Tiffany, and Brooke (pseudonyms). Each participant met the following additional criteria: they were at least 18 years old, experienced pregnancy during high school years at a public high school in the United States within the last 12 years (2008-2020), and were no longer in high school.

### **Participant Descriptions**

#### ***Andrea***

Andrea is a young woman in her late twenties. She discovered she was pregnant the summer before her senior year in high school. Andrea gave birth in February of her senior year and graduated high school with her class. She attended the local community college after graduation and has obtained her associate's and undergraduate degrees. Andrea is currently employed in a director-level position at a community-based nonprofit organization.

#### ***Tiffany***

Tiffany is a young woman in her late twenties. She discovered she was pregnant at the beginning of her senior year in high school. Tiffany had arranged to graduate a semester early before her pregnancy. She graduated in January and gave birth in June. Tiffany has obtained her undergraduate degree and her Master's in Business Administration (MBA). She currently owns her own business.

***Brooke***

Brooke is a young woman in her late teens. She had decided to drop out of school at the beginning of her senior year. However, after she dropped out of school, she discovered she was pregnant. This pregnancy discovery led her to immediately re-enroll in school, and she was able to graduate with her class. Brooke is currently exploring educational paths and plans to become a licensed clinical social worker.

I intentionally chose to research adult women who experienced teen pregnancy in the last 12 years instead of teens who were currently pregnant and/or in high school. I made this decision because I wanted data that were recent enough to be contemporary, but I did not want to potentially cause emotional distress to a minor who was already in a socially and emotionally vulnerable situation. Therefore, in this study, I analyzed reflective perspectives over a past experience instead of dynamic perspectives during a current experience. According to the literature, it is appropriate to interview adult Black women instead of Black teens. R. Brown (2009) stated that “Black girlhood studies is about the representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female. Black girlhood is not dependent, then, on age, physical maturity, or any essential category of identity” (p. 1). Additionally, Kaplan (1997), who interviewed older Black women who had been teen mothers, noted that “the older women brought a sense of history and their reflective skills” and that “the problems of being a teenage mother did not disappear when the teenage mothers became adults” (p. 22–23).

## **Participant Recruitment**

The method I used for recruiting participants was backyard research. Backyard research involves utilizing people with whom you are familiar as participants (Glesne, 2015). When I decided to interview Black women who experienced teen pregnancy, it was very important to me that they had a strong support system in place. Due to previously being involved in research where there was more emphasis on data collection than the participants' well-being, I wanted to keep participant wellbeing a priority in this study. Therefore, after I obtained Internal Review Board (IRB) approval on July 8, 2019, I collaborated with various community-based programs to recruit eligible participants. I wanted to ensure that if this interview caused any psychological distress they could turn to people they trusted and access needed resources.

From September 2019 to February 2020, I recruited twice a month from the group sessions conducted by various community-based programs. At each recruitment opportunity, I handed out the IRB Information Sheet (see Appendix A) to each attending program participant and discussed the nature of my research at a group level as well as at an individual level. Over the 6-month recruitment period, I had contact with approximately 70 program participants. I was able to conduct two interviews in October 2019. One participant was a program director, and another participant was an adult volunteer for one of the programs. I was referred to a third potential participant. But after initially agreeing to be interviewed, the third potential participant canceled multiple interview sessions and discontinued answering my text messages and emails. After 2

months of failed interview attempts and one month of not being able to make contact, I decided to respect her right not to share her story.

In November 2019, I decided to modify the study to include minors aged 12-17. I only wanted to interview women who were 18 and over and no longer in high school because I did not want to be in a situation where I had to potentially break confidentiality due to any child abuse concerns. However, I did not have enough access to the 18 and over age group among the program participants to allow for 10 research participants. By expanding the age group, I tripled the potential research participants since the programs primarily consisted of teens younger than 18. I had six participants who initially were interested in being interviewed, but later declined. In January 2020, I was able to obtain a third research participant from one of the community-based programs who was 18 and no longer in high school. I decided to stop recruiting in March 2020 due to the advent of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (Education Week, 2020).

### **Participant Identity Protection**

I deidentified all data collected to protect the participants' identities. I encouraged participants to choose their own pseudonyms if they did not want their actual names to be used in publications. I wanted the participants to choose their pseudonyms so that my bias was not imposed upon their identity.

### **Compensation**

Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were not compensated.

## **Data Collection**

In keeping with the narrative element of the study, I wanted to create a space for the participants to tell their stories. Therefore, I utilized a semi-structured individual interview, a data collection technique in alignment with qualitative studies, to engage in the dialogue needed to create the space for the story. This dialogic research relationship is essential to a Black feminist thought framework. Collins (2000) noted that

for Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community. A primary epistemological assumption underlying the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims is that connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the knowledge validation process. (p. 260)

I met with each participant in-person once for a roughly 90-minute interview to gain as much breadth and depth of information regarding their experience. The interview took place in a location where the participants felt the most comfortable.

### **Individual Interview Preparation**

I vetted the interview questions (see Appendix B) with one of the staff members of a community-based organization to reduce the potential that I might trigger the participants. She also assisted me in wording the questions so that they reflected wording that is typically used by the participant population and was less likely to be emotionally triggering or offensive. This vetting was extremely helpful since it was not only a form of accountability, but it also helped me evaluate how my bias could potentially affect the participants.

For example, in questions regarding participant demographics, the staff member told me not to ask participants who did not graduate high school if they attained a GED (Graduate Equivalency Degree) because it could be insulting or emotionally triggering because some participants may view a GED as stigmatizing. The staff member said it was better to ask what grade they left school.

### **Recording Devices and Transcription**

I utilized an online transcription site, Otter (<https://otter.ai/>), to audio record and transcribe the interview. Otter is a free site that allows the interview to be recorded and transcribed in real-time. I utilized a separate audio recorder as a backup for the interview. I took handwritten notes of non-verbal body language and posture. The interview recordings and transcriptions were maintained on a password-protected server, UNCG Box. The handwritten notes were typed into a password-protected server, UNCG Box, and the physical handwritten notes were destroyed in a confetti shredder.

The transcription rendered by Otter, while extremely helpful, still required time-intensive editing. I collected several hours of data over the three interviews. I edited the transcriptions of each interview, which required a total of 24 hours divided over several weeks. The process of listening to each interview and editing the transcription allowed me to become intimately familiar with the data. Additionally, I have a similar cultural and social background as the participants, which allowed me to pick up on phrases, terminology, and inflections that may not be readily apparent to persons unfamiliar with our social context.

## **Data Analysis**

For the data analysis, I utilized two techniques: thematic analysis and research poetics. I utilized thematic analysis to organize the information I obtained during the interviews to develop a basis for each participant's narrative profile. Furthermore, I utilized research poetics to explore deeper meaning from the themes. I present the resulting poems and discuss their meanings in Chapter V.

### **Thematic Analysis**

I organized a coding system to identify themes in the data that I collected. The building of codes and themes from gathered information is in alignment with qualitative research techniques. According to Saldaña (2013), "a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3).

Each interview yielded richly detailed data. After personally editing each transcription thoroughly, I went about the task of organizing the data thematically. I organized each person's transcript individually into themes. Then I looked for the themes that answered my research questions, themes that were similar across the interviews, and themes that were unique to the individual. It was very difficult to choose what information to include and exclude in Chapter IV because the information shared was so meaningful to the participant and to me. Ultimately, I chose to include the themes that addressed the research questions and the themes that gave the reader deeper insight into the multi-dimensional fullness of the participants' lives.

## **Research Poetics**

I utilized the technique of research poetics to create poems from the interview data to obtain deeper meanings. The goal of research poetics is to inspire the reader to enter into the participant's worldview and achieve a better understanding of the participant's lived experiences.

### ***Poetic Logic***

My biggest fear in re/presenting data was that my voice would drown out the participants' voice. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that "the overall interpretation will be the researcher's understanding of the participant's understanding of the phenomenon of interest" (p. 25). Therefore, my purpose for choosing research poetics was to reduce the discrepancy between my understanding and the participant's understanding by prioritizing the participant's voice. Research poetics is a method of re/presenting data "that de-centers the authority of the researcher by preserving and promoting the participant's voice" (Nichols et al., 2015, p. 5). I chose to include this form of data analysis because it embraces the traditions of Black feminist thought. Collins (2000) noted how American Black women have produced and presented social thought forms that "diverge from standard academic theory [for] it can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like" (p. 9). Moreover, Collins (2000) discussed how finding ways to re/present data that captures the voice of Black women may be more useful "than trying to uncover universal knowledge claims that can withstand the translation from one epistemology to another" (p. 268). She stated that "rearticulating Black women's standpoint refashions the particular and reveals the more universal human dimensions of

Black women's everyday lives" (Collins, 2000, p. 268). Research poetics takes lived experiences and invites the reader to actively connect to the experience regardless of the reader's background utilizing the participants' actual words.

Another inspiration for my use of research poetics was Audrey Lorde. In *Sister Outsider*, Lorde (1984) discussed how poetry was seen as "a less 'rigorous' or 'serious' art form" (p. 116) by the mainstream, which favors prose. However, poetry is the most accessible creative expression for women with fewer economic resources. Lorde (1984) stated that "as we reclaim our literature, poetry has been the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women" (p. 116). Utilizing poetry to analyze research data grounds the re/presentations in our historic voice. Therefore, I am reclaiming our narrative in our native literary tongue.

### ***Definition***

Various articles have been written to define research poetics. While the researchers may define their techniques differently, there seems to be a consensus that the purpose is to creatively engage with the data to obtain a more intimate experience with the data in the analysis process. Nichols et al. (2015) stated that "When poetry is applied to qualitative studies it can deepen our understanding and heighten our connection to the lived experiences" (p. 6). Depending on the data source, research poetics may be further specified as *poetic transcription*, *found poetry*, etc. There is no one way to classify this technique. For this dissertation, I utilize the term *research poetics* to describe the methodological technique of using poetry to re/present data due to that term being utilized by Dr. Nichols, a researcher whose work inspired using this technique (Nichols et

al., 2015). And the specific method I used was *poetic transcription* since I created the poems from interview transcripts. Another term that is often utilized in the research poetics literature is *re/present*, which is a term utilized to convey that I am presenting data (the poem) previously presented in another form (i.e., a transcript). In my study, I utilized the term as well to remain within the spirit of research poetics.

Glesne (1997) used *poetic transcription* to describe her creative re/presenting of data from interview transcripts. She noted that her “experimental writing” was useful in “examining issues of power and authority, including that of researcher/author” (pp. 203–204). It is important to me that I remain aware of my power as a researcher and author of publications. I have the power to choose what is published and how it is published. By utilizing research poetics, I was forced to analyze why I chose certain statements over others, how well I preserved the participants’ voices, and how others may interpret their words.

Another component of research poetics is that it captures the reader’s attention. I feel that it would do an injustice to the participants if their voices and stories are glossed over for the reader to get the gist of the author’s writing. Research poetics brings the participant’s stories to life because it “provides a vicarious experience” and “its strength lies in its ability to evoke strong emotional responses from an audience” (Nichols et al., 2015, p. 15). In addition to bringing the stories to life, I want the reader to actively question the words I chose to use in the poems and analyze what those words mean to them.

### ***Technique***

I utilized Glesne (1997) to inform the structure of the poems. Glesne (1997) noted that she created this structure so that she would have boundaries and rules. The following are the three rules that Glesne (1997) created for herself:

1. The words of the poem will be the participant's, not the researcher's.
2. The phrases can be pulled from anywhere in the transcript and can be juxtaposed.
3. Enough of the participant's words should be kept together to re/present the "speaking rhythm" and "way of saying things" (p. 205)

In Chapter V, as part of my analysis of my findings, I re/present the data through poems that I created from the words of individual participants and composite poems that I created from the words of multiple participants. These rules gave me a blueprint for how to create the initial individual poems and the composite poems. Also, the rules gave me the freedom needed to creatively engage with the data while maintaining the integrity of the re/presentations.

### **Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of this study was extremely important to me because I wanted to obtain and present the stories of the participants in a manner that honored their generosity and their stories. According to Glesne (2015), "trustworthiness is about alertness to the quality and rigor of a study; about what sorts of criteria can be used to assess how well the research was carried out" (p. 83). Therefore, I sought to establish trustworthiness in two ways. First, I presented my positionality and my data collection

preparation to allow the reader to determine my credibility. Second, I kept a reflexivity journal to explore how my personal biases may be affecting how I interpret the findings.

I presented my positionality and my data collection preparation to demonstrate that the reader could trust me to be ethical in my methodology. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discussed how “part of ensuring for the trustworthiness of a study—its credibility—is that the researcher himself or herself is trustworthy in carrying out the study in as ethical a manner as possible” (p. 265). I was transparent in my positionality so that the reader could critique my findings, knowing that I am an academic researcher and an American Black woman who did not experience teen pregnancy. I was also transparent about the steps I took to ensure that the participants had access to support if they found the study to be emotionally distressing. These steps included making sure that participants were members of a community organization, working with a teen pregnancy program staff member to develop interview questions that were not likely to be emotionally triggering, and adhering to IRB requirements in working with human participants.

Additionally, I chose to only interview the participants once because I wanted to minimize the potential of emotionally triggering or retraumatizing the participants. Initially, I considered doing a second interview with the participants to discuss elements of their first interview, increase the data that were collected, and assess the trustworthiness of the data. This second interview is referred to as member checking. Birt et al. (2016) described member checking as “the method of returning an interview or analyzed data to a participant” for their review and this methodology “is used to validate,

verify, or assess the trustworthiness of qualitative results” (p. 1802). However, I was advised by an expert in researching teen pregnancy not to conduct member checking because it could possibly be emotionally triggering and/or retraumatizing to the participants. Therefore, I made the judgement call not to conduct member checking and focus on maximizing the information obtained from the interviews.

To convey and analyze the participants’ narratives based on their lived experiences, I had to reflect on my lived experiences. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that reflexivity, which is “critical self-reflection by the researcher regarding assumptions, worldview, biases, theoretical orientation, and relationship to the study that may affect the investigation” (p. 259), is a strategy for enhancing trustworthiness. Therefore, I maintained a reflexivity journal and participated in individual talk therapy with a licensed professional counselor to reflect on my emotions and thoughts and critically analyze how my voice may inadvertently seep into the research analysis.

As a result of maintaining a reflexivity journal and participating in talk therapy, I uncovered a deeper significance of this study. One of the biggest struggles I had when I started collecting interview data was identifying with the participants. After my first two interviews, I went to my dissertation chair, distraught about the participants being too similar to me. I was worried that I was subconsciously seeking participants with whom I could identify. Even though my dissertation chair tried to assure me that the participants were not like me because they had experienced teen pregnancy and I had not, I could not shake the feeling that the participants felt just like me. After much journaling and talk therapy, I realized that I was identifying with the participants’ middle SES background,

family structure, knowledge of social services, academic achievement, and American Black culture. This awareness allowed me to realize that I was researching an underexplored experience in the teen pregnancy literature, the pregnancy experiences of middle SES Black teens. And this awareness forced me to face the bias that I expected the participants to be lower SES and that ethnicity would be our only commonality.

As previously stated, I purposely took steps to honor the generosity and stories of the participants. However, ultimately, the reader will determine the trustworthiness of this study. Therefore, I sincerely hope that the reader will value my transparency, my methodological rigor, my consideration for the participants, and my proactive reflexivity methods, and thus judge this study as being trustworthy.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study is that I had three participants. While these three participants provided rich, substantive data, they represent a small number of people relative to the broader population. Initially, I thought that I would be able to interview at least 10 participants, given my years of volunteering with numerous community-based programs that served pregnant and parenting adolescents. However, I found that many of the program participants who freely shared their stories with me in my role as a volunteer were wary of sharing their stories with me in my role as a researcher. My difficulty in recruiting Black women to speak about intensely personal topics is echoed by Bell (2014), who found it so difficult to recruit Black women to discuss infertility that she had to alter the nature of her research study. Additionally, Kaplan (1997), a Black female researcher who was a teen mother and studied Black teen pregnancy, noted her difficulty

gaining participants even though she was an insider researcher (Sullivan, 1997). She discussed how

Being an insider did not help me gain the confidence of the teen mothers and others immediately. Most were suspicious of researchers. I lost a chance to interview one group of teen mothers involved in a special school project because the counselors who worked with them did not like the way a White male researcher had treated the teen mothers previously. Indeed, these teen mothers had the right to be suspicious. What these girls and women say about their lives can be used against them by public policy makers, since the Black community is often blamed for its own social and economic situations. (p. 26)

### **Summary**

In this chapter I outlined my research questions, research design, participant criteria, data collection techniques, and data analysis. I also presented the concept of accidental ethnography and the research poetics analytical technique. In the next chapter, I re/present the stories of the three participants. Each participant's story is re/presented separately. Within each individual story, the information is divided into themes. The research poetics, which are re/presented in Chapter V, were created from the direct quotes in Chapter IV.

## CHAPTER IV

### PARTICIPANT PROFILES

#### Introduction

When I first proposed the idea of interviewing Black women who experienced teen pregnancy, I was told that it would be difficult to get them to speak about such a deeply personal subject. This difficulty was experienced by Kaplan (1997) and Bell (2014). However, three women agreed to be interviewed for this research. These three women chose to be very vulnerable in describing their experiences, for which I am greatly humbled. They opened up about racial struggles, domestic violence, and mental health struggles. They invited academia into their personal lives. And I will admit I was not prepared for their gift of vulnerability.

My goal in re/presenting the information gathered in the interviews was to let the three women's stories be told in their own voices. When I conducted the interviews, I followed their lead and let them tell the story they wanted to share. I neither wanted any of my preconceptions of teen pregnancy nor my research goals to hinder their truth. However, I had to grapple with what information to share in the write-up. I had to ponder whether I should edit out or gloss over information that I believed to be too personal. I had to question if I was leaving out sections of vulnerable truth because it did not fit into *my* research goals, not matching *my* literary template, or because it made *me* uncomfortable.

The women I interviewed were intentional about sharing their stories; they wanted to be courageously vulnerable. Therefore, outside of lightly editing for clarity, I decided to re/present their stories as closely as possible. I also chose to leave their grammatical phrasings and colloquial language use. I believe that the women felt comfortable utilizing loose and expressive grammatical phrasings because I am a Black woman, and we share a similar social standing. I also noticed myself becoming very loose with my grammatical phrasings as the interview became more vulnerable and personal. Rigid adherence to grammar can at times be used as a technique to garner respect and social acceptance. Therefore, I am greatly honored that they were willing to drop their grammatical guards and speak in the grammatical structure needed to convey their courageously vulnerable truth. Thus, I made every effort to protect the women's identity by de-identifying their information while preserving their truth and their interpretation of their lived experiences.

The stories of Andrea, Tiffany, and Brooke bring us into their lived experiences as they navigated teen pregnancy and early motherhood. In this chapter, I chose to re/present the information they conveyed about their reactions to learning about their pregnancies, interactions with school-based personnel, personal struggles and achievements, and personal reflections on their experiences.

### **Andrea**

Andrea is a young woman in her late twenties. She was very enthusiastic about participating in this research and sharing her story. However, she quickly noted that she

normally does not share her story because she feels it does not fit the stereotypical norm of pregnant teens.

Andrea's story is one of striving for and attaining greatness. She is an accomplished young woman who holds several academic degrees and professional licensures, and is a director of a community-based non-profit program that serves low-income and teen mothers. She is a homeowner who paid the down payment for and designed her own home when she was twenty-one. And she does all of this while co-parenting an 11-year-old son. However, Andrea's story is also one of a human being trying to find herself after spending over a decade trying to defy the stereotype of being a teen mom.

### **Discovering She Was Pregnant**

In the summer before her senior year, Andrea discovered she was pregnant at 17 years old. She described how she first told her best friend and her boyfriend that she was pregnant.

So, my best friend, she graduated [she was in a class ahead of Andrea] and they had senior week at [the beach], and I was sick. I worked at [a pizzeria] during this time in high school. I was about to be the manager. And I kept smelling the bacon pizza, and it was making me sick, and I'm like, "What the crap?" I wasn't throwing up or anything. It was just this bacon pizza, making any type of meat lover's pizza up in that oven, I would get nauseous. And I'm like, what the crap is that? I ain't never even. I've been working here for years, I never had no issues. Then I was like, let me see if I'm pregnant. Never even thought to think like, "Oh yeah, you actually pregnant," but this went on for a while. So, I went and stopped at [the drug store] to get a pregnancy test.

My best friend and my son's dad were [at the beach] for senior week . . . And I called her first, and I was like, "Bruh, I think I'm pregnant because, because I just did this pregnancy test." And she started screaming, she had seen my son's dad on the strip at [the beach], so she's running. All I hear is doom, doom, doom,

running. And I'm like, "Where are you going?" and she's like, "He's down here." I'm like, "What?" And she runs, and she's like here, and she hands him the phone, and I'm like, "Yeah, I think I'm pregnant." He was like, "Are you serious?" So, both of them end up coming back from [the beach] that night. I was like, "I didn't need y'all to come home."

I asked Andrea why she thought they came that night.

To support. They both ended up coming back. They both popped up in my door like two o'clock in the morning, because they had come back from [the beach], Senior Week, because I was pregnant.

The next dilemma was getting an official pregnancy test. Another friend took her and her boyfriend to the Health Department to get a pregnancy test because they did not have a car.

And so, I'm like, you know, how are we going to figure out if I'm really pregnant, we need to go to the doctor. So, [my boyfriend's] friend, who we are still friends with . . . It's crazy, everybody who was there still are here now. But his friend had this huge spaceship car. And [my boyfriend] was like, he's like I'm a call such and such, and I'm like okay here call him, and I'm gonna make an appointment for the Health Department.

I asked her how she decided to go to the Health Department. She noted that she decided to go there to avoid feeling judged by her primary doctor.

My doctor that my mom was taking me to, she, I feel like she cursed me. She put me on the birth control. She said, "you don't take this birth control right, you'll be pregnant at 16." And I was like, okay, so I didn't want to go to her. And so, I was like, we got to find somewhere else to go because I don't want to go to her because she's gonna throw it in my face that I think I'm pregnant.

I asked Andrea how she knew about the Health Department as a potential place to get tested.

Honestly, I think that I don't know cuz Google wasn't in, you know, I don't know, nobody told me, though. I was like, you know the Health Department, everybody goes to the health department, you know. So, and we ended up going to the Health Department. I ended up calling them because I didn't want to go my regular doctor, and the dude pulls up in this spaceship car . . . So, we go, he drops us off at the Health Department . . . We go to the Health Department and we find out we was pregnant. So, they gave me a bag, and all of this paperwork, or whatever.

I asked Andrea how far along was she in her pregnancy.

I think eight weeks. I think it was eight weeks when we went there. Yeah, so, I hid the bag and stuff. So, the guy who comes back and stuff is like, "Are you pregnant or not?" and we's like, "Yeah, we are."

### **Family Support**

Andrea found support in her family, her boyfriend, and her boyfriend's family.

Between her family and her boyfriend's family, Andrea felt she had the support needed to complete high school, attain higher education, and retain the freedom to experience her youth. However, she quickly noted that family members made sure that she and her boyfriend understood that they were parents, and thus they did not have as much free time as their peers who were not parenting.

They always, even though we had him very young, both sides of our parents wanted us to still kind of enjoy that thing called life. We didn't get to enjoy it the way we wanted to, of course, but they still tried to make sure that we got to do, in a sense, what we wanted to do. But we did have a lot of responsibility. Now, they weren't the ones where you were just gonna drop him off for the week, the whole week, no, you get maybe days. But other than that, they wanted to make sure also

that we understood that this was what we chose, and this is the repercussions for, you know, our actions, but they've always been supportive, and I think that I couldn't have gotten this far without any of their support.

### **Interactions with Secondary School-Based Personnel**

Andrea described herself as a strong student who had always excelled academically and that her teachers knew she would be “okay.” However, in addition to beginning her senior year pregnant and giving birth in February, Andrea had to face and overcome four academic obstacles in her senior year: the indifferent attitude of the school, the Homebound program, the Senior Project, and the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program.

#### ***The Indifferent Attitude of the School***

Andrea entered her senior year pregnant with a child due in February. She was one of two students who were pregnant in her school at that time.

It was actually a predominately Caucasian school, and that's why it wasn't really acknowledge that we got pregnant. Due to the fact of two African American girls who got pregnant, and it was kind of like they probably had never even really dealt with that, you know.

Um, back then, it was so different from what it is now. Back then, it wasn't shunned or frowned upon, but it just wasn't accepted, either. There weren't a lot of resources available for me to help with what was going on, but I did get into a program where they came to the school. And I, basically, like on my lunch period or something or somewhere during class that we sit with the other moms and got to talk about our issues. Then, at the time it was only two people, me and another person in the class, who were pregnant in the whole school.

I think that honestly the school was not receptive to the [teen pregnancy program]. I think that they had that person coming in because that was a grant that probably was started and, maybe, you know, they have the need and the person came, but they never made an issue about it. And I don't know if that was a good thing or bad thing that they didn't make it an issue, but they made it more like it was just a

nonchalant thing. It was more so like it just wasn't acknowledged. I can't say that I was acknowledged any different.

After Andrea had her baby, the school experienced an increase in teen pregnancies.

I guess me and the other person kind of opened the floodgates of thinking pregnancy was okay. We started out with just the two of us, and then it ended up with like eight of us. So, everybody ended up getting pregnant during that time, after we had our kids.

### ***The Homebound Program***

Andrea had completed the majority of her graduation requirements the fall semester of her senior year. Therefore, when she had her son in February, her high school graduation was practically assured.

I don't really think they did support me or didn't. I don't think I was any different from anybody else they didn't make any special modifications for me to be great. I did . . . I was always a little bit smarter than most. So, when I got ready to have my son, I was doing the main careers course, which was off campus. And then I was also doing, what do they call it- student something, so I didn't have a course. I didn't have but like two classes because I had already got all of my credits in my prior years of high school. So, after I had him and when I was pregnant, I had a light load, due to the fact that I had already had all my courses to graduate.

However, Andrea still had to complete her senior project and the second portion of her CNA program. While on maternity, Andrea tried to utilize the Homebound program to complete her senior project. Homebound is a program for students who cannot attend school for medical reasons. In this program, school-based personnel bring

your schoolwork to your home and take your completed schoolwork back to your teachers. Andrea explained,

. . . It was called Homebound, you have to start the papers . . . I think I asked for the paper, they didn't initiate anything and I asked for the Homebound papers. And I started Homebound, but even then it was sucky because I didn't finish Homebound. The person who came out to the house while I was on maternity leave was supposed to bring all of my classwork, they were supposed to go to my teachers and get everything, and I was supposed to do it, and she was supposed to take it back, and that didn't work well either. I don't know why that didn't work, but I don't even think she came back.

I asked Andrea if she would have graduated if she had to depend on the Homebound program. She replied, "I would have been screwed. I would have been screwed. I would have been screwed. I mean freakin' screwed."

### ***The Senior Project***

The Senior Project is a research project that graduating seniors must complete before graduation. Andrea had unsuccessfully tried to begin her senior project through the Homebound program and the associated school-based personnel. However, she described having a good relationship with her classroom teachers.

And I will say that my teachers, my senior year, were bomb.com. And I want to say they were "bomb.com" because they were African American, and we were really cool with them.

When Andrea returned to school in April after her 8-week maternity leave, her teacher did not require her to do a senior project. The teacher just gave her an "A" for the senior project.

I remember, this is quite horrible, horrible, horrible. You know, as a senior, you have a senior project, and the homebound teacher brought me the criteria for the senior project. My English teacher was rolling with my son's father and his little clik of friends during that time. And I didn't even do a senior project . . . She gave me an "A." I didn't do a board. I didn't do a paper. I didn't even have a topic. I didn't have anything, anything.

Andrea noted how some of the younger teachers befriended older students. Thus, she believes that the teacher gave her an "A" because the teacher was friends with her boyfriend (the father of Andrea's child).

### ***The Certified Nursing Assistant Program***

Andrea wanted to have her licensure as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) to provide for her son. She completed the classroom portion of her CNA program that fall semester and had to complete the clinical hours in the spring semester. Andrea started her clinical hours in January, but she missed eight weeks of clinical hours due to being out of school on maternity leave. When she returned to school, she was behind schedule in clinical hours.

Andrea described how her main career teacher, a White woman, saw her determination to succeed in the CNA program. Andrea believed that because she was an "A" honor roll student who took higher-level classes, her CNA teacher had faith that she would do well even if she did have a baby. She further described how her teacher was

. . . always so understanding of [the pregnancy], and she, if it had not been for her, I would not know where I would be because any other teacher wouldn't have let me make up those hours, but she [saw] my determination. And I literally went to that nursing home at 6 am, while everybody else came at 10 am. I had to stay from 6 to 10, and then work 10 to lunchtime due to the fact that I had missed so many hours being on maternity leave.

Andrea finished her clinical hours and was the only one in her class to pass the state exam for CNA licensure on the first try.

### **Impact of Community and Social Resources**

Andrea found additional support during her pregnancy through community and social resources. Through community-based programs and social services, she was able to receive mentoring, prenatal education, childcare, and some nutritional assistance.

#### ***Community-Based Non-Profit Organization***

Throughout her pregnancy, Andrea participated in a program where a staff member from a community-based non-profit organization would come to the school and speak with pregnant students for half an hour.

She used to come to the school and just basically educate us on the things that were going on in our bodies and changing.

She would come to the school, I don't remember if it was during my lunch or during a class, but somewhere another it was like a 30-minute session. And we got together and talked about different things that were going on with us, the baby, or different things, just mom topics. And she would bring us like snacks and fruits and stuff. Then she kinda just educated us on the importance of making sure the baby was healthy, making sure we were healthy, and, if we had already had the baby, birth control and things like that.

Andrea could not recall which organization came to her school, but she described the staff member's impact. She stated that the staff member is "like my mentor, she is someone I still stay in contact with . . . I was kind of like her spokesperson in a sense because I got a scholarship when I graduated and went to college . . . I was scholarshipping and it up."

### *Social Services*

Andrea discussed how she wanted to utilize services that were available to her when she found out she was pregnant.

I am very resourceful, as I've always been. I knew that being that I was having a baby, I went to social services, and they did meet me with all the resources that I needed. And then I did have the support from that person who was coming to the school, who wasn't a school affiliate. She kind of gave us a little bit of information. So, after I had my son, I had him in February, I went back to school in April, and I graduated in June. So, from April to June, I was on a daycare voucher, and I was able to finish school. Then after I finished, they dropped the daycare voucher.

I think during that particular time frame, everyone who got pregnant and wanted to finish school got a daycare voucher. Now, there's a waiting list for the voucher. But prior to [now], if you wanted to finish school, you just signed up, and they gave you the voucher, and you picked your childcare facility. Well, I think now it's so many people getting pregnant, during that time, it wasn't. Like it might have been two people at every school during the time I got pregnant. I think now because it's so oversaturated and so many people are having babies, and the lack of funds and jobs and things like that are just not there. And I think that you're at a disadvantage being a mom who's in school having a baby. Now, due to the fact that, you know, everybody is trying to find a job and everybody who's working now aren't making enough money, but they need daycare. So, they're on the waitlist with the moms who are in school.

Even though Andrea, while attending high school, could receive social support from the community-based non-profit organization, a daycare voucher from social services, and WIC, after graduation she did not qualify for a childcare voucher, WIC, or food stamps. WIC (The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) is a federally funded nutritional subsidy that helped provide the formula for her son since she could not breastfeed as she completed school. Food stamps is a federally funded nutritional subsidy provided to lower-income individuals to purchase

food for themselves and their families. In the statement below, she describes why she neither continued to receive a childcare voucher and WIC nor qualify for food stamps.

I stayed with my mom, and [social services] based my income off of my mom's income. My mom has always worked good jobs and has always made a great living, and so her income impacted me in a negative manner because I couldn't qualify for food stamps. I didn't qualify for childcare, I didn't qualify for a lot of things. Only thing I qualified for was WIC to get milk, and then also the childcare voucher, so I could get out of school. So, because she did make decent money and I was still technically her dependent, I couldn't receive any benefits.

Andrea was in a space where she was legally an adult mother, but she was still viewed as a dependent because she lived with her mother. However, Andrea wanted to be independent and utilized available resources to secure that independence. And she maximized her high school education by obtaining CNA licensure. Andrea stated,

And so, once I graduated, well, I knew that, as long as I got the I, I was gonna be good. I felt like that was my meal ticket because I knew that after I graduated, I was no longer going to get WIC assistance. I knew that—that I was my meal ticket, my meal ticket out of [my mother's] house, my meal ticket to make sure that I could provide because nobody would give me anything. So, once I finished that course, I knew that I just had to find a job. And so, when I graduated, I took the boards, and I passed. I instantly started working at [an assisted living facility].

Upon graduating high school, Andrea lost all of her social service assistance. She was a single mom earning \$18,000 a year as a CNA, but could not qualify for any social services because she was living with her mother. This is still an emotionally painful area for Andrea.

I had been working for two years as a CNA, I still couldn't get any benefits. I never got food stamps. I always feel like I have a rebellious streak against food stamps, for I'm like y'all could have gave me food stamps.

**Determined to Succeed**

Andrea graduated four months after her son was born and began working full-time as a CNA and attending community college full-time. In the years after having her son, Andrea continued her quest “to be great” by attaining an associate’s and bachelor’s degree, securing a hospital CNA position, becoming a homeowner, and employing her skills in various social sectors.

***College***

After graduating high school, Andrea utilized her scholarship to attend the local community college. However, she no longer had a childcare voucher for her son. Andrea discussed how she and her boyfriend/father of her child decided how to best proceed for her to go to college while they raised their child.

We were together during that time and so we came up with a plan to see who would be more successful in the long run. And we thought it was me. We decided that I should be the one to go to college, so he sat back and watched our child so that I could go to college.

Andrea’s boyfriend stayed home with their son for one year while she attended the local community college.

Like many college students, Andrea explored various disciplines such as pharmacy technician, medical assistant, and nursing before deciding on an Education major. She obtained her associate’s degree in Education and her bachelor’s degree in the Health and Human Science Field. Even though Andrea laments that her associate degree took 6 years to complete, she attained a high school diploma, a CNA license, an associate

degree, a bachelor's degree, and a teaching license in 10 years. Also, during this time, Andrea became a homeowner at 21 years old.

### ***Homeownership***

Andrea lived with her mother for two years after graduating from high school. After working at assisted living facilities as a CNA for the first 2 years post-graduation, she secured a hospital position. As soon as she secured the hospital CNA position, Andrea decided to design and have a house built. She stated, "I picked out the carpet to the wall color to the side to the ground . . . I was making \$18,000, and I had been able to save all of my CNA money. So, I dropped \$10,000 on the house." This purchase occurred nearly 10 years ago, and Andrea plans to pay off her mortgage in the next 5 years.

### ***Multiple Jobs***

Andrea is fiercely protective of her independence and maintaining her greatness. She introduced herself in this interview as a person with five jobs and one who believes that having multiple streams of income keeps her from being vulnerable and dependent.

Yeah, cuz I never had to [depend on someone] even with jobs, even with nonprofit world. The only reason I won't step out of [the hospital job] is because I'm still in nonprofit. If something goes down tomorrow, which it has in previous employment—I ain't gonna be without no income, you know what I am saying. I have to have multiple streams of income because if they said today, "Oh Andrea, your grant ran out." I'm not the type of person that likes to stress or struggle. So, I will not, I wouldn't put myself in a position . . . And I think that's the reason I won't put myself in a position to be vulnerable and depend solely upon anything, a man, a job, or anything.

## Defining Greatness

Andrea's pregnancy and becoming a mother motivated her to pursue greatness. Throughout the interview, Andrea kept saying, "I had to be great," "I have to be great," and "I am great." I listened not only for the motivation of her greatness but also for her rubric for measuring greatness. When Andrea discussed her accomplishments, she compared herself to her sister and the stereotype of teen moms.

At various times during the interview, Andrea compared her journey to her older sister, who did not experience teen pregnancy.

Even now, I have made it further than my, you know, sister, which I hate to say. I don't want to say further, we're just very different, and I took a different path, even though my path seems like it started me a little bit further back. Besides, you know, I made it great, you know, most people won't even know that I'm a teen mom, the way that I live, you know, with all of the things that I've accomplished and things like that.

My sister is four years older than me, and she had her first child when she was 28. But my sister always struggled, my sister just moved out of my parents' house, maybe five years ago, maybe four. She found it hard to stay on a job. I mean, she didn't have any responsibility, but she really struggled in life, and I don't know why. Don't get me to lying, but, you know, I don't know. She didn't finish school. You know, it's not that she's not great, she's great in her own way. And I think her greatness just started later because now that she has my niece, she is trying to be great. But it is almost like she's a teen mom in a sense because now she has this kid, and she still wasn't ready in a sense and still trying to figure out who she is and find her way. And we help her a lot.

I asked her what she considered the stereotype of a teen mom to be.

I think to me, the stereotype of a teen mom is somebody who still lives at home, who might have stuttered with their success in the world and might not be as far as people think that they should be.

I don't want to say that I know what an actual teen mom looks like, but I know the barriers that we have. And I know how challenging it could be to break down those barriers because had I not been in that CNA class, had I not had a supportive family, I would probably be staying at home with my mom, even at 30. I wouldn't have half the things I have because I wouldn't have had those doors and opportunities given, you know, opened. And I think sometimes, when we have children, having children in general is a lot. And then, it's easy, it's so easy for us to get discouraged because I've gotten discouraged so many times, but had I not kept going. And a lot of people don't have that keep going mentality because so many things beat us down in the world.

However, Andrea's ability to overcome barriers associated with teen pregnancy also makes her reluctant to share her story.

I typically don't tell my story because my story is not, it is not, it is nothing but God. And it is not what the norm would go through, is not what the normal teen parent would go through. And I think it is because of my support system and I also think it's because of my drive.

### **Discovering Herself**

Andrea's quest for greatness did not come without a personal cost. While Andrea was striving to seem great in the eyes of others, obtain their approval, and wash away the stigma of being a teen mom, she did not take the time to learn who she was as a person and who she wanted to become. The ways she has defined herself, such as homeowner, responsible adult, racially colorblind, and independent, are now creating cognitive dissonance as they conflict with the person Andrea is becoming.

And I would have had this responsibility just later in life. I never regret my son never. Would I have had him when I was 25 or 30? Yes. The same exact human being. I probably would even want to go through the same stuff, but I would have had him later in life just so that it wouldn't have been as much of a struggle as it has because it's been a struggle, even though I make it look good. It has been a struggle, and like I say, that's one reason why I don't tell my story—I was trying

to overshadow my struggles. Some people will look at, they won't look at the struggles that I really had, they say, oh you're driving a nice car, you live in a nice house, you sound like this, you have a great, you know, child's father so it's hard for people to really think that I struggled because it didn't look like it.

That's one reason why I say, too, the typical teen mom versus me. People won't think that [I'm the typical teen mom] because they think that I didn't have as much struggle, but, in reality, I did. It was just in different parts of my life.

### *Seeking the Approval of Others*

I asked Andrea how much of her striving for greatness was about proving she was not the stereotypical teen mom.

Ninety percent, 90%. Probably 95. Even now I still try to. That's just me as a person, I'm all about perception. I don't care what people think about me, but then in the same aspect, I care about what people think about me. I don't know, I'm all over the place. I don't know where I'm coming up with some of this stuff. But I think that knowing that I had my son, I knew that I had to rise above everything and go over and beyond. Even when I built the house, I was like, I'm not moving into an apartment, my son needs a yard. I'll be 30 in a few weeks and I have been in this horrible transition of trying to figure out my whole life and figure out who I am, who I have become, and how and who I really am because a lot of my life has been spent . . . I don't want to say proving things to others, but making sure that my son was okay and then in a sense proving things to others. I wanted to make sure that I did things so grand that nobody thought, even remembered that I was a teen mom. I wanted to do stuff, like, when I bought the house, nobody was gonna be like, "Oh, she's a teen mom who bought a house." No, they're just like, "Oh, she's a homeowner, she bought a home, she bought this beautiful home, her house is upstairs-downstairs, you know, I wanted everything to be so grand that you forgot about any of my struggles or flaws that y'all thought were going to make me or break me.

### *Homeowner*

As stated earlier, Andrea became a homeowner at 21 years old and planned to pay off her mortgage at 35. She became a homeowner as one way of erasing her status of being a teen mom. While Andrea is grateful to have a nice home in which to raise her

son, she laments not being able to have gone off to college like her peers and have the experience of living in a college dormitory. Andrea discussed how even though she had a good life in her early twenties, she wonders who she could have been if she left home to attend college and live in a dorm vs. becoming a mother and owning a home.

I won't say my experience was crap, but it would have been so different. I probably would have went off to college I had enough brains and scholarship money that I really could have went off to college. And that's what I mean as far as opportunities and things that would have looked different. Because just even in general, going to a university versus a technical school. That's what I could have seen myself doing had I not had my child. Was it different? Yeah. But is it anything I regret? I don't really think I regret it. It's just I know that my life would have been totally different had I experienced different stuff. So, when I say more so that ratchet side that I have accumulated is more so that person who I know I would have been had I had those experiences and exposure to live in a dorm. You know, because while everybody else was in a dorm, I had this house built in the cut, you know, so different.

### ***The Ratchet Side***

Andrea discussed how her ratchet side is a space where she can discover and explore various aspects of herself. Andrea specifically stated, "I don't want to say ratchet, I would say less professional. I consider this the ratchet Andrea, only because it's not my professional side, but typically when I go out, I'm more professional." When she said "ratchet," she pointed to body adornment, and when she said "professional," she touched her hair, which was straightened.

For the last decade of her life, Andrea made parenting and providing for her son a top priority. And because she felt like she had to do everything in a "grand" manner to escape the stigma of being a teen mom, Andrea carefully cultivated her "brand" so that she would be perceived as "great" and be respected by others. Now that her son is older

and she is entering her thirties, she is wondering who she could have been in her twenties if she had not been a teen mom. Thus, she is exploring her “ratchet” side.

My ratchet side is being the person who I wanted to be when I was in my early twenties . . . Yeah, and that’s the thing to being a teen mom and grinding the way that I have, I lost so many years, personal loss, because I had been grinding. I went got my associate’s degree. I done built a house. I probably had three new cars. Worked here, worked there building my whole brand, as you would say. And with all of that, I haven’t been able to actually enjoy my twenties. I don’t want to say *enjoy*. I haven’t been able to live the way that I would have lived had I not had a kid, had a whole bunch of responsibility.

It is clear that her child is her top priority; she just wants to know what her life would have been like without so much responsibility at a young age.

I take me being a mom very seriously. And I know that he’s looking up to me, and I want him to have the best and be the best. I know that there are certain things I just can’t do. It’s just simple things that I know in my earlier twenties, that I would have did and a lot of things that I set out on. When I was working for the hospital, I worked there for six years, three days a week. I worked every weekend for six years, every weekend at 21, every weekend 7 pm to 7 am, so I had no social life. I lost a lot of friends, I won’t say friends, associates, I lost a lot of associates and things like that because I was too busy making sure that: the bills were paid, my house was nice, my kid looked appropriate. So those are things, you know, had I not had a child, I probably would have been out every weekend for six years, turning up, you know, or doing other things that maybe had less meaning.

Andrea’s exploration with her ratchet side involves wearing a tongue ring, a nose ring, and getting tattoos. And her “wild phase” has not gone unnoticed by her son. She relayed a recent exchange between her and her son.

And so, my son was like, “I’m gonna tell all my friends that whenever you want to do stuff, you just go get piercings and tattoos.” I’m like, “What? Really?”

Andrea acknowledged that her son has noticed that “Mom’s having like a little crisis here.”

### *Racial Awareness*

Andrea discussed how developing racial awareness was a part of her finding herself.

Oh, I think I don’t want to say the African American [identity] played into it until I started working at [the hospital]. I really didn’t see race. I’m from [a rural area]. Before I moved down here, I didn’t know what Hispanic was, all I knew was White and Black. I was so naïve to race, and I didn’t really start experiencing racism or experiencing race issues, until I started working for [the hospital]. That was after I graduated high school. I was so naïve, I just thought everybody should treat me the way I treated them. My mom is mixed, you know, my Paw Paw was White, and so I’m just like, you know, I don’t really see color. And so, um, I don’t want to say that affected me until I got into my adult years. And by then I was too busy trying to overshadow [being a teen mom].

Andrea further noted that it was the teen mom aspect of how she was treated that was originally most salient to her.

Yeah, it wasn’t the race factor. Now knowing what I know now, I would probably, if I—it was done again, I would be like, “it’s because I’m Black.”

You know, it would be, it would be different. It wasn’t a race thing, it was more of a teen mom thing in my, in my encounter. Now, now I feel like it was definitely a race thing.

The catalyst for Andrea intentionally becoming aware of racial issues and educating herself was Black Lives Matter and other racially based social movements.

But I was not educated on the race thing, when I was 17, 18, you know, back then it wasn’t as prominent as things now. It’s all these movements, all this “Black Lives Matter,” social media has taken over.

In addition to reanalyzing her own experiences through the lens of race, she had to come to the reality that her son is a Black boy. And she could no longer be naïve to the dangers he faced by virtue of being a Black boy in America.

I think I'm still developing [my Black female identity]. And, um, I think I'm still developing it. I think it got stronger when, you remember the Trayvon Martin thing, and I think it got stronger then because I have an African American son. And then I had to start realizing like, "Oh, okay. We out here like that," like, "Oh, I have a Black African American son. My son's father is African American." And so I think that's kinda when I started to really be like, "Okay, you can no longer be naïve about certain situations, you have to wake up and educate your son and yourself because these are things that are going to happen to him, or these are things that we're growing up with, or that he's been raised in that you have to educate him on." So, because I can be a little naïve about race . . . only reason I feel like I'm naïve about race is because I feel like color doesn't matter to me, but umm, after the Trayvon Martin thing, I think that's when I started to try to learn.

Currently, Andrea is more cognizant of analyzing her experiences through a racial lens. As a director for a community-based non-profit organization, she often meets with various agencies to discuss their program. She relayed the following recent encounter.

And I was waiting. I was supposed to be speaking at a meeting. I was speaking at somebody's staff meeting about our program. And the person came out, twice, and she looked at me twice. Then the third time she came out there, she was, "Are you, Andrea?" And I'm like, "Yeah, I am." Not knowing that I was this young African American woman. So now it is starting to really be like, "Okay, you're an African American woman, they're not expecting you in this role. I'm still learning, I'm still learning, especially because I sometimes, want to be like a little ratchet because you see I gotta tongue ring, a nose ring, you know. Yes, sometimes I just want to be just a little ratchet.

### ***Independent***

Andrea takes great pride in being independent and self-reliant. While she recognizes her privilege in having the support of her family, she also recognizes that she

intentionally took actions to become financially independent at an early age. She did not qualify for social service programs such as food stamps due to her mother's income.

Therefore, she described herself as a "Billy Bad Ass" because she "got nothing handed to [her]" and her financial accomplishments are her own. However, the determination and resiliency it took to achieve her independence have also left her feeling isolated from other single moms and fearful of being vulnerable in romantic relationships.

### *Not Quite a Single Teen Mom*

Andrea discussed how she tries to connect with women who experienced teen motherhood and/or are single parents based on the daily demands of parenting.

Just being a parent is hard. Me and my son's father are really good co-parents, but at the end of the day, me and my son are at our house by ourselves, you know. And we do rotate in who gets him, but at the end of the day, I'm still running a lot with my child, you know. And I guess that's what we identify with one another, those everyday struggles, even if it's simple as trying to figure out something for dinner every day, or trying to make sure you're here, here, here. Make sure you're, you know, the kid is okay and all of that, so, I do identify with their, uh, with the struggles of just being a mom.

Andrea noted that it is hard for her to tell her story to the single moms that she works with in her program because while they have similar stories to each other, their stories are not similar to her story.

So that's another reason why, you know, it's hard for me to tell my story to them because it's not . . . a lot of them share similar stories due to the fact that their child's father's not there, they might have multiple kids by different people, and none of them are supportive, they might not be working, they might not have went to school, they have similarities.

Also, the single moms with whom she works generally become dismissive of her story because her son's father is very present in her and her son's lives. However, what they do not see is that Andrea wants a family, not just a co-parenting situation.

I'm more reserved with telling my story due to the fact they be like, "oh well, you got your son's father," but they don't really understand that yes, I do have him, but at the same time I . . . we don't have him. Because everybody, not everybody . . . My goal. My personal goal was to always have a family. I just can imagine us being so different and so much more helpful if, if he lived with us or we were actually working on a relationship and building together. I had built a lot by myself, you know what I am saying. And what I mean by myself, I mean as far as financially, I have built a lot financially by myself. And I just think about having extra income, or you know having that extra support when I don't want to get up in the morning and take him to school, [his father could] take him to school this morning, but my son's dad lives in another city, so he's not that big of a support when it comes to things like that.

Andrea also has difficulty relating to her own friends who have children and/or were teen moms due to her positive co-parenting relationship with her son's father.

I'm telling you, even with my friends who have kids. They don't have good baby fathers, their [children's] fathers are just crap. And so even then sometimes I feel like I can't talk to them because sometimes they be like, "Oh, well, he don't do that. Well, you know he ain't doing that. At least you got such and such. At least you got his help. At least you got."

Even like my good best friends are like . . . One of them has two kids, and both of them are by the same father, but he just does not do anything. Barely come see them, the kids don't know him. And she's like, I know you don't know because [your child's] dad is not like that. Or I know you don't know because you've always had that support. You know, it's like they don't identify with me. That's why I keep it under wraps because it's kind of like, "Okay, it's a little different, but I still do deal with some of the same things," but they don't see it.

Andrea went on to note that she is "all about how people perceive [her]." However, other moms and her friends are only seeing her success and not her struggles.

I asked Andrea if she felt lonely not having a support group of women who experienced teen pregnancy.

No. No, not really. I guess because now, now where I am, so many other people want to talk to me about other things. So, I still do talk to a lot of people, but some of them want to know how to be a doula, some want to know how to buy a home. Like a girl came last week, she's doing a PhD program, and she wanted to sit with me to talk about how to buy a home. So, it's because I'm talking about so many other different things, so many other aspects of my life, that it's like, oh well, the teen mom, I don't have to live off that anymore.

### ***Romantically Involved***

Andrea and her son's father broke off their relationship when their son turned two. She discussed how they were both young and trying to figure out who they were independent of each other.

When we turned almost 20, we kind of went our separate ways, things were different. We had almost now a 2-year-old. We were both trying to navigate our lives independently. And it was no longer conducive for us to be together just because we were trying to figure out everything on our own. It was almost like we had known how to be a parent, but we didn't know how to be individuals because we had him so young.

Andrea has gone on to have other romantic relationships with other men. One of her relationships lasted six years. However, Andrea struggles in romantic relationships because she does not want to be vulnerable, and her romantic partners perceive her independence as masculine.

Andrea discussed that one of the biggest reasons she believes her mother was upset with her teen pregnancy was because she did not want Andrea to struggle.

It was like, you know, get established first, you know, have your family, make sure that you have a good husband, so you don't have to struggle on your own. Because it's nice to have a house, and it's nice to have a house on your own, but it's not nice when all of the bills are coming out of your pocket.

However, Andrea has become so self-reliant that “most of the guys that [she has dated], they have said to [her] that [she acts] like a man” because she is such a strong provider.

Andrea noted that

I have become so independent on my own that somebody can't come in here and tell me shit. A man cannot come in and tell me anything. Don't tell me nothing. You know that takes, if you got a strong man, you can't tell them that. And that was the issue. I had been in a relationship for six years, and we even had lived together for a little while and I'm so [independent], I'm like, “Well, what you gonna tell me? Nothing. Your money don't pay for nothing up in here.”

Andrea admitted that she wants to be in a relationship where she does not have to be the strong one. However, she has developed a protective wall, which “came quickly” because she was “paying all [her] bills on [her] own.” And she will not let down that wall stating that “And because I can't depend, I will not, you know. And I won't bring myself to be vulnerable.”

### **Hopes for Her Future**

Andrea noted that she had accomplished all of her goals for her twenties, but it does not look the way she intended.

Especially when I thought by 30 I would have this, this, and this, and I do have that. It just doesn't look how I thought it would look, especially, thinking I was gonna be married definitely by 30, you know. You think about things and just things that

you want. And so, I'm definitely having to re-look at myself and figure out who I am because I'm a different person.

Andrea described how she wanted marriage and happiness in her future.

### ***Marriage and Family***

Andrea relayed that her goal is to marry her son's father. She sees how integrated their families are, how well they co-parent their son, and gushes about how "amazing" her son's father is.

My son's dad is amazing. He is amazing, and we don't always see eye to eye. But he's amazing. He's an amazing person. His family is amazing. You wouldn't know the difference between my mom versus his mom with me. They have always been nothing but supportive. Me and her even to this day, you know, she stays at my house, I stay at her house, we're just thick as thieves. His whole family has embraced me and taken me in. They still want us to get married eventually and that's my goal, hopefully, in the future. But we're not on some ways, but me and him are still really good friends. And I think even more, we're very good at co-parenting. And it took us a while, I mean, I won't say that we haven't had our struggles because we have. But overall, we have just made it work, and we understand that even with our emotions that our common goal is our child. [Our child has] had a good life, our son has had an amazing life for us to have started out where we did.

However, even if she does not marry her son's father, she stated that she just wants to be in a happy relationship.

### ***Happiness***

When I asked her what happiness looked like to her, she shifted away from describing a romantic relationship to describing an overall lifestyle of ease.

I don't know what happiness looks like it will probably look different for me now to 40. Happy might be going home, sitting in the bed, but I hope to hopefully have my house paid off because I want to pay off my house. I want to use it as income.

I want to get the house paid off. That's my main goal. So that when I don't want to do something, I don't do it. I'll probably piecemeal jobs together. Just to, you know, pay the little stuff, because you know, what we go to work for now is to pay bills. When you don't have bills, then you know, it's no actual point of being locked into something, you know.

Andrea just wants to slow down in her thirties. After working so intensely to accomplish her goals and prove her greatness, Andrea is ready for a change of pace. However, she discussed the possibility of going back to school for another degree. But, overall, Andrea's goal for her future is to give herself the time and freedom to figure out who she is and who she wants to become.

### **Tiffany**

Tiffany is a young woman in her late twenties. She was very enthusiastic about participating in this research and sharing her story. She also enjoys sharing her story because she wants to inspire other young women who experienced teen pregnancy.

Tiffany's story is one of achieving her passion for studying and educating others on business and finances. She is a business owner who holds a master's in business administration (MBA), and she is a single mom to two boys. While Tiffany is very self-composed and meticulous in her business endeavors, she has had to deal with uncertainty and heartache in raising her children. Thus, her story is one of quiet strength and perseverance.

### **Discovering She Was Pregnant**

Tiffany was 17 years old when she discovered she was pregnant at the beginning of her senior year in high school. She described how her family supported her when she

revealed she was pregnant, how she redirected her dreams, and how becoming a teen mother saved her life.

### ***Family Support***

Tiffany was at the start of a relationship with a man who was six years older than her when she became pregnant. She was in disbelief that she was pregnant so soon by a guy she “didn’t really like” and who had “stalked” her before the relationship. The first person she called for support was her brother. Then she told her mom and grandparents.

Well, I just didn’t believe it. The guy that I was with, first of all, he was six years older than me. Second of all, we were only together for like three months before I got pregnant. So, it was like everything was fresh and, really, I didn’t really, like him like that if that makes sense. Like there was so much red flags. So many things. Like the whole reason we started talking is that he practically stalked me. So that should have been red flag number one. And yet, here I am. So, I was like, “this can’t be, this can’t be it.” So, the first person, I called was my brother. He lives in New York.

I called him while I was doing the home pregnancy test. Because you know we’re not super close because we live in two different states, but we grew up together. And anytime, we talk, you know, we talk about stuff like this. So, I felt comfortable talking about it. So he was the first person, and my mom was the second.

I know I was most nervous telling my mom. But I called her at work one day because I had just went to the [obstetrician]. I just took a pregnancy test and said positive, and I was like, this can’t be right. So, I went to the [obstetrician], and I told my mom that they just so happened to test and I was [pregnant]. Even though that’s really why I went. And she didn’t really say, like, I didn’t get in trouble per se. But it was just like, “Oh, wow.”

Yeah, she was just shocked. And she was like, “Yeah. Okay, we’ll talk about it when I get home.”

Tiffany could not really remember her family's initial reaction stating, "That's how non-eventful it was." She noted that her family's "non-eventful" reaction might be due to her not being the first teen mom in the family.

Oh, talking about family history and generational things. So, my great grandma, she had her first child at 15. So, when I came along, it was like nobody could really say anything to me. Because it was nothing new.

### *New Dreams*

Tiffany always had dreams of being a chef. She discussed how she received her acceptance letter a week before she found out she was pregnant.

I was excited. I was happy. I was like, oh yay, because I've always wanted to be a chef my whole life. When I was five, I would make my own little restaurant at my grandparents, I would type up a menu. I would ask my grandmother what she was cooking, type up a menu based around that, and then pass it around at dinner, go around collecting my pennies and dimes and stuff. And like ran a little restaurant. So, I would always watch the food channel like 24/7, like that was the only channel I would watch. I went on the [culinary college] tour. Like, you know, it was just—that's what I wanted to do.

However, her dream of being a chef was redirected when she discovered she was pregnant.

I got accepted into [culinary college] because I wanted to be a chef. And of course, that's in [a distant city]. So, I was like, well, there is no way I can go now seeing that I'm going to have a baby, I don't want to be all the way in [a distant city]. And I don't want to leave the kid for my mom to take care of because that is also a generational thing. I'm trying to break generational, you know. I was left with my grandparents, you know. I want to be the one to raise them.

Therefore, even though Tiffany was “sad” about choosing not to go to culinary school, it was important to her to raise her son, and she felt most empowered to do that in a familiar environment surrounded by family.

### ***Overcoming Suicidal Ideations***

While Tiffany presents herself as a happy and joyful person, she is also a person who has had to overcome tremendous emotional pain. She attributes not only her academic and career success but her very life to choosing to be a teen mom.

Well, honestly, I feel like having my son so young literally saved my life. Because I had been suicidal, and I had attempted to kill myself multiple times up until that point. And then I’m like, okay, now I have a little life that depends on me, so I need to be here for that. So, I feel like it saved my life. Also, I feel like it gave me more oomph, it gave me something more to look towards. So, I don’t think, like, if I didn’t have my kids and I’m just speaking from, you know, what if, like, I have no idea. But I just feel like if I didn’t have my oldest son when I did, I probably wouldn’t be where I am today. I feel like it gave me more drive to get things done. I had to be better with money, I had to have jobs all throughout college. Like I had to do well in school. And I feel like it taught me valuable lessons upfront vs. people who don’t have that.

### **Interactions with Secondary School-Based Personnel**

Tiffany discovered she was newly pregnant at the beginning of her senior year of high school. And because she graduated in January, no one in her school knew she was pregnant until she attended the graduation ceremony that June.

Yeah, so, um, I was pregnant when I was 17. So, it was my senior year. I found out that I was pregnant around September or so. And luckily, I graduated school in January. So, by the time I was starting to show, like, nobody could tell.

### ***Attending a Career-Oriented Magnet School***

Tiffany attended a career-oriented magnet school her senior year, where she focused on culinary arts. Before her pregnancy, she had already taken the initiative and arranged to complete her courses her senior year in the fall semester.

[The career-oriented magnet school] is like a vocational school . . . So, if you are there just to take like culinary, I was in culinary, or auto mechanics or whatever, then you only go for half the day. So, I was like, “Can I just go ahead and take all my classes there?” So, I think I had an English and Math class, instead of staying a whole ‘nother semester and taking it at [my district high school]. So, I had to go through an approval process. I had to go to the principal directly and get approval there and get approval here, and then they finally said, “Yeah, that’s fine.”

Attending that particular career-oriented magnet school allowed her to manage her morning sickness so that it would not affect her schooling.

I do know that I had morning sickness really bad. But luckily, I was going to [the career-oriented magnet school] at the time. So, I was driving myself. And luckily, they allowed me to take all my classes at [the career-oriented magnet school] to finish up the culinary program and then take my last two core classes. So, with that being said, [the career-oriented magnet school] started a little later than where I would have been going, so that helped with the morning sickness. I had time to get myself together before I went to school.

### ***Secondary School’s Attitude Toward Teen Pregnancy***

Tiffany did not tell any school-based personnel that she was pregnant, and she noted that graduating early allowed her to attend school without showing. Tiffany stated that she did not know why she did not tell any school-based personnel that she was pregnant. I asked her how she thought her experience would have been if she had been showing while she was in school. Tiffany replied,

I don't know if it would have been a horrible experience. Because like I, so many other people were [pregnant]. So, there probably would have been more support. I feel like there probably would have been more, like, camaraderie if I was in school.

The high school that was experiencing multiple teen pregnancies was her district high school. This was the high school she would have attended the second semester of her senior year if she had not arranged to graduate early. I asked Tiffany how the school responded to the increase in teen pregnancies.

I have no idea. I just know, umm, like before I got pregnant, like there were people who got pregnant way before me. Like somebody got pregnant in eighth or ninth grade. So that kind of, like, set the precedent. But, you know, it made it not as shameful for everybody who came afterwards. If that makes sense.

Because I remember when the other girl was pregnant, like, eighth or ninth grade, whatever year it was, everybody was like, "Oh my gosh, do you believe such and such is pregnant." You know it's like people talking. But, by the time, you know, I came along, everybody else that was pregnant with me, it wasn't like "oh my gosh," it was just like, "oh ok." That sounds so horrible. But I feel like that's how it was, like nobody made it a huge deal.

When I asked her specifically how she thought school-based personnel would respond to her pregnancy, she stated,

I never thought about that. I think part of the reason was that I was going to [the career-oriented magnet school] back and forth. I'd go to class and drive home. I wasn't the one to do a whole lot of socializing. Actually, I didn't do sports, I didn't do extracurriculars.

### ***Graduation***

Even though Tiffany technically completed school in the fall semester of her senior year, the graduation ceremony was the following June. By the time of the

graduation ceremony, her pregnancy was showing. Tiffany went to the graduation ceremony not to walk with her class but to quietly obtain her diploma. Tiffany described her interactions with a member of the school-based personnel and her classmates when she went to the graduation ceremony to obtain her diploma.

So, it was a big shock when I came back to go to graduation, and of course, by that time, I was like, way out there. And everybody was like, "Oh my gosh, Tiffany, what happened?" But it wasn't, wasn't too horrible of an experience.

The only thing I remember is when I went back for graduation at that point, the lady was like, obviously I was showing, "are sure you don't want to walk." Because I did not walk for graduation. Not because I was pregnant, but just because I didn't really feel the need to. I wanted my diploma, and I can head on my way. So, I came in like jeans and a T-shirt. And she told me that I had to stay until after the ceremony was over to get the diploma. So, she was like, are you sure you don't want to walk, and I was like, "I'm sure." She was like, "Well, there's seven of you." Talking about people that were pregnant. She was like, "Don't feel bad." I'm like, no, it's not about that.

It was a lady that was organizing the graduation. I don't remember what her role was, who she was, or whatever, but I just know that there was a lady that was holding my diploma that I needed. And so, she was like, "you can walk there's like seven of you that are pregnant that are walking." I don't know what made her say that.

Going back thinking about it, like, I don't know why that was her first thought like I was just ashamed to walk because I was pregnant.

I asked Tiffany how she felt about the school-based personnel's comment.

I think my only thought was like, I just want to get my diploma and go. I don't want to stay and wait. I didn't feel ashamed or anything about it.

I probed further to understand why she decided to go to the graduation to obtain her diploma when she could have gone to the school the following week to get the diploma.

Because that's what I was going for just to pick it up. I was like they will have them here, let me just go ahead and pick it up. I didn't think about going way later. I still didn't think about that until you just said it and I'm like, dang, I could have just did that.

### **Impact of Community and Social Resources**

Tiffany was proactive in finding support for her pregnancy through community-based non-profit organizations and social resources. She stated, "I feel like as soon as I found that I was pregnant, I tried to get as many resources as possible. So, you know, WIC, and stuff."

#### ***Social Services***

Tiffany relied on several social service programs at various times to support her through difficult times. When she first found out she was pregnant, she was connected to a social service program.

It was a program for mothers that were young and at risk, you know, for depression, anxiety, and stuff. So, that way, after you have the baby, you have a support system, you know, for post-partum depression and that stuff. [The service provider] was the one that was like, you can do this, you can do this, and plugged me into everything.

One of the programs she was plugged into was a community-based non-profit organization.

#### ***Community-Based Non-Profit Organization***

Tiffany discussed how she was connected to the community-based non-profit organization through a social service program. She joined the program "pretty close" to when she discovered she was pregnant. In addition to gaining helpful information and

support from regularly attending the teen mom program, she was also able to connect with other pregnant and parenting teens.

When Tiffany started attending programs hosted by the community-based non-profit organization, she discovered that the nurse at her doctor's office was a doula as well as a "teacher" for a community-based non-profit organization that supported pregnant and parenting teens. She noted how it was "really cool" to be supported by someone who was a nurse, doula, and affiliated with a community-based non-profit organization that specialized in supporting pregnant and parenting teens.

### **Experiences with Her Son's Fathers**

After discovering she was pregnant, Tiffany redirected her life so that she could raise her child herself. However, after leaving an abusive relationship with her first son's father, he tried to keep her away from their son. She felt like he treated her as though she was just a "surrogate" who carried a child for him and his mother. Tiffany had to enter a legal fight to get her son back.

#### ***Meeting Her Son's Father***

Tiffany's oldest son's father was six years older than her. When they met, she was 17, and he was 23. She described how it felt like her son's father "stalked" her before their meeting because he found her picture and number in his friend's phone and started calling her and then coming by her job. Tiffany was not initially interested in her oldest son's father because she was currently in a relationship. Tiffany discussed how the age of her oldest son's father was appealing because she enjoyed partying and he could legally purchase alcohol.

Despite her insisting that she was not romantically interested in him, Tiffany's oldest son's father remained interested in her romantically and continued to come by her job. At one point, he came by her job while Tiffany's boyfriend was visiting her. Tiffany's boyfriend became upset and pushed her. Tiffany said that it was a light push, but she lost her footing and fell. When she fell, her oldest son's father proceeded to beat her boyfriend violently. Tiffany ended her relationship that night, stating that she told her now ex-boyfriend, "You put your hands on me, and I don't tolerate that. I don't care how mad you are, that should not even be an idea."

Even though Tiffany was horrified by the violence, she noted that "my oldest son's dad was like the knight in shining armor. All of that." Tiffany went on to describe that her first son's father continued to pursue her, stating that "he [kept] calling and stuff because he knew that I was single because I broke up with my boyfriend."

I asked Tiffany when she decided that he was her boyfriend. Tiffany replied, "Well, when you spend a lot of time with a person, you know. Not sure exactly how it happened." She did add that "we talked for like a month or two before we made it official." They kept their age difference hidden from their families throughout their relationship by saying she was older to his family and that he was younger to her family. And they kept their age differences disguised until she ended the relationship.

### ***Living with Her Son's Father***

Three months after making it "official" with her oldest son's father, Tiffany discovered she was pregnant. I asked her how he reacted to the pregnancy, and she stated, "He wasn't upset or anything that I remember." Her first son's father supported her

throughout her pregnancy, drove her to the hospital, and was present while she gave birth.

After Tiffany gave birth, her first son's father moved in with Tiffany and her mother to assist with caring for their newborn son. She noted that it was not an immediate move-in but rather a gradual move-in because he was staying up at night with the baby. Her mother was okay with him moving in because it eased the level of help that she needed to provide.

Tiffany and her first son's father lived with her mother until her son was nearly a year old. She decided to move after her mother claimed her son as a dependent on her taxes.

We got into it about who was going to file him on their taxes. I was working and stuff, and I take care of him. But she said, "you live in my house." And then she said you can go ahead and [file your son on your taxes]. And then I did [filed my son on my taxes], then it came back because she had already [filed my son on her taxes]. That's the only big event that I remember.

She described how the combination of the tax incident and her mother saying "you should do this and you should do that" led her to decide to get her own place. Therefore, Tiffany, her son, and her son's father moved into their own place.

### *Leaving Her Son's Father*

Tiffany lived with her son's father for approximately two years. Her oldest son's paternal grandmother had moved in with them. Tiffany described the situation as emotionally and physically abusive because his mother undermined her parenting and her

boyfriend became abusive after they moved out of her mother's house. I asked her about her break-up experience. Tiffany replied,

Umm, for me it was freeing at first because I was going to a therapist for really bad depression because he was very emotionally and verbally bad. He had put his hands on me and he had tried to choke me at one point.

Anyways, I was going to a therapist and she met him once. And she was like, "You need to not be in this relationship. This is not good; this is not healthy for you." And it took me maybe like a year or two after she said that to actually make a move.

Tiffany told her son's father that she was leaving and went to stay with her grandparents for a couple of weeks until she could find an apartment. She decided to let her son stay with his father and paternal grandmother while she searched for an apartment.

[My son] stayed with [his father] because I was like, you know, let me get my apartment, you know, before he moved in with me because he has a bed over there, he has all that stuff over there already, his toys, everything. So, I was like, let me get an apartment first, so that way I can just move all of his stuff in.

Tiffany planned to have full custody of her son and allow her first son's father to visit with him. However, what initially started as an "amicable co-parenting" situation within a couple of months turned into a "horrible" situation.

At first, it was all fine and dandy. He'd be like, "Oh, let me come get [my son]," and I'm like, "Okay, fine." And then I would take him over there, we had a really amicable co-parenting existence. Like everything was good. And I don't know what happened. But he flipped the switch. On April 1st of that year is when he told me, "don't worry about [my son], you will never see him again."

### *Getting Her Son Back*

Tiffany endured eight months of going through the legal system to get her son back. She believed that her first son's father was keeping her son away from her as a way to retaliate against her breaking up with him. Tiffany detailed her ordeal.

When I broke up with my oldest son's dad he went, boohoo crying to my mom or whomever, I don't know if he was really crying, but he went over there to try to get her to talk to me into being back with him. And my grandpa was there and he was like, "Well, good luck with that. 'Cause once Tiffany is done, she's done."

It was crazy. Well see, he had came to my house one time without my son and he was knocking on the door trying to get in. And I didn't answer, I'm like, my son is not with you, like, we have nothing to talk about. So, I guess maybe that's part of what flipped the switch to him like, "Oh, she really don't want to be with me anymore." And he started acting crazy. So, when he said that, first of all, my first thought was, is it an April Fool's joke? It was April 1st. Like, "Is this an April Fool's joke? Are you kidding me? Are you joking?"

So, he's like, "No, I'm serious." So that day, I went down to the courthouse, and started the process to file for custody. Because I'm like, what you are not going to do is make it so that I can't spend time with my son. So, unfortunately, it took eight months to finally get a temporary order through the court system, and then that's how I was able to see my son again. Because he wouldn't answer the phone. When I would go over there, he wouldn't answer the door. Like I couldn't see my son at all. I couldn't interact with my son at all.

I couldn't see him, because I would go over there, nobody would answer. I even went over there with the police, and the police were like the only thing we can do is a well child check. So, they went in to see him to make sure he was okay and then came down and told me he was okay and then I had to leave. And then he told the apartment complex that I was causing issues. So, then I was banned from the apartment complex. It was a big thing.

So, because of how he was acting and everything that had happened. Because he was not taking him to his doctor's appointments. I had got him into pre-K. He didn't take him to pre-K. He didn't do anything with him. So, the court ordered that I have sole legal and physical custody and he just had visitation. And that was on October 31st. I remember it was Halloween. As soon as I went and got my son, I took him to go get a costume so we could go trick or treating.

### *Co-Parenting Struggles*

Tiffany redirected her life so that she could be the one to raise her son; however, co-parenting, even with a court order, has proven to be difficult. Tiffany described her struggles in raising her son in a situation where she often feels powerless. She stated that “[My first son’s father] still makes my life difficult. Like, it is a never-ending thing.”

Tiffany and her oldest son’s father have court arrangements for visitation purposes. And because the custody transfers are court-ordered to occur at her son’s school or a public restaurant, she does not know where her son goes when he is not with her. Tiffany stated that “Like I used to try to call and text like “Hey, how is [my son] doing?” But I never got a response. So, I just don’t do it anymore.”

I asked Tiffany how she is emotionally handling this co-parenting arrangement. She replied, “I mean, at this point, it’s like, you know, I’ve been through it so long, I’m just numb to it. I don’t like when he goes over there, though, because you can tell a whole attitude shift every time he comes back, and then also they talk bad about me.” She went on to discuss how she is constantly in court enforcing custody, childcare, and child support issues. With exasperation, Tiffany stated that her oldest son’s father “especially wants to make my life a living hell, for whatever reason, I guess from breaking up or whatever. That it’s just, it’s crazy.”

Even though she has an extremely difficult co-parenting situation, Tiffany did discuss that she had a good relationship with her son. However, even though her son is “a really smart kid and very strong kid,” she recognizes that her co-parenting situation has been traumatic for him. Tiffany has obtained mental health care for her son to help him

work through the trauma of his father not letting him see her for eight months and his anxiety with the custody transfers.

I have him going to a therapist. I got him a therapist because all of that stuff was traumatic. Like I was the only person that he knew, you know, as far as like interacting with him—his dad really didn't pay him any attention really. I was always the one like playing with him and doing stuff with him and teaching him stuff. And then for him to be taken away like that, it was traumatic. Like the first time he had to go back to his dad's house according to the court order, he was in tears because he was like he didn't know if he would see me again. So, I have him going to a therapist, he has anxiety issues too.

### **Postsecondary Educational Attainment**

Tiffany was determined to not only raise her child herself but also get a college education. She decided to redirect her dream of attending culinary school and attend the local community college and study business. Tiffany went on to get her bachelor's degree and her MBA. When she was attaining her bachelor's degree she was experiencing an abusive relationship, and her son was taken away from her by his father. However, despite these horrific circumstances, Tiffany persevered.

#### ***Community College***

A week after being accepted into culinary school, Tiffany discovered she was pregnant. Therefore, she decided to attend the local community college and redirect her culinary dreams into raising her child and attaining a business degree.

I was sad and I was devastated. I'm not going all the way to [a different city] with a new baby. I guess I am the type of person where I look for the good in stuff. I was like, I can't do culinary, so let me just do my second love which is business. So, at that point it was too late to apply anywhere because of application deadlines.

So, I was like, let me just go to [the community college]. I went up there and applied. And it's funny because the lady, the admissions person, she was like, "What are you doing here?" because my GPA was really good. She's like, "Why are you here?" And I was like, "Well, you know, I decided to study business, and I'm pregnant. So, here I am."

So, when I was at [the community college], I was always online. The only thing I didn't do online was P.E.

It was great for me because, you know, I was breastfeeding, and I would do my work while he was sleeping and when he woke up, I would play with him and stuff. So, you know it taught me time management as well.

My goal was to get my associate's and then transfer to get my bachelor's because I always wanted to, eventually, like I wasn't going to stop at an associate. But at [the community college], they kept giving me the runaround. So, I eventually transferred out one credit away from an associate's because I was like I'm not staying a whole 'nother semester for one credit which is literally like a P.E., I'm like "whatever, good bye."

### ***Four-Year College***

After approximately two years at the local community college, Tiffany transferred to a four-year college and took online courses. This was also the time when her first son's father decided to keep her son away from her.

At that point, we broke up and I moved out to my own apartment. And he decided he wanted to keep my son from me. So, I went like 8 months without seeing my son. So, during that eight months was like two semesters. And I was just failing everything because I just couldn't get my mind going. Like I was just in a really bad place at that point . . . It was horrible. It was horrible. I was in a very dark place. I was failing all my classes.

### ***Master of Business Administration***

A year after graduating from the four-year college, Tiffany, now a mom of two young boys, decided to get her Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree. It was

important for her to go to a program that offered in-person classes so that she could have an alternate experience to online classes

When I graduated . . . I only took a year off in between my bachelor's and my master's.

That was in the classroom. I did all of my undergraduate studies online, so I didn't have any relationships with the professors. I didn't have any relationships with my peers. So, I'm like this time I want to be in the classroom so that way I can form these relationships and build these relationships. So, I was doing it after I got off of work from 6 PM to 9:30 PM.

[My] grandparents and my mom would tag team watching [my children]. I was so grateful to have them because that's why I was able to do it.

### **Becoming a Business Owner**

Tiffany has had a lifelong passion for business, finances, and culinary arts. When she redirected her life to focus on business and finances, she explored receiving unemployment financial assistance while volunteering for a non-profit, simultaneously working multiple low-paying jobs, being an executive assistant, being an executive, to now being a business owner. She explored these various forms of employment, all while attaining multiple higher education degrees and raising her two children.

### ***Occupational Explorations***

Tiffany discussed how she worked various jobs to support herself and her children while she was in school. She described how she used government and charitable programs to provide for her family during times of struggle.

So, I worked pretty much all through school. When I was in undergrad, I did an internship at [a non-profit organization] where I was a volunteer coordinator. That was while I was getting my unemployment because I was like, since I'm getting

unemployment let me do a lot of volunteering stuff for the community. So, I was volunteering a lot for [a non-profit organization] and that's how I got on as an intern there. Then after that I started working at thrift a store as a cashier and worked my way up there to where I was assistant manager by the time I left. I think I was [at the thrift store] for almost three years, and even during that time I was working at [another job] like as a seasonal thing. So, I was working two jobs with two kids. I think I had my youngest son at that time too.

I struggled a lot. I was using government programs. I never got Section 8 (a federally funded housing voucher). I don't know why because I applied back when I was pregnant with my oldest son I still haven't been called back. Even to this day I still haven't gotten a phone call. But, you know, just using like food stamps, WIC. Toys for Tots, like one year I had to do that because I didn't have any money. I was using my student loan checks and my tax refund checks to pay up our rent just so we can have a place to stay. Then I just figured out everything else after that.

Tiffany had the goal of being an executive assistant. Upon attaining her bachelor's degree, she found employment in an office setting. However, when Tiffany attained the role of being an assistant, she decided that was not the role she wanted. Tiffany decided she wanted to be the executive.

I worked at the thrift store [for almost three years], that's when I graduated with my bachelor's. And at that point, I got a job at an office. I call it a glorified receptionist because I was a receptionist, but I was doing a lot of different other things. I was practically one of the assistant project managers, but at the front desk. That's pretty much what it was. All throughout undergrad, I was like, "Oh, I want to be an administrative assistant and work my way up to executive assistant. That's what I want my corporate experience to be. I just want to be like a CEO's right-hand girl like that was my whole thing.

I got that first role [as an executive assistant], and I was like, this can't be life. I was like this is not for me. So, then I saw the HR (Human Resources) lady. And I was like, "Oh, I like what she's doing." I started asking her questions and she was giving me some tips and things I needed to do. So, then I was able to get a job as a payroll and HR assistant. And then with that position, I stayed and worked my way up to HR specialist. And then, when I left there, I got a job as HR BP (Human Resources Business Partner), which is like a step below [Business Partner], so it's like director level.

I asked Tiffany what happened that changed her perception of herself as an executive assistant to an executive.

I think it was like once I got into corporate, and I saw how people respected me and respected my opinion. I was like a leader without being a manager, like I was leading people. And I guess that just rose my confidence. I was negotiating raises and titles and all this stuff and then probably also just being in the MBA program, probably helped with that mind shift too.

### *Taking an Entrepreneurial Leap*

After achieving an executive-level position, Tiffany started to reflect on her true interest: personal finance.

I worked [as a corporate executive] for some time. And then I was like, Tiffany, you know you have more money magazines, than you have HR magazines. During that time I was in that position, I had started my [finance] blog. That was December 2017. And so, I would go to my day job and then I would go home and write on my blog or read about money. I've always had a fascination with personal finance.

After determining that her real passion was personal finance, Tiffany decided to quit her corporate job and start her own business as a personal finance blogger and consultant. Tiffany described how she had the support of her family in her entrepreneurial endeavor.

Yeah, so they've been very supportive, especially when they see me trying to do something because I'm always trying to do something. When I quit my job for instance. My grandma's like, "If you ever need any help, just let us know. It's not like you're just sitting on your butt not doing anything." They know how I am. I'm not the type, like I don't ask for help. I don't. Like I always find a way to make things work.

However, her most recent boyfriend was not in favor of her quitting her job and becoming an entrepreneur. Tiffany ended the relationship, stating, “I made the decision [to break-up] because he was just very negative and controlling and just didn’t want me to go higher.”

### ***The Sky’s the Limit***

After hearing of Tiffany’s journey of being a teen mom, attaining multiple academic degrees, leaving abusive relationships, and becoming an entrepreneur, I asked her how being a teen mom affects how she presents herself to others.

I don’t think it does. Like, even when I was younger, I was always comfortable. But um, yeah, it never really bothered me to begin with. You know, society in general, you know, has this stigma like, “Oh, you’re a teen mom, you’re probably not gonna do much of anything.” And I guess maybe part of it is me wanting to prove people wrong. So, I’m just like super overachiever at this point. But it’s also so I can be an example to [others who are experiencing or have experienced teen pregnancy and parenting]. It’s like, you don’t have to settle for the status quo just because you have a child, like, sky’s the limit.

### **Brooke**

Brooke is a young woman in her late teens. She has a quiet confidence and is actively navigating what it means to be a legal adult, how to parent a toddler, and how to cope with mental health struggles. Brooke’s teen pregnancy and parenting experiences began approximately two years ago at the time of this interview, and thus, are recent. Before her pregnancy, Brooke had recently been expelled from school at the beginning of her senior year. She was planning to live a “reckless life,” but then she discovered she was pregnant.

Brooke's story is one of being determined to succeed to be a role model to her son. Brooke has big dreams for her son, and she feels that the best way for him to accomplish his goals in life is to model goal accomplishment. The first goal that she was determined to accomplish was graduating high school. This interview chronicles her journey of becoming a fiercely determined young mother.

### **Discovering She Was Pregnant**

Brooke found out she was pregnant days before her 17th birthday. What she initially thought were allergy symptoms were actually pregnancy symptoms. Brooke described how she felt a mixture of fear and disbelief when she discovered that she was pregnant.

I was really scared and I was really emotional. I remember I didn't go to the doctor because I thought I was pregnant. I went to the doctor because I thought I had allergies. I was like, "Is nausea a part of allergies?" And they just looked at me like I was crazy. So, I was like, "Well, could you pregnancy test me?" And then they came out, and my like pediatrician doctor told me, "You're pregnant." And he was like typing, he wasn't even looking at me. He was like, "I'm gonna prescribe you some allergy medicine. I'm gonna send you to an OB-GYN because we don't accept pregnant patients." [Brooke made a confused face indicating her confusion at the doctor's statement]. I was like what is this. So, I am freaking out.

I told my dad first since he had drove me to my appointment and I remember coming out and he was like what's wrong with you, and I was like "they say I'm pregnant." He was like maybe they got it wrong. And I was like, yeah, and I was really like in denial. I was like, yeah they just got it wrong, and I rode all the way home. I told my grandma that they said I was pregnant, but my dad said, you know, they might have got it wrong. And she was like doctors don't usually get stuff like that wrong. She was like they could have. But I was like, take me to the [medical facility for women] because for some reason I just felt like [the medical facility for women] was going to be more smarter than the test at my pediatrician.

As Brooke requested, her grandmother took her to get a second pregnancy test. She discovered that she was three weeks pregnant.

So, I went up there and the clinic was starting to close. I was telling her like I need y'all to take this test and she was like, it's the same test but we can, we can take another one. I don't know what type of face I had made because she was like "It's alright, we will take one real fast." And I said, "OK." And we went back there.

And she came back, she came back [very] fast. So that's how I know it had to just be like, drop positive, cause she kind of went there and she typed up that confirmation of pregnancy. When I saw that piece of paper and it had my name, date of birth, the date, tested positive, estimated due date, when I saw that on that paper, I folded it up, I walked out, and when I got them double doors, I hit the floor like, like boohoo heaving crying. And they came out and they were like, "Ma'am please come back in, it's really hot out here, and it's okay." I was heaving like, "How am I going to tell my mother?"

They just told me you know to breathe and it will be okay and that, you know, I will tell her when it's the right time and she's not gonna hate me, stuff like that. They were talking to me. They were just trying to keep me calm cuz I think I was low key about to hyperventilate.

I was only three weeks pregnant. I was really early and I was like, what in the world. I didn't know what to do with myself. I really didn't.

### ***Telling Her Mother***

Brooke feared telling her mother because her mother believed she was on a long-term birth control method, an intrauterine device (IUD). Brooke described how her mother made her get an IUD at 14.

[My mom] found out that I had sex and she was like, "You need to have it right now." She told me to get [an IUD] because it would guarantee I wouldn't have a baby until I was out of her house, which was 5 years.

However, Brooke did not like the IUD. She stated that "it was making my periods bad, it was giving me headaches. I can't stand that thing." When Brooke turned 16, she was considered an adult at the medical facility and could have the IUD removed without

informing her mother. Therefore, she scheduled an appointment and had her IUD removed at 16 without her mother's knowledge.

After Brooke got the second confirmation of her pregnancy from the medical facility for women, she met her mother for an orthodontist appointment. At the appointment, she handed her mother the confirmation of pregnancy paper. Even though her mother was initially in denial, she accepted that Brooke was going to be a mother.

I think all of us was just in denial. After leaving the orthodontist, we stopped at a store to get some snacks, and literally, the OB/GYN was calling [my mother's phone] to make my appointment.

I was like, "Oh my god," and she's like, "I'm gonna hand this to her because since she's grown now." I was like, "Oh junk, oh my god," and I was like, "So, Mom," and she's like "Oh, so, you are just going to be a mother. You're gonna be a mom." And she ended up getting some shoes for my birthday. She's like, "You gonna need them, so I'm gonna buy them for you." So, [the shoes] did come in clutch, my feet did grow.

### **Discipline Issues at an Alternative School**

Brooke detailed her experiences with an alternative day school specializing in psychiatric care, which occurred weeks before discovering she was pregnant. Brooke has struggled profoundly with her mental health. She had been hospitalized for psychiatric issues before her pregnancy and was hospitalized for psychiatric issues three times during her pregnancy. She does not give the actual source of her mental health struggles, but throughout the interview, she alluded that they stem from traumatic events in her life.

Brooke had been in a long-term psychiatric hospital for seven months. About two weeks after she left the long-term psychiatric hospital, she started attending a day school

specializing in psychiatric care. Brooke noted that a regular public school was not deemed to be a good fit because

I hate school, it gave me really bad anxiety. It was a lot of people. Also, I think that I have some type of learning disability, and nobody like helped me. Nobody went through the process of getting me an IEP or a 504 (specialized educational plans). [The school-based personnel] knew I was having issues because I was like, in and out of hospitals. They were like, "Oh well."

However, Brooke was expelled from that school due to her cell phone use. She had used her phone twice; the first time was to contact a classmate's mom about attending a birthday party, the second time was to order a pizza. Brooke described how ordering a pizza quickly escalated to a situation that led to her being expelled.

Once I ordered the pizza, they were like you obviously don't need your phone because you done ordered a pizza, and you done texted this girl. So, they were like demanding my phone, and once that happened, I pushed the desk. Well, it wasn't like it was immediate, it was like, "No, you're not getting my phone. You're not getting my phone." Once they took it. I stormed out, push the desk, went in the bathroom and calmed myself down. I did what I had to do and then came back out. And then I stayed [at school] for the rest of the day. Well, actually, they were going to send me home and I was like, I want to stay. And then they let me stay for the rest of the day and then they called my parents and said I could not come back.

Brooke shared her thoughts about how the school treated her.

I was like, so this is a school for people with mental health, I push a desk, and all of a sudden, I'm kicked out. I was like, well what mental health training do y'all have because apparently none. Y'all try to take my phone and accuse me of doing all this stuff. And I didn't really do nothing. I was like y'all are crazy, y'all are crazier than me. So, like, this is too much.

I asked Brooke if the school had given her an alternative place to go after she was expelled. Brooke replied, “No, they didn’t say none of that.” She noted that she had been planning to drop out before she was expelled. I asked Brooke what she had planned to do since she was planning to drop out of school.

I was about to live a reckless life. I really was. My mom was like I wasn’t gonna have nowhere to stay because if I’m not going to school, I’m not gonna have nowhere to stay.

So, I was like Imma just house hop and chill out and do whatever I want to do. So, I’m kind of glad. I’m really glad my son came. Because he made me feel like hold up pause, that’s it, I can’t live the life of house hopping and just roaming, which is what I was going to do.

Like I used to run away so much like just walking around. And I would be gone for days, and I would be perfectly fine. But now that I’m older, you know, I realize that’s really unsafe. But I was going to do that. I was just gonna wing it.

### **Interactions With Postsecondary School-Based Personnel**

As soon as she found out she would be a mother, Brooke was determined to go back to school and graduate. Brooke overcame many obstacles to graduate, but she persevered.

#### ***Setting an Example***

Brooke described how the fear of nearly losing her baby made her decide to forgo living a “reckless life” and to become a high school graduate.

[I decided to graduate from high school] like as soon as I found out I was pregnant. I still didn’t really believe [I was pregnant]. The day after my birthday, I had started spotting, and I freaked out. I mean, I freaked out. And so, it was late [at night] and I was like, we’re going to [the medical facility for women] right now. And I saw that ultrasound and he looked like a kidney bean. I was like, “That little kidney bean is a baby”?

I was like that's my baby. I was like for real, I'm going to do this. So, I had made up my mind that I can't be homeless and pregnant. I needed to [graduate]. Because both my parents graduated [high school]. So, it's like I gotta do at least that. Because I would want [my child] to graduate high school. Yeah, that's what I was thinking in my head. Yeah, I got to do this.

### ***Enrolling in School***

Brooke described her experience enrolling as a senior in a traditional public high school a few weeks after the fall semester had started. However, it was still early in the semester.

Oh, it was easy. I just went up there, like it was literally the day or two after and I found out I was pregnant. I went up there. Cuz, my momma, we was talking about it and she was like "Oh you're pregnant now, I will kick you out. You are not gonna sit in my house and not go to school." She was like "Is that what you want for your future and your child?" I was like "No." She was like "So are you going to go to school?" And I was like "Okay." And I just went up there and filled out my paperwork inside my school district and I was able to start. I started the day before my 17th birthday, which was four days after I found out I was pregnant.

### ***Interactions With Teachers***

Brooke described how her teachers were supportive and accommodating of her needs throughout her pregnancy.

I was getting sick like a lot. It was just all the time. I would get nauseous, certain smells was like irritating. I [would] sometimes, very rarely, throw up. It was more like I would just gag. It was so irksome, but it wasn't that bad, I guess I let my teachers know, just upfront, because I was like I'm already gonna grow and stuff.

I mean there was one time it was really hot in the school because they had, I don't know I think it was like, they didn't want to turn the heat off because, you know, our weather, once they turn the heat off and turn the air on, they gotta keep it on. And I think they didn't turn the heat off or something and it was like, extremely hot. I was like "I'm gonna pass out in school." I had to go sit in the office by a fan and do my work.

And there was a teacher, I told her I would be tired because I don't think I was eating enough because school lunch is nasty. She would bring me like little snacks and stuff or a little plate or something, because I was like, I am, I feel like famished all the time. She saw that I was, like, struggling to stay awake and have energy.

Brooke described how, during her second trimester, she had an interaction with a teacher that made her uncomfortable. The teacher noticed how Brooke was coming to school regularly during her pregnancy. Therefore, the teacher approached Brooke and another student who was also pregnant and asked Brooke to encourage the other student to come to school more regularly. Brooke described this as a negative experience.

I had a negative experience. Like a teacher, she tried to call me out in the hallway with some random girl. [The teacher stated] "You know you are openly expecting and you come to school and, you know, you do your work. I was hoping that you could help her out or be encouraging her to come to school."

I mean, even though [the teacher] was okay, but it's just like, that's absurd trying to, like, talk to somebody else, be their cheerleader. It would be different if like I knew [the other student]. I didn't know that girl.

It was just like I can't make her want to come to school. And I don't know her. I don't even like coming to school. It's like, either you make that decision for yourself or you not gonna come. And I don't know her situation.

Brooke noted how in her mind, she wanted to tell the teacher no, but reluctantly agreed to encourage the other student.

I was like, "No, because I don't want to be here." That's what I told [the teacher]. I told her, like, I mean I think I had originally, in front of the teacher, I think I nodded my head or kind of was like "Okay."

### *Interactions With the School Nurse*

Brooke described how the school nurse would monitor students who were pregnant at the school. She stated that “[the school nurse] would monitor my blood pressure and see how I am doing.” I asked Brooke what made the nurse decide to monitor her. She replied, “I think she does it with all pregnant people because, I guess, to just make sure that they are ok. I’m not exactly sure, but I didn’t mind it. I was like, ‘Okay.’”

Brooke also noted that the school nurse connected her with a community-based non-profit organization specializing in serving pregnant and parenting teens. She stated, “The nurse gave me the paper. And she was like, ‘call them.’ And I was like, ‘Okay.’ And I called them.”

### *Interactions With Guidance Counselors*

Brooke discussed how the guidance counselors supported her needs during pregnancy and her quest to graduate.

Guidance counselors were really good, like, all my teachers had the note. So, if I ever need to go to the bathroom, I didn’t have to ask. I just go to the bathroom because they legally can’t say no. So, they will just allow you to go to the bathroom. And, of course, you don’t overuse it. They were cool with me going to the bathroom and going to nurses anytime I needed to.

[The guidance counselors] were really good. Like, because some of my teachers, it would be like a delay in getting my work and stuff because I would miss class for appointments. And [the guidance counselors] made sure to, like, get on them and be, like, “Hey, she needs her work.”

[The guidance counselors] were always supportive of my mental health as well, like, checking in on me.

And they were a big help with my senior project, like, telling me about Saturday school, and like, making sure teachers, like, if I needed extra class time, that they could try to work on maybe staying after with me, and stuff like that.

I asked Brooke to tell me about Saturday school.

Saturday school, it gives you, like, if you have absences and tardies, [a way] to make them back up. You go to [one] Saturday school and it counts as three [days]. So, I went to Saturday school a whole lot.

Brooke noted how Saturday school was “a few hours” and that it would make up three days. She noted that she went to Saturday school a lot. Brooke stated that “Especially towards the end [of school] because I had my senior project. And I was needing a whole lot of help, so I was using the computer and stuff there.”

I inquired about the topic of her senior project. Brooke described how she was writing her senior project on “teen pregnancy.”

I just wrote about, like, the statistics, and I wrote about, like, the resources in place that you could go. It was easy cuz most of the resources, I used them. It was kind of funny standing up there a week from being 9 months pregnant. [As] I presented my senior project, I’m thinking, “Hey” [Brooke motions her hands around her stomach to indicate her pregnant stomach at the time of her presentation].

I asked Brooke what takeaway thoughts she had regarding her senior project. She stated, “Umm, it made me want to do better, like, it made me want to beat the statistics and the odds . . . I graduated, so I beat one.”

### **Mental Health Struggles While Trying to Complete School**

Brooke experienced mental health struggles during her pregnancy. When her mental health struggles became unmanageable, she would seek hospitalization to keep herself and her unborn child safe. During her pregnancy, she sought hospitalization three times.

The third time Brooke sought hospitalization, she was near her due date and the end of her senior year. She was admitted to the perinatal psychiatric hospital unit. Brooke described that she decided to be hospitalized because she was “panicking” about the future.

I didn't know if I was going to graduate. I didn't know, like, what adulting was going to be like. I didn't know what parenting was going to be like. And it was just so many “what ifs” that were scaring me. And I just kind of panicked.

### **Giving Birth While Trying to Complete Graduation Requirements**

Brooke had meticulously planned to finish her graduation requirements before giving birth, but there was a medical change of plans. The third time she sought hospitalization for psychiatric care during her pregnancy, she was days away from taking her final exams. While she was hospitalized, it was decided that she should be induced to give birth since she had slightly elevated blood pressure.

### ***Striving to Complete Her Senior Project***

Even though Brooke was being prepared to have her baby, she was determined to complete her senior project. The hospital provided her with a laptop so that she could write her paper. She described her experience of writing her paper while being induced.

And I was actually, while I was in labor, I was working on my senior project. No lie. Like not like the actual labor, but being induced it, you know. It took so long such a long time. I was sitting there typing trying to finish that paper because I had did everything else, but the paper. And I had to have 8-10 pages because I was in an honors class. And so, they told me to go ahead and turn in what I had and they will give me the highest possible grade given the circumstances. And I was like, okay.

They ended up giving me, like, I think it was a D because that's all they could give me. But I was like I'm okay with a D because my presentation score was a 98, and everything else was 100 like the resume and the PowerPoint. All that other stuff was 100. So, I'm like, I'm ok.

### **Taking Her Final Exams**

Brooke gave birth hours before she was scheduled to take her final exams. She described calling the school hours after giving birth, worried about missing her final exams.

And then I remember I had called the school at 7 in the morning. I was like "I was supposed to take my exams today, what do I do?" and they were like, "Do not worry about exams," "You are fine," "You just had a baby," "Somebody take her phone away" cause I was freaking out.

They were like, "No, ma'am. Please, someone take her phone, because, no." They were like "She does not need to be worried about exams right now. Tell her to enjoy the time with her baby." They made me give my phone to my mama because I was freaking out for a second. Because if it was up to me, I probably would have been like "Let's wobble out of here right now. We gone get there by nine. And I am taking these exams." Cause I just knew that was what was gonna decide if I graduate or not. Because my classes, I had to pass all of them. I knew I was passing all of them, except for math, I was like on the fence. And I was like, what if I get a good score on my exam, then I'll be straight.

Brooke described how two weeks after she had given birth, the guidance counselors went to her home and administered her final exams.

Two weeks after or like a week and a half after [the guidance counselors] came into the house for three days. Well, no, for two days.

I got to take [my exams] at my house with my baby and that was so good. It was really good because I was breastfeeding. Anytime I needed to stop to breastfeed or because I was still recovering so I had to change the [maternity] pads and stuff, I had to go to the bathroom. It was like a lot more comforting to be in my home because I wasn't feeling like 1,000%.

I asked Brooke if it was common for the guidance counselors to go to people's homes and administer exams.

I don't know I think they made an exception because I never heard of it. I thought I was going to have to go up there, but it was a lot more better for them to come.

Brooke took three exams in two days while she was recovering from childbirth.

Brooke described the results of her exams.

I had to decide which [exams] I wanted to do. And I remember I did English and social studies on one day, then I did my math by itself because I knew, I was like, I don't know what I'm doing. And if I'm being honest, I filled in the ones I knew then I put Abracadabra. But I got the highest [math] score in the class . . . I got a 98. I was like Abracadabra it is!

### **Experiencing Graduation**

Brooke, who started her senior year planning to drop out of high school and live a "reckless life," ended her senior year passing all of her classes with A's and B's and becoming a new mother.

I asked Brooke how she felt when she found out she passed all of her classes. She replied, "It was very relieving." Brooke went on to describe how it felt to graduate and her graduating experience.

It was exciting. I just felt so proud of myself. I started not to walk the stage because I hadn't got a cap and gown, but they let me borrow a cap and gown. I think they just saw how hard I was [working] to graduate, and they were trying to give me the best foot forward. And they let me borrow a cap and gown. I had to return it to get my diploma. I was freaked out because when they [handed] out everybody's Manila envelopes with they diploma in it I just assumed mine was in there. I got home and I looked in there because my mom was like, because my family, you know, was asking for my diploma. I looked in, and they was like,

“Umm, where is it at?” I was going in there to go get it and my mama’s was like your diploma is not in there. And I was like, what, and I looked in there. And it was a piece of paper that said you owe [the] High School and I was like “I don’t owe [the] High School.” My mama was like “You got to return that cap and gown.” I think she was like “So that someone else who’s in your position next year, can have that cap and gown.” And I’m like “Oh yeah, you’re right.” So, I went up there and I returned it and I got my little diploma and my little mini diploma. And I was so happy, and I was like “yay.”

It did feel so good. I felt like I was on top of the world when I graduated. I was like, look at me, like I did it. I honestly didn’t even feel like I was going to do it. Like if you would have asked me freshmen year do you think, well maybe not freshman year. But if you would have asked me 10th-grade year, I would have been like I’m not going to graduate.

### **The Impact of a Non-Supportive and a Supportive School Environment**

Brooke had attended different schools in different areas of her school district.

While Brooke has attended schools specializing in psychiatric care, the schools discussed in this section were public schools.

#### ***Non-Supportive School Environment***

I asked Brooke to expound further about the experiences that led her to consider not completing high school.

It’s just freshman year was hard, as it was, but 10th-grade year, I think I just was done. Cause, I think, I just couldn’t handle it no more. Like I tried. You know how, like, freshman year you just have that excitement, you like, “Oh, it’s high school and it gets better when you become an upperclassman.” I think once I got over the “I’m in high school” excitement, it’s just like I realized I hated it.

Brooke described how a school environment of “Large groups of people, bullying, [and] harassment” made it so that she wanted to leave school. Additionally, Brooke “went through some experiences” that affected her learning ability.

Even the work, like, I felt like I wasn't able to understand stuff as fast. Like, I feel, like, I don't know, I went through some experiences, and I think it's, like, stunted me honestly. And it made it hard for me to, like, remember and grasp things. And I was, like, trying to, but I felt so bad because at one point, you know, it was like I went from being in accelerated classes to now I'm not understanding. And I wanted to understand it, like, I understand when I get enough time to get it. I felt like I wasn't getting enough time.

Brooke also related that she was not receiving any support from school-based personnel to help with her struggles. Brooke described how she believed the school-based personnel at her previous public schools thought of her.

That I was trouble. Honestly, I think they thought that I was just a whirlwind of problems because I had mental health issues and I was constantly, like, in and out the hospital. That's how it felt.

Brooke further discussed how her previous public schools did not make accommodations to help her catch up with her work when she was absent due to hospitalizations.

Just kind of like, I don't know, it's like they swept me under the rug. I was trying to catch back up and they didn't really care. And it was hard to catch back up, it's like they just let me drown in all my work.

I asked Brooke if she had experienced her pregnancy at her previous schools, what level of support does she think she would have received.

I would have failed. I would have dropped right out. Because the support system would have just not been the same. Like the teachers just, they didn't care as much. It was too many kids and they were tired. And guidance was just overrun by students that had problems and they were [nonchalant]. It was just, like, too much. And then [one school she had attended] is a new school. They were still working out kinks in the school in general. And they didn't have no expression, like I got suspended for that. I always got suspended and kicked out of stuff for the craziest reasons. There was just a lot of bullying they just allowed. And like,

harassment, and stuff that they allowed, and stuff that they let go on that I just didn't think—it just didn't make sense.

### ***Supportive School Environment***

I asked her how she started to see herself in light of the support she received from school-based personnel when she was pregnant.

[Initially], I did still kind of feel down. And I guess I just thought that I wasn't worth the time at first, but then, like, going to [the school from where she experienced her pregnancy] did change that. They made me feel like I was a priority, like, me graduating was important to them.

I asked if she thought the school would have cared about her if she had not been pregnant.

Sometimes I honestly think not. Maybe they would have because guidance was really good. I feel like the teachers probably wouldn't have cared as much.

### **Impact of Community-Based Non-Profit Organizations**

In addition to the support Brooke received from her school-based personnel, she also received support from community-based non-profit organizations. One organization came to her school and hosted programs, while another organization met with her at home and hosted programs in the community.

### ***School-Based Program***

The school Brooke attended had seven pregnant and parenting students (including her) involved in a school-based program. Brooke described how the school-based program provided her with useful information and connected her to other pregnant and

parenting students at her school. She also noted that the program was not just for her school, but “they go to all the schools.” The program met every week during the lunch period.

It was really good because any questions that we had, or anything- they were supportive. They also brought food which was good because school food was not it, it was making me throw up.

[They answered] any questions you have about pregnancy, any concerns that you have about, like, school stuff. Um, any resources that they could think of they would give it to you, pamphlets and stuff. [They] just checked in on us, how we doing, and stuff like that.

It was good. It felt like it was an extra support because it was. They were acknowledging that it is hard. It’s like a lot of people are just like, “Yes, however, you chose to do that.” So, they like, “Do you really need the extra help?” And it’s like, “Yes.” It’s like we made a mistake, but we do need that extra support. So, it’s kind of, like, not reassuring, but it was just, like, “You can do this.” So, yeah, reassuring, like, “You can do this, like, you have support, you can still, like, get through it.”

### ***Community-Based Program***

Brooke also participated in a community-based program that was hosted in a community setting. The organization supported her throughout her pregnancy and early parenting. Her school nurse told her about the organization and encouraged her to connect with them. Brooke described the support she received from this particular community-based non-profit organization.

I like [the program] a lot because they do so much. They gave my son so much stuff that I wouldn’t have been able to probably afford. Honestly, like, he needed a bed. And he has a bed. The childbirth classes was really good because I was really scared, I didn’t know what it was gonna be like. So, to be able to get that experience and to have some insight on, like, what’s gonna be happening was really great for me. It was also good to just be around other teen moms because

they can relate, they get it. It's just so much help and support, like financially and just mentally. It's like a family.

### **Defining Herself as a Mother**

I asked Brooke how she felt she is seen in society because she is a Black teen mom. Brooke described how she feels she is seen through a stigmatized lens.

I mean, I think it makes me seem more like a baby mama versus a mother. It's like they expected my baby daddy not to be there. I don't know. It's like a stigma, honestly.

I asked Brooke to clarify the difference between a baby mama and a mother.

One is just, like, somebody just pop out kids just to have kids. The other one is, like, active. Regardless of the terminology, I'm not necessarily offended by either one. Well, I guess a little bit I am. One just seems more demeaning, it's like, you know, I'm somebody's mother not just like some person. I don't know how to explain it. It just seems like it's like an attitude with it.

Brooke further described how it felt to be considered a baby mama rather than a mother.

I guess it makes me like a little sad. It's like I don't want that at all. I guess, like, that misunderstanding of moms in general, single, single or not. I guess it's just like weird. I don't know how to explain it.

Brooke noted how it is her peer group, or the "youth," who see her as a baby mama.

I guess like only my closest friends will be like, you know, mother, but like, I feel like everyone else is, just like, I feel like it's kind of a trend thing to be the baby mama. I don't think it's a really positive trend.

I asked Brooke how she saw herself as a mother.

[I see myself] as a strong mother. A strong Black mother because I love my son, and I do everything in hopes that it will benefit him and me and our future. And that's really, like, all that I can be focused on.

### **Reflecting on Her Past and Goals for Her Future**

As she sat in front of me, a high school graduate and a new mother, I asked Brooke about how she would change her past schooling experiences and what her goals were for the future. In examining the past, she discussed how she would have delayed childbearing and advocated for her educational needs. As for her future, she wants to help adolescent girls who have struggled with mental health issues.

#### ***The Past***

As Brooke reflected on her past experiences, she replied that she would have delayed childbearing. She stated that "I feel like I would have had more time to plan, like, get myself together, figure out who I am." However, I reminded Brooke that she stated earlier that she decided to graduate because she wanted to set an example for her son.

Yeah. Kinda like I needed [to have a child] at that moment, I guess. I wish I could do High School over, if I'm being honest. And maybe, apply to, like, a smaller school. That way it's a smaller select amount of people. There [were] more options [for different types school settings], I just had to apply myself. But, I didn't know all that then. So, it's like if I could do that, go back and do that again and advocate for myself, that I needed an IEP or 504 (specialized educational plans).

I asked Brooke if her experience at the school where she graduated affected how she would have redone her high school experience. Brooke replied, “A little bit, yeah, because it makes me want to be mattered the whole time through.”

### ***The Future***

Brooke described how her future goals involved continuing her education and helping young people who have experienced trauma.

[I want] to go to college. Maybe get, like, some quick certifications or something, and get a good job. And then gradually over time, I want to become a licensed clinical social worker. I want to own a group home. And I want to be a therapist.

I asked Brooke who she wanted to serve as a licensed clinical social worker and group homeowner, and she replied, “young people, girls, teens, like adolescents,” and she wanted to assist them with “trauma-focused problems.”

### **Summary**

This chapter re/presented the stories of the three participants concerning their interactions with school-based personnel, personal struggles and achievements, and their personal reflection of their experience. In the next chapter, I analyze their stories within the context of the research questions.

## CHAPTER V

### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to amplify the voice and visibility of Black women who experienced being pregnant while in high school. I wanted to add their experiences to the literature and explore how the concept of controlling images of Black women related to their experiences. In this study, I sought to answer one broad question and two sub-questions:

What are the stories of Black women who experienced pregnancy during high school?

- How do Black women who were pregnant teens in high school characterize their interactions with school-based personnel when they were pregnant?
- How does the concept of controlling images help us understand their experiences?

All three participants shared how they perceived themselves to be successful. Andrea shared how she bought a house that she designed and had constructed at 21 years old. She plans to pay off her mortgage before she is in her mid-30s. Tiffany shared how she has earned an MBA, paid off over \$50,000 of student loans, and left a lucrative corporate job to start her own business, and she is not even 30 years old. And Brooke shared how she tried to leave the hospital less than 6 hours after giving birth to take her

high school final exams. When she took her exams two weeks later, she made a near-perfect score on her math final exam, which was the highest in her class.

When I conducted the interviews, I quickly noted how their stories did not reflect the negative outcomes that I had been socially conditioned to associate with the stigmatized perception of teen pregnancy. Andrea even stated that she did not tell people that she was a teen mom because her story is not the “norm.” However, as I asked deeper questions, the participants started to confess that part of their relentless drive to succeed was so they would not be seen as the stereotypical teen mom. They did not want to reflect the stigmatized teen mom stereotype of not graduating from high school, struggling financially, and not caring for their children. I could hear the exhaustion in their voices as they discussed their accomplishments as if they were means to prove their worth to a society that saw them as worthless the moment they decided to be teen mothers. As a human being, it was painful for me to know that society’s contempt toward teen moms partially fueled their success. Tiffany noted how she became a “super overachiever” to prove people wrong, and Andrea stated she “wanted to make sure that [she] did things so grand that nobody thought, even remembered that [she] was a teen mom.”

In this chapter, I analyze the participants’ stories in the context of answering the research questions. To do so, I rely on two analytical techniques: thematic analysis and research poetics. In the thematic analysis section, I present the main themes that arose from the interviews and, by extension, that appeared across the narrative profiles of the participants I re/presented in Chapter IV. In answering my research questions, I connect these themes to the existing scholarship that I previously reviewed. In the research

poetics section, I utilize research poetics to explore deeper meanings in the three women's stories. Afterward, I make recommendations for practice and provide recommendations for future research. Finally, I close the chapter with my personal thoughts about this study.

### **Thematic Analysis**

In alignment with the narrative elements of my research, I examined the stories of the three women who discussed their lives immediately before discovering they were pregnant, their lives as pregnant teens, and their lives as young mothers. All three stories richly add to the understanding of the experiences of pregnant and parenting teens discussed previously in studies such as Anastas (2017), Kaplan (1997), Oxley and Weekes (1997), Luttrell (2003), Pillow (2004), SmithBattle (2005), SmithBattle (2007a), SmithBattle (2007b), Filter (2015), M. Morris (2016), and SmithBattle et al. (2020).

During the interviews, the participants were very generous with the information that they provided. In this section, I answer the three research questions with the main themes that surfaced from the analysis of the participants' stories.

#### **What Are the Stories of Black Women Who Experienced Pregnancy During High School?**

In my overall question, I sought to understand the stories of the three participants as they navigated the problematized experience of being a pregnant and parenting teen. I explored two themes that emerged: **defying the stigma of being a teen parent** and **demonstrating a determination to succeed**.

### *Defying the Stigma of Being a Teen Parent*

My goal in conducting and presenting the research was to depict a holistic picture of a section of our population that is too often stigmatized, stereotyped, and marginalized. Luttrell (2003) discussed how researchers must respond to the dominant ideology regarding teen pregnancy when presenting their findings.

In terms of the dominant image that gets evoked, the “pregnant teenager” is seen as a Black, urban, poor female who is more than likely herself the daughter of a teenage mother. She is probably failing in school, has low self-esteem, sees no future for herself, and now must deal with the untimely end of her youth and face the harsh realities and responsibilities of adulthood. Research about this group, whether the researcher acknowledges it or not, must engage in, and respond to, these dominant discourses and representations of the “pregnant teenager.” It is not as if one can present a distinct “narrative” or set of alternative images about teenage pregnancy without engaging the dominant discourse. (p. 4)

Relatedly, the 1965 Moynihan Report pathologized single Black motherhood as being responsible for perpetuating poverty within the Black community. Luttrell (2003) described how this ideology casts “Black teenaged women on welfare as a problem” (p. 32). SmithBattle et al. (2020) further noted that “despite teen mothers’ efforts to demonstrate competence in response to stigma, mothering was further imperiled by pervasive stereotypes, stigmatizing interactions, and professionals’ low expectations of young mothers” (pp. 6–7).

All three women recognized how the stigma of being a teen parent impacted how they saw themselves and how they believed others perceived them. Each of them also discussed how the stigma of being a teen mom motivated their actions. Andrea discussed how she felt compelled to succeed because she wanted her success to overshadow her

status as a teen mom. She believed that the more she achieved, the less people would see her as a teen mom. She noted that she does not usually tell people she is a teen mom because she feels her story of being supported and being successful is not the typical story of teen moms. Tiffany described how the stigma of being a teen mom inspired her to be a high achiever. She discussed how she tells her story of success to inspire other girls and women who have experienced teen pregnancy and parenting and let them know their life is full of possibilities. Finally, Brooke recounted how her research on teen moms for her senior project further inspired her to graduate high school because low high school graduation rates were associated with teen pregnancy. Additionally, Brooke noted how it makes her feel sad that some of her peers do not view her as fully invested in her child's wellbeing because she is a single teen mom.

This desire to distance themselves from being the *typical teen mom* is similar to the findings of Kaplan (1997). Kaplan (1997) noted that all her participants would discuss “a strong work ethic . . . as a way to overcome the welfare stigma” (p. 142). This sentiment is further echoed by SmithBattle et al. (2020), who discussed how qualitative studies in their review described how “teen mothers highlight their aspirations and competence to defend themselves against stereotypes” (p. 7).

### ***Demonstrating the Determination to Succeed***

All three women discovered they were pregnant around the beginning of their senior year of high school. Andrea and Tiffany had prepared throughout their high school experience to have their graduation credits completed within the first semester of their senior year. Brooke, conversely, was planning to drop out of school. However,

discovering their pregnancies created more focus and determination for each of the three women to complete high school. Andrea completed high school and was the only person in her high school certified nursing assistant course to pass the state exam on the first try. Tiffany graduated a semester early from high school. And Brooke re-enrolled in school, graduated with her class, and made the highest math score in her class on the state standardized test. Andrea and Tiffany, who are now both in their late twenties, discussed how being teen moms drove them to continued success. Andrea went on to attain a bachelor's degree, purchase a home, and attain a high-level position at a community-based nonprofit organization. Tiffany attained a bachelor's degree and a Master of Business Administration degree (MBA), and she is an entrepreneurial business owner. The participants' success is in line with M. Morris (2016), who discussed how teen pregnancy could lead to high achievement.

Parenting teens often face tremendous obstacles to completing a high school education, but more often than not, girls interpret their parental responsibilities as an incentive to perform better. While girls are plagued by social narratives that warn of an end to their lives if they have a child as a teenager, they also understand their heightened responsibility and make great attempts to rise to the occasion. (p. 143)

Tiffany and Brooke discussed their struggles with mental health and suicidal ideation. Both detailed how becoming pregnant and being a mother made them determined to live and obtain the mental healthcare they needed to be there for their child. This is similar to a study by SmithBattle (2005), who discussed how becoming a teen mother assisted previously suicidal teens in finding a reason to continue living.

Brooke's story of academic disengagement, dropping out of school, and then re-enrolling in school upon discovering she was pregnant aligns with Anastas (2017) and Pillow (2004). Anastas (2017) described how "there is much evidence that 'regular' schools often push disadvantaged [or 'different'] young women out before and after they become pregnant" (p. 165). Pillow (2004) discussed how "60 percent of girls who become teen mothers drop out before pregnancy. Thus, contrary to popular belief, a large percentage of teen pregnancies occur when the teen girl is already disenfranchised from schooling" (p. 118). Pillow (2004) noted that "up to 25 percent of female dropouts return to school when they are pregnant" (p. 118) and that during her qualitative research, girls often explained that they returned to school because of their baby. Therefore, Brooke's story adds to the voices of students who became academically re-engaged due to pregnancy.

### ***Impact of Middle Socioeconomic Status Background on Success***

Another potential explanation for the participants' determination and ability to achieve middle SES markers of success (e.g., graduating high school, attaining post-secondary degrees, and engaging in meaningful and gainful employment) is that each participant in this study comes from a middle SES background. Middle SES markers were demonstrated by each participant's access to family financial support as well as their ease in navigating medical and educational systems (Lareau, 2002).

Teen pregnancy is not typically associated with mainstream, or Middle SES, values. Choo and Ferree (2010) gave an example of problematizing mainstream values by presenting the question, "what is absent in middle-class, college-aged women's lives that

would lower the cost of early childbearing for them?” (p. 139). SmithBattle et al. (2020) noted that for “middle class youth . . . risk-taking is mitigated by family and community resources” (p. 7). In this study, the cost of early childbearing was mitigated for each participant due to the presence of the social and financial capital associated with being middle SES. Andrea’s mother was able to financially support Andrea and her child, which enabled Andrea to save nearly all of her earnings as a CNA for a down payment on her house. Tiffany was comfortable negotiating how she finished her high school credits with school-based personnel, which enabled her to graduate high school a semester earlier. Brooke was comfortable seeking needed medical treatment for her pregnancy and mental health challenges, and she had the financial means to afford it.

SmithBattle (2007b) discussed how pregnant and parenting teens from middle-class families tended to achieve middle-class status in adulthood. Even though SmithBattle (2007b) conducted her research with White middle SES pregnant teens, Lareau (2002) noted that White and Black families of similar SES tend to raise their children similarly. Therefore, the participants’ middle SES childhood environment assisted in their ability to achieve a middle SES adulthood experience.

### ***Summary***

In this section, I answered the first research question, “What are the stories of Black women who experienced pregnancy in high school?” The question was answered by two themes, “defying the stigma of being a teen parent” and “demonstrating the determination to succeed.”

### **How Do Black Women Who Were Pregnant Teens in High School Characterize Their Interactions with School-Based Personnel When They Were Pregnant?**

In this section, I address the first sub-question by specifically focusing on the participants' interactions with their high school-based personnel. All three participants were in their senior year in high school when they discovered they were pregnant. They attended either their district school or a magnet school. They did not attend an alternative school for pregnant students. Each person described the impact that their interactions with school-based personnel had on their success in graduating from high school. In the end, the prevalent theme that emerged was: **the participants' interactions with school personnel were mixed; however, each participant ultimately benefitted from some relationships with school-based personnel.** To illustrate this theme, I revisit examples from each participant.

#### ***Andrea***

Andrea began her senior year pregnant and gave birth at the beginning of the second semester. She stated that the school-based personnel did not really acknowledge her pregnancy, but the school did host a community-based non-profit teen pregnancy program that provided support for pregnant and parenting students. She discussed how she had taken enough courses over her previous high school years to have a lighter course load her senior year. However, she still needed to complete her senior project and the requirements for her certified nursing assistant (CNA) course.

Andrea noted how she would not have graduated if she had to depend on the Homebound program. She described how the school-based personnel for the Homebound program did not bring her schoolwork as required during her maternity leave, which

made it difficult for her to do her senior project. However, due to her child's father being friends with her English teacher, she was given an A on the senior project without completing one. Additionally, Andrea's CNA instructor allowed her to make up the clinical hours she missed while on maternity leave.

SmithBattle (2007a) discussed how pregnant and parenting students can become disengaged from school when school-based personnel do not accommodate their needs. While Andrea was not accommodated adequately by the Homebound program during her maternity leave, she was still able to graduate with her class and gain her CNA license due to her teachers making special accommodations for her to either make up her work or exempting her from work.

### *Tiffany*

Tiffany discovered she was pregnant shortly after the school year had started. She had already arranged to graduate high school a semester early before learning she was pregnant. Tiffany attended school during the beginning of her pregnancy when she was not physically showing signs of pregnancy. Therefore, she did not tell any of the school-based personnel that she was pregnant.

Tiffany noted that she experienced "really bad" morning sickness during the semester she attended school. SmithBattle (2007a) discussed how lack of accommodation for absences due to morning sickness could lead to pregnant teens discontinuing school. However, the career-oriented magnet school Tiffany attended started later in the day, which allowed her to manage her morning sickness before going to school.

Tiffany described how she was visibly pregnant when she went to graduation at the end of the school year to pick up her diploma. She discussed how one of the school-based personnel members tried to convince her to walk during the graduation by telling her that seven other girls were pregnant and that she did not have to feel bad. Tiffany did not understand what motivated the school-based personnel member to say that because she did not feel ashamed about her pregnancy. She just wanted to pick up her diploma; she did not want to walk on the stage.

The statements of the school-based personnel member during graduation may have been due to an effort of that person trying to combat the stigma of teen pregnancy, but she inadvertently perpetuated the stigma of teen pregnancy. In trying to be understanding and welcoming of Tiffany's visibly pregnant body, the school-based personnel member inadvertently reduced her to a statistic when she stated that "there are seven of you" as well as a stigma when she said, "Don't feel bad." The use of the phrase "there are seven of you" invoked the ideology that the presence of one pregnant teen in a school would lead to further teen pregnancies (Fershee, 2009). Andrea echoed this ideology in her interview when she stated that "I guess me and the other person kind of opened the floodgates of thinking pregnancy was okay," and went on to describe how six more students became pregnant while she was in school.

### ***Brooke***

Brooke was able to easily re-enroll in school near the beginning of her senior year. It happened only a few days after she discovered that she was pregnant. Brooke described how several school-based personnel supported her through her pregnancy. The

school not only had a community-based non-profit organization provide teen pregnancy and parenting support, but the school-based personnel took on an active role in supporting Brooke as well. Teachers allowed her to go to the bathroom as needed, one teacher brought her snacks since Brooke did not like the school lunch, and when the school air conditioning was not working properly, she was allowed to do her work in an air-conditioned area. Brooke's school counselors provided pivotal support by ensuring that teachers provided her with makeup work, telling her about Saturday school, and administering her final exams at her home while she was recovering from childbirth. The school nurse monitored her blood pressure and connected her with a community-based non-profit organization specializing in assisting pregnant and parenting teens. Additionally, the school provided her with a cap and gown so she could walk with her class during the graduation ceremony.

Brooke noted that her senior year was the first time she felt like she mattered at school. She discussed how previous schools made her feel like she was a problem because of her mental health struggles and that supporting her was not worth the time. She had become increasingly disengaged with school to the point of deciding to drop out. Even though the school-based personal at her final school made her feel like a priority, she feels they may not have cared as much about her if she were not pregnant. However, now that she knows what it feels like to matter and be a priority, she feels like she should have mattered and been a priority the entire time she was in her previous schools.

Brooke was able to stay engaged with school and graduate because the school-based personnel were heavily invested in her success. Her success aligns with

SmithBattle (2007a), who discussed how supportive, dedicated, and flexible school-based personnel who embrace pregnant and parenting students can create an environment where they can successfully continue and complete their studies.

### *Summary*

Each participant noted how their respective school's flexibility allowed for them to graduate. The schools were flexible, in general, by allowing students to graduate early and earn senior credits at an accelerated rate. And the schools exhibited flexibility specifically to the participants' situation by exempting Andrea from her senior project and administering Brooke's final exams in her home. This willingness of the school-based personnel to be flexible greatly assisted in the participants' ability to graduate. Thus, the theme that resonates in response to the first sub-question is: **the participants' interactions with school personnel were mixed; however, each participant ultimately benefitted from some relationships with school-based personnel.**

### **How Does the Concept of Controlling Images Help Us Understand Their Experiences?**

In this section, I explore the second sub-question, which concerned how the concept of controlling images of Black women relate to the experiences of the participants. Controlling images of Black women is a key component of the Black feminist thought conceptual framework, as discussed in Collins (2000). As I analyzed the interview transcripts, I discovered incidents suggestive of the theme, **controlling images of Black women connected with the participants' experiences.** This was particularly true regarding six controlling images: the Mammy, the Matriarch, the Welfare Mother, the Black Lady, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire.

### ***The Mammy***

Collins (2000) and Harris-Perry (2011) discussed how the Mammy controlling image is associated with nurturing others at the sacrifice of oneself, and that nurturing is aligned with promoting and perpetuating White supremacy. This controlling image was displayed when Brooke's teacher asked her to encourage another teen who was pregnant to come to school. On the surface, it seems like an innocent request; however, the teacher asked Brooke to encourage the other student in front of that student. Brooke was not in a position to say no to her teacher because it could have been seen as disrespectful and could have created a negative consequence for her. Therefore, Brooke reluctantly agreed to speak to the teen. During the interview, Brooke discussed how that was a bad experience because she felt like she had no choice but to comply with the teacher's request. However, Brooke did not want to be the other student's "cheerleader" because she struggled with encouraging herself to come to school.

Brooke's experience aligns with Annamma et al. (2019), who noted that when a Black female student shows nurturing characteristics in line with the Mammy controlling image, she is seen positively by school-based personnel. Therefore, to achieve her goal of graduating high school, Brooke reluctantly decided to comply with the Mammy controlling image and try to be of service to another student at the expense of being of service to herself by refusing the teacher's request.

### ***The Matriarch***

Collins (2000) discussed how the matriarch controlling image is defined as a "bad Black mother" (p. 75). She is a working single mother whose children are academically

unsuccessful due to her work, and she does not have a husband because she is aggressive and emasculating. Elements of Andrea's, Tiffany's, and Brooke's experiences resonated with the matriarch controlling image, especially as they discussed their difficulty with romantic relationships and their dedication to being responsible mothers who care for their children.

Andrea described how she wants a husband, but she struggles with letting herself be emotionally vulnerable in romantic relationships due to fears of losing her independence. She also noted that previous male romantic partners described her as masculine because she is such a strong provider and very self-sufficient.

Tiffany described relationships where romantic partners tried to control her relationship with her child or her career trajectory when she asserted her independence. Her son's father prevented her from seeing her son when she decided to leave their abusive relationship. And a more recent romantic partner tried to discourage her from taking a calculated risk of leaving her current job to become an entrepreneur. His discouraging behavior prompted Tiffany to end the relationship.

It must also be noted that Brooke did not mention the father of her child at any point during the interview. Brooke's omission resonates with Filter (2015), who noted that nearly none of the pregnant Black teen participants in her research expected to be in a long-term relationship with their child's father.

Andrea, Tiffany, and Brooke emphasized their efforts in taking care of their children. Andrea discussed how proud she is that her son has an "amazing life." She is meticulous in taking care of his medical needs, and she decided to buy a house instead of

renting an apartment because she wanted her son to have a yard. Tiffany recounted her 8-month ordeal of trying to get her son back after her son's father prevented her from seeing him. She discussed how she has a great relationship with her son and that she cares for her son holistically by making sure he has access to mental healthcare to cope with her difficult co-parenting arrangement. Brooke discussed how she graduated from high school so she could model academic achievement to her son.

Andrea, Tiffany, and Brooke became laser-focused on success and independence to provide the best care for their child(ren). However, Andrea and Tiffany perceive that their independence and success have created conflicts in their romantic relationships; and Brooke did not mention any romantic relationships. Therefore, each woman is caught in the web of the matriarch controlling image because, as single mothers, they must be high achievers to provide for their children, but their high achievements could potentially keep them romantically single.

### ***The Welfare Mother***

Collins (2000) and Harris-Perry (2011) discussed how the welfare mother controlling image is considered to be a bad mother who is academically and economically unsuccessful. She feels entitled to financial assistance and, thus, is a burden on society. In general, teen pregnancy invokes the welfare mother controlling image because it is assumed that the teen mother will be unsuccessful in life and perpetually in need of financial assistance. Each of the participants' stories contained elements of the welfare mother controlling image.

Andrea and Tiffany discussed utilizing government financial assistance. Andrea described how she received government financial assistance to obtain childcare and formula for her son so that she could graduate from high school and feed her child. However, after she graduated from high school, she was no longer qualified to receive government financial assistance because she lived with her mother, who had a high income, even though she personally had a low income. Tiffany noted using government financial assistance during times of financial difficulty. She described how the assistance allowed her to provide for her children while she finished her education and established her career. However, Tiffany did not receive a housing voucher, which could have further eased her financial burdens as she progressed through her postsecondary education.

Brooke did not discuss any use of government financial assistance. However, she did discuss how when she became pregnant she decided to graduate from high school because she wanted to role model high school graduation. This is in line with opposing the concept that the welfare mother passes her low achievement ideology onto her children (Collins, 2000). Additionally, Brooke's research on teenage pregnancy and how it was associated with dropping out of high school further motivated her to graduate because she did not want to be another teenaged pregnancy "statistic," a statistic usually associated with the welfare mother controlling image. Brooke was so intent on graduating that she suffered from anxiety so severe that she chose to be hospitalized. Additionally, Brooke could not fully enjoy her son's birth because she was trying to type a paper during labor, and she was worried about missing her final exams.

The Welfare Mother controlling image can also be used to understand Brooke's interactions with her peers. She discussed how her peers see her as a "baby mama" because she is a teen mom. Brooke saw the term "baby mama" as derogatory and associated with a person who has many children and does not care about the wellbeing of her children. This perception of her peers is related to the irresponsible breeder ideology rooted in the welfare mother controlling image. However, Brooke saw herself as a strong, Black mother who does everything with her child's best interest in mind.

The Welfare Mother controlling image pathologizes needing financial assistance and creating families outside of the idealized heterosexual marriage. As demonstrated in Brooke's story, this controlling image promotes the ideology that poor, single mothers are lazy and manipulative, undeserving of financial assistance, and are not good mothers. Andrea and Tiffany are shining examples of how government financial assistance can ease the financial burdens that impede people as they strive to achieve financial independence. However, Andrea and Tiffany are also examples of how difficulty in obtaining government financial assistance can potentially cause financial strains for loved ones who support them and emotional stress on themselves.

### ***The Black Lady***

Collins (2000) described the Black Lady controlling image as a good woman who is respectable, educated, career-oriented, and middle class. She is also single because either her success keeps her too busy for a man, or her assertive ways are unattractive to men. Andrea's story of constantly striving to be great and present herself as a successful, respectable woman is in line with the Black Lady controlling image. Andrea repeatedly

stated that she had to be great because she wanted her success to make people forget that she is a teen mom. She does not tell people she was a teen mom because she believes her success story is not the typical experience. She discussed how she cares about how other people see her and how she wants to be seen as a successful career woman, financially independent, and prosperous. She wants to be respected.

The Black Lady is a good woman because she is not a single mother, and she is self-sufficient. There is no space in this controlling image to be a teen mom because being a teen mom is not in alignment with the respectability and success of the Black Lady. Therefore, Andrea's story relates to how the Black Lady controlling image creates a fear of losing respect and thus may prevent a person from fully telling their whole story.

### *The Jezebel*

Collins (2000) described the Jezebel controlling image as a hypersexual, promiscuous woman. Her body is seen as solely existing for the sexual gratification of heterosexual men. Elements of the Jezebel controlling image were revealed in the stories of all three participants.

Andrea's story invoked the Jezebel controlling image when she discussed how she was becoming exhausted with her carefully constructed presentation of self and how at times, she wants to be ratchet. N. E. Brown and Young (2016) described how ratchet is derisively associated with lower SES Black women.

The term is particularly used to denote the less than respectable demeanor of Black women. While the actions of the Jezebel can be associated with a number of different identities, it is mostly geared toward Black women. Similarly, a Google search of the term delivers countless YouTube videos, memes, and pictures of Black women engaging in ratchet behavior (e.g. fighting, dancing

provocatively in inappropriate locations such as grocery stores, or failing to parent their children) and wearing ratchet clothes or hairstyles (e.g. multicolored hair weaves or tight and revealing clothing). (p. 46)

The way ratchet was utilized by Andrea, in the context of this interview, was to convey a need to feel free of the controlling nature of trying to adhere to a White supremacist, patriarchal standard of a respectable appearance. Andrea's desire to be ratchet is in alignment with Lewis (2013), who discussed how Black women in various SES positions engage in ratchet behaviors as a way to let loose and have fun in a confining world, not necessarily to be derisive of a particular SES of Black women. By Andrea utilizing the term ratchet to describe her desire not to straighten her hair and to have tattoos and piercings shows how binding controlling images in general are because they do not allow for a holistic manner of expressing one's self.

Tiffany experienced an element of the Jezebel controlling image during her high school graduation. Tiffany recounted how a school-based personnel member encouraged her to walk across the stage and told her not to feel bad because there were seven other pregnant students. Tiffany told me that she was not ashamed about being pregnant, and she did not know what made the school-based personnel member assume she would be ashamed. The notion that the school-based personnel would assume that she was too ashamed of her pregnancy to walk during graduation can be linked to the Jezebel controlling image. Tiffany's pregnancy was an indicator of unmarried sex, which is associated with the sexual deviancy of the Jezebel controlling image. And the assumption that Tiffany should be ashamed of being pregnant further highlights her deviance from the dominant ideal of having children within a legal heterosexual marriage and at a later

age. Tiffany's experience with that particular school-based personnel aligns with M. Morris (2016), who stated, "The educational domain today is infused with the prevailing stigma of 'Jezebel'—primarily in the form of concerns among school officials about the moral decency of girls" (p. 153).

Brooke's story highlighted aspects of the Jezebel controlling image when she discussed her birth control experience. Brooke discussed how at 14 years old, her mother took her to a medical provider to have an intrauterine device (IUD) implanted in her uterus to prevent her from having a child for the next five years. Brooke disliked the physical effects of the IUD, but for 2 years, she did not have the power over her body to have the device removed. This is an example of the Jezebel controlling image because a medical provider was willing to place a device in the uterus of a 14-year-old child that not only caused her two years of discomfort but could have also compromised her future fertility just to prevent her from becoming a teen parent. For two years, she endured the pain of being reduced to her sexuality and controlled by others' fear of her potential reproduction. This is in line with Volscho (2011), who discussed how minoritized women of color are often given long-acting forms of birth control because they are considered "sexually irresponsible" (p. 676).

All three participants had experiences that relate to the Jezebel controlling image. Andrea's constrained behavior, Tiffany's ease of embracing her pregnancy, and Brooke's physical body were affected by this powerful controlling image that pathologizes sexuality and invokes the fear of irresponsible reproduction and thus becoming a societal burden.

### *The Sapphire*

The Sapphire controlling image is characterized as the angry Black woman (Collins, 2000). She does not blindly accept the status quo, but rather she questions the status quo and advocates for her needs. Brooke's schooling experience before her pregnancy most resonated with the Sapphire controlling image.

Brooke discussed how she has had a long history of mental health struggles and implied that they were trauma-related. Before discovering she was pregnant, Brooke was expelled from an alternative day school specializing in psychiatric care. She recounted how she was expelled due to expressing anger over the school-based personnel asking her to hand over her phone after she used it unauthorized. She expressed her anger in the form of arguing, turning over a desk, and going to the bathroom to calm herself down. Brooke also expressed shock that she was expelled because the school specialized in assisting people with mental health struggles. But instead of helping her manage her emotions, the school-based personnel exacerbated her struggles and did not create a plan for her to continue her education.

This aligns with Blake et al. (2011), who discussed how Black female students are most often disciplined for defiance and were more likely to experience exclusionary discipline than their White and Latinx counterparts. Furthermore, Annamma et al. (2019) described how school-based personnel were more likely to punish Black girls based on subjective behavior (such as defiance) based on the controlling images of Black women. In this situation, Brooke's behavior was viewed through the Sapphire controlling image lens.

This incident resulted in Brooke deciding to discontinue her education. Brooke's strong emotion in advocating for the retention of her phone should have rendered a therapeutic response from the school-based personnel, but through the lens of the Sapphire controlling image, her behavior resulted in a punitive response. The need for a constructive response to student behavior is echoed by M. Morris (2016), who explained how "implementing alternative reactions to negative student behavior and developing relationships that teach young people about who they are and how they should behave in a safe learning environment doesn't conflict with developing personal responsibility" (p. 239).

The Sapphire controlling image pathologizes strong emotion, especially strong emotion in the process of self-advocacy. However, Brooke's ability to use strong emotion in the process of self-advocacy is what enabled her to re-enroll in school when she discovered she was pregnant, as well as keep herself engaged with the academic process so that she could graduate despite numerous difficult obstacles. This aligns with E. W. Morris (2007), who noted that a Black female student's ability to advocate for herself is crucial to her academic success. Therefore, Brooke's story is an example of the potentially damaging effects of the Sapphire controlling image where self-advocacy may lead to exclusionary punishment and silence may lead to lost opportunities.

### ***Summary***

The concept of controlling images of Black women helps us better understand the nature of each participants' experience. For instance, the Jezebel controlling image relates directly to how each participant experienced oppression regarding her sexuality

and reproduction. The Welfare Mother controlling image relates directly to how each experienced struggling needlessly, either financially or socially. The Matriarch controlling image relates to how each experienced struggles in their romantic relationships. The Black Lady controlling image relates to how Andrea experienced the need to be great and not fully reveal her story. And the Mammy and Sapphire controlling images relate respectively to how Brooke experienced the struggle of being forced to assist others at the expense of herself and the pain of being punished for advocating for herself.

In the end, a prevalent theme from my research was that **controlling images of Black women connected with the participants' experiences**. The concept of controlling images helps us to understand negative events and relationships in participants' lives. However, it is worth noting that the participants did not let those experiences hinder them from their goals. All three participants responded to those experiences in a manner that was empowering and propelled them towards their goals. Andrea empowers herself by allowing herself to explore and understand various aspects of her identity. Tiffany empowers herself by her willingness to take risks in expanding her goals. And Brooke empowers herself by asking for and embracing support when she needs it. Therefore, utilizing the concept of controlling images assisted me in not only locating the gendered racism within their negative experiences but also helped me to appreciate how they overcame those experiences. This aligns with M. Morris (2016), who stated,

Our girls need to know how to identify sexism in all its forms, how to understand the ways in which it intersects with racism to create problematic narratives about the femininity of Black girls, and how their own education and self-determination can change these narratives and the devastating effects of biased policies and practices associated with education, justice, and the economy.

### **Finding Deeper Meaning With Research Poetics**

In this section, I present four poems I created by utilizing the participants' words to present two of the themes I developed through thematic analysis. I created one poem from the **demonstrating the determination to succeed** theme; it is a composite of all three participant's voices. Based on the theme, **the participants' interactions with school personnel were mixed; however, each participant ultimately benefitted from some relationships with school-based personnel**, I created three poems; each poem is from each participant's voice. For each poem, I will discuss how I created the poem and the deeper meaning the poem is intended to convey. My intent in creating these poems was to re/present the participants' words in the hopes of surfacing deeper meanings.

#### **Demonstrating the Determination to Succeed**

One of the themes that arose from the thematic analysis was **demonstrating the determination to succeed**. In creating the related poem, I went through each participant's transcript and looked for phrases that expressed decision points, how motherhood impacted their decisions, sentiments of overcoming, and their definition of success.

The following is the poem that I created from their words:

**Determination to Succeed**

*I was about to live a reckless life  
 I had attempted to kill myself multiple times  
 Having my son so young literally saved my life  
 I'm somebody's mother  
 I typically don't tell my story because my story is  
 Nothing but God  
 Most people won't even know that I'm a teen mom  
 With all of the things that I've accomplished  
 They think that I didn't have as much struggle  
 In reality, I did  
 It made me want to beat the statistics and the odds  
 I wanted everything to be so grand that you forgot  
 The teen mom, I don't have to live off that anymore  
 Don't have to settle for the status quo  
 I'm just like super overachiever at this point  
 Sky's the limit*

Lines 1-4 are the voices of Brooke and Tiffany.

*I was about to live a reckless life (Brooke)  
 I had attempted to kill myself multiple times (Tiffany)  
 Having my son so young literally saved my life (Tiffany)  
 I'm somebody's mother (Brooke)*

Each participant discussed how being a pregnant and parenting teen motivated them to succeed academically and financially. They expressed how mothering gave them a purpose in life. Brooke and Tiffany revealed how before motherhood, they struggled with the desire to live. In the interviews, Brooke and Tiffany discussed their mental health struggles and how becoming a mother gave them a purpose in life. These four lines show

how decision points that could have been detrimental were positively impacted by motherhood.

Lines 5-13 are the voices of Andrea, Brooke, and Tiffany.

*I typically don't tell my story because my story is (Andrea)*  
*Nothing but God (Andrea)*  
*Most people won't even know that I'm a teen mom (Andrea)*  
*With all of the things that I've accomplished (Andrea)*  
*They think that I didn't have as much struggle (Andrea)*  
*In reality, I did (Andrea)*  
*It made me want to beat the statistics and the odds (Brooke)*  
*I wanted everything to be so grand that you forgot (Andrea)*  
*The teen mom, I don't have to live off that anymore (Andrea)*

Each participant's words show a recognition that there is a social stigma regarding teen pregnancy and a belief that they have overcome that stigma. However, when isolating their phrases, I became more aware of the effort they exerted to overcome the stigma. Words like "beat" and "don't have to settle" reveal how the stigma of becoming a teen mother created for these participants adversity that they had to overcome, even though for Brooke and Tiffany, it was a positive event that gave their lives meaning. Andrea's desire to do things "so grand" that people "forgot" that she was a teen mom implies that one cannot be accomplished and a teen mom, even though her experience contradicts that implication.

The last three lines are the voice of Tiffany.

*Don't have to settle for the status quo (Tiffany)*  
*I'm just like super overachiever at this point (Tiffany)*  
*Sky's the limit (Tiffany)*

Tiffany's words embody the high achieving goals that each participant discussed and their positive beliefs about their future potential. However, her words of achievement and future potential seem to be in spite of becoming a teen mom rather than because of being a teen mom.

The "Determination to Succeed" poem helped me realize the participants' perceptions of what a teen mom's life is supposed to be, what a good life is supposed to be, and the contradictory reality of their own lives. Thus, the conflicted nature of teen pregnancy alluded to by SmithBattle et al. (2020) when they stated that "Teen mothering simultaneously transforms and imperils" (p. 3) became more apparent. I was able to see how the participants wrestled with the ideology that teen pregnancy was supposed to be a negative experience, yet they had positive experiences. By creating a composite of their voices, I was able to see the similarities in their experiences, which helped solidify the theme.

### **Interactions With School-Based Personnel**

Another theme that arose from the thematic analysis was that **the participants' interactions with school personnel were mixed; however, each participant ultimately benefitted from some relationships with school-based personnel.** For this theme, I created individual poems because I wanted to re/present each participant's individual experience. I went through each participant's transcript and looked for phrases that expressed their overall sentiment regarding their interactions with school-based personnel.

The following poem re/presents Andrea's interactions with school-based personnel.

**If it had not been**

*I would have been screwed  
I mean freakin' screwed  
Didn't make any special modifications for me to be great  
I started Homebound, but it was sucky*

*My teachers were bomb.com  
Always so understanding  
This is quite horrible, horrible, horrible  
I didn't even do a senior project  
Gave me an "A"  
Let me make up those hours  
If it had not been for her  
I would not know where I would be*

Andrea's poem re/presents a contradiction in her experience. On the one hand, she expressed how her school did not "make any special modifications for [her] to be great" and how she would have been "freakin' screwed" if she had to depend on the Homebound program for graduation. But on the other hand, she discussed how one teacher exempted her from the senior project, and another teacher allowed her to make up her clinical hours to obtain her CNA license. Upon deeper analysis, Andrea's poem reveals that while her school systemically may have failed her, individual members of the school-based personnel supported her. Therefore, Andrea's poem highlights ways that the school should systemically change to better support pregnant and parenting teens instead of pregnant and parenting teens being left to hope they have school-based personnel willing to be supportive.

The following poem re/presents Tiffany's interactions with school-based personnel.

**I Didn't Feel Ashamed**

*I went back for graduation  
I was showing  
I did not walk for graduation  
Not because I was pregnant  
I didn't really feel the need to  
I wanted my diploma  
I had to stay until after the ceremony*

*A lady that was organizing the graduation  
She was like, "Are you sure you don't want to walk?"  
"There's seven of you"  
"Don't feel bad"*

*I don't know what made her say that  
Like I was just ashamed to walk because I was pregnant  
I just want to get my diploma and go  
I don't want to stay and wait  
I didn't feel ashamed*

Tiffany's poem re/presents her confusion over a statement from a school-based personnel member. The graduation ceremony was the first time Tiffany appeared at school visibly pregnant since she had technically graduated after her first semester senior year. What Tiffany thought would be a quick errand of retrieving her diploma presented the first situation where she interacted with her school in a visibly pregnant body. The comments of the school-based personnel member presented Tiffany with the notion that she was a number ("there are seven of you") and that her pregnancy was shameful ("don't feel bad"). Upon deeper analysis, this poem exposes the school-based personnel member's negative views on teen pregnancy even though, on the surface, she appears to

be sympathetic and understanding. Therefore, Tiffany's poem highlights how a student's sentiments regarding their pregnancy cannot be assumed and how the personal beliefs of school-based personnel regarding teen pregnancy may affect the interaction with a pregnant/parenting student.

The following poem re/presents Brooke's interactions with school-based personnel.

**Worth the Time**

*It was easy  
I just went up there  
Filled out my paperwork  
And I was able to start  
I let my teachers know upfront  
I was like I'm gonna grow*

*One time it was really hot in the school  
I had to go sit in the office by a fan and do my work  
There was a teacher  
She would bring me like little snacks  
Because I was struggling to stay awake and have energy  
The nurse would monitor my blood pressure and see how I am doing  
Guidance counselors were always supportive*

*I thought that I wasn't worth the time at first  
They made me feel like I was a priority  
It makes me want to be mattered*

Brooke's poem re/presents her ease in navigating her schooling experience while she was pregnant. Before her pregnancy, Brooke had experienced a lack of support from school-based personnel that made her feel she "wasn't worth the time," and she had decided to drop out of school. This poem begins when she decides to re-enroll in school upon discovering she was pregnant. I chose phrases that conveyed the ease she

experienced re-enrolling in school, the accommodations and support she received from various school-based personnel, and how the school-based personnel's support changed Brooke's opinion of herself. Upon deeper analysis, the poem reveals a school systemically supporting a student's well-being and academic engagement. Therefore, Brooke's poem highlights the positive impact that school-based personnel can have on academically re-engaging students and supporting pregnant students.

The individual poems I created regarding the participants' interactions with school-based personnel allowed me to compare the participants' individual experiences with their own words. I was able to juxtapose Brooke's systemic academic support with Andrea's sporadic academic support. I was also able to juxtapose Tiffany's experience of school-based personnel implying she should feel ashamed with Brooke's experience of school-based personnel actively creating experiences where she felt like a priority and that she mattered. Through the use of research poetics, I explored the impact the school-based personnel had on the academic success and the self-concept of pregnant and parenting students.

Research poetics allowed me to interact with the participants' voices and arrange their words in a manner that helped me imagine and interpret their experiences. Through this analytical technique, I was able to find deeper meaning in the themes and creatively convey that meaning with the participants' words.

### **Discussion**

I created this study to add to the literature the stories of Black women who experienced teen pregnancy in high school and learn ways to better assist this

demographic. The three participants' stories illustrate the importance of support, creating opportunities for empowerment, and the need to end the stigma of teen pregnancy and the controlling images of Black women.

As demonstrated by the participants, teen pregnancy is not a problem nor necessarily a barrier to high achievement. M. Morris (2016) noted how teen pregnancy could actually inspire young women to renew their commitment to their education and their future. However, as presented by SmithBattle (2007a), a lack of accommodation for their medical, emotional, educational, and childcare needs can create an academic disengagement that could potentially lead to dropping out of school. Their stories highlight how inflexibility within the school system and low levels of support received from school-based personnel could have been the factors that hindered their academic success.

The intersectional identity of being a Black pregnant and parenting teen created conditions where the participants not only had to deal with the stigma of teen pregnancy but also the controlling images of Black women. However, the participants demonstrated that those controlling images could lose their grip as Black women encounter and embrace opportunities for empowerment. Opportunities for empowerment came in the form of participating in community-based non-profit organizational programs that helped them learn about their changing bodies and how to manage their birth and parenting experiences and educational opportunities that allowed for successful graduation as well as post-graduation success. But most importantly, opportunities for empowerment occurred when the participants felt valued and that their success mattered.

The participants' stories also revealed areas in which school systems can improve to be more accommodating and supportive of pregnant and parenting teens. In the next sections, I will discuss how this study can better inform school-based personnel as well as the educational system on how better to support this population.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The participants' stories highlight the importance of supportive school-based personnel members and their willingness to be flexible to the needs of pregnant and parenting students. Regardless of the school-based personnel's level of power to enact systemic change, all can say an encouraging word and express a belief that a pregnant and parenting student can succeed. Creating a positive and nurturing environment is within the ability of every member of the school-based personnel.

The participants were generous in sharing their varied stories, but one key achievement that was important to them was obtaining their high school diploma. Andrea and Tiffany started navigating ways to accelerate attaining graduation credits before pregnancy. Andrea was excited to graduate and embark on her career path as a CNA. Even though Tiffany did not want to walk during the graduation ceremony, she was excited to receive her diploma. And Brooke was so determined to graduate that she was willing to leave her hospital bed hours after giving birth to go to school and take her final exams. Therefore, given the importance that graduation held for each of the participants and the challenges that pregnant and parenting students can experience in achieving graduation, I offer recommendations in the following areas: school support, school procedures, graduation requirements, and career and technical education programs.

## **School Support**

Supportive school-based personnel can help maintain and increase the academic engagement of pregnant teens. This recommendation is supported by M. Morris (2016) and SmithBattle (2007a), who both noted that supportive school-based personnel could lead to academic success. However, M. Morris (2016) and SmithBattle (2007a) noted that social narratives and school-based personnel tend to view pregnant and parenting teens from a deficit lens, which may skew their ability to see how pregnant and parenting students can be academically successful.

Brooke's story gave examples of how school-based personnel can be more supportive. Her school counselors made sure she had her classwork and could make up absences, which was crucial to Brooke feeling confident that she could keep up with her assignments during her pregnancy. Her teachers allowed her to take bathroom breaks as needed and provided her with snacks so she could focus on her lessons. The school nurse monitored her health and connected her with a community-based non-profit organization, which expanded her support system. Each school-based personnel member was invested and committed to her success. This personalized support led Brooke to remain engaged with her schooling, increased her self-esteem, and increased her self-efficacy.

I am aware that the support Brooke received appears to be time-intensive. However, the school also collaborated with a community-based non-profit organization specializing in supporting pregnant and parenting teens. The organization assisted the school in supporting the pregnant teens by providing advocacy and mentoring. Sadler et al. (2007) discussed how school-based support programs could support schools in helping

pregnant and parenting students stay academically engaged and achieve graduation.

Therefore, the school expanded its ability to support pregnant teens to enhance not only their academic success but also their holistic success.

### **School Procedures**

Pregnant and parenting students need the flexibility to maintain academic engagement and achieve academic success. SmithBattle (2007a) noted how absences and bureaucratic procedures could lead to pregnant and parenting students disengaging from and discontinuing school. In this study, each participant was able to graduate successfully due to flexibility within school procedures.

Andrea experienced flexibility when her CNA instructor allowed her to make up her clinical hours when she returned from maternity leave. This flexibility allowed her to finish the CNA program successfully and start her CNA career shortly after graduation.

Even though Tiffany had planned to graduate a semester early before her pregnancy, the fact that her school allowed for the flexibility to graduate early proved to be helpful during her pregnancy. Additionally, Tiffany attended a career-oriented magnet school that started later in the morning, which allowed her to manage her morning sickness before going to school.

Brooke experienced flexibility in two important ways. First, she was easily able to re-enroll in school after dropping out. Secondly, after missing her scheduled final exams due to giving birth, her school counselors administered her exams in her home while she recovered.

Every student, not just pregnant and parenting students, have needs that do not easily fit with rigid school procedures. Flexibility in school procedures would allow for more synchronous and asynchronous online options for students who need to or want to engage in class but not attend school, the ability to easily graduate in different time frames (either earlier or later), and a simple process to re-enroll for academically re-engaging students.

### **Graduation Requirements**

Schools can be flexible in the graduation requirements. In this study, the senior project, which was a graduation requirement, could have affected two of the participants' ability to graduate in their desired time frame. As discussed by the participants, the senior project involved choosing a topic and producing a presentation and a paper on that topic.

In this study, Andrea and Brooke encountered difficulties completing their senior project. Andrea was not given the proper information to complete the project while she was on maternity leave. Brooke tried in vain to complete the paper for her senior project while she was being induced to give birth. While Andrea's teacher decided to give her an A even though she did not do a senior project, Brooke received a D on her paper because she was three pages short of an eight-page requirement.

Based on these participants' stories, school systems should reconsider what constitutes a senior project and/or what is necessary to graduate. For example, Andrea did not do a senior project, but she finished her CNA requirement and was the only one in her class to pass the state exam for her CNA license on the first try. And Brooke's senior project topic was on teen pregnancy, which was her current reality. She had completed

the presentation portion of her senior project and was trying to complete the writing portion while she was giving birth as a pregnant teen. Therefore, Andrea obtaining her CNA license could be a senior project, and Brooke could have been exempted from the paper portion of the project due to extenuating circumstances so that she could have focused on her birthing process.

SmithBattle (2007a) discussed how frustrating it could be for pregnant and parenting students who expect to graduate to be denied graduation due to not being informed of missing credits, not receiving proper instructions to complete assignments, or the school's mismanagement of student records. This delay in graduation due to rigid requirements may result in the student not graduating at all because they have competing demands for their time and attention. Therefore, schools should exercise flexibility in evaluating graduation requirements, allow for substitutions, and understand extenuating circumstances.

### **Career and Technical Education Programs**

Schools should have opportunities for students to graduate from high school and achieve gainful employment in various fields. Zook (2019) discussed how career and technical education programs promote academic retention and satisfaction and provide access to in-demand jobs. Therefore, career and technical education programs can help keep students academically engaged while in school and able to support themselves and/or others when they graduate. In this study, Andrea and Tiffany enrolled in programs that allowed them to have employable skills upon graduation. Andrea discussed

extensively how important it was for her to obtain her CNA licensure and that the opportunities it afforded her were key to her financial success.

### **Summary**

I am writing this dissertation at a revolutionary educational point in time. Due to the COVID-19 health pandemic, K-12 schools were closed across the nation. According to Education Week (2020), “the closures affected at least 55.1 million students in 124,000 U.S. public and private schools” (para. 3). Schools were forced to move away from traditional academic models and to innovate new ways of delivering remote quality education. These innovations may lead to more flexible school schedules, flexible online options, more opportunities to show academic mastery, and more career opportunities with a high school degree. This increase in academic flexibility would greatly benefit pregnant and parenting teens as they not only pursue graduation but gainful employment.

I am aware that remote learning options could lead to pregnant and parenting students falling through the proverbial cracks in the system. Therefore, it will still be necessary to focus on creating supportive environments where school-based personnel are invested in the academic achievement of each student. This is where community collaboration can help follow up with the most vulnerable students to ensure that they can access the information and thrive in a remote learning environment.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on this research study, I would suggest that future researchers into this subject should continue to gather the stories of pregnant and parenting teens in high school and expand the participant criteria to include more intersectional identities. The

participants in this study had similar intersectional identities: American Black, U.S. citizens, cisgender, stable economic resources, and middle SES backgrounds. M. Morris (2016) noted how we need to have “culturally competent and gender-responsive methods of teaching—approaches that respond to girls who stand at the crossroads of racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, and poverty” (pp. 237–238). Therefore, this study could expand to include various races and ethnicities, legal standings, gender identities, sexual orientations, economic resources, and social classes.

In addition to gathering the stories of more pregnant and parenting teens in high school, I would also recommend studying the bias of school-based personnel in proactively assisting students. The schools in this study had academic support structures in place that allowed for the participants to complete high school, but participants noted that the school-based personnel were gatekeepers to those academic support structures. Examples of potential bias were re/presented in the stories of Andrea and Brooke. Andrea noted that she believed her teacher allowed her to make up her CNA clinical hours because the teacher perceived Andrea to be a good and determined student. Brooke noted that her school counselors proactively ensured she had the needed accommodations to graduate, whereas previous schools did not make such an effort. Also, SmithBattle (2007a) discussed how difficulty in attaining existing academic support structures due to school-based personnel bureaucratic inefficiencies could lead to academic disengagement for pregnant and parenting students. Therefore, there needs to be more research on how school-based personnel’s bias toward students impacts their access to academic support structures.

### **Final Thoughts**

One of the biggest revelations I had in conducting this study was the importance of creating spaces for people to tell their stories. Initially, participants were nervous and thought they had nothing to say, but they joyously invited me into their narratives when allowed to share their story with an interested listener. And as I listened to their stories, I was able to see the commonalities of our shared humanity and the differences of our unique experiences. I could feel my empathy and human connectedness deepen as they continued to tell their stories.

In this dissertation, not only was I very intentional about examining the way Black women were reduced by controlling images, but I was also very intentional about not including any statistics regarding teen pregnancy. I did not want to do a study about the numbers; I wanted to do a study about the experience. When I first decided to research the experiences of Black women who were pregnant teens, I was told by several people that the number of teen pregnancies is down, so it is no longer an issue. However, just because the numbers are down does not mean the experiences no longer exist. We often reduce the human experience to a number and assign a one-dimensional stereotype, or controlling image, to that number. Therefore, this study focused solely on the lived experiences of the participants so that instead of seeing a number or a stereotype, the reader could hear a voice.

As stated in Chapter I, teen pregnancy was not my direct experience, and I was raised to treat it as a stigma to be avoided. I was taught that it would derail your life, you would end up in poverty, and the kid would behave badly and not do well in school.

There were plenty of statistics and after school specials to reinforce this singular detrimental outcome of teen pregnancy. However, by listening to the participants' stories, I learned (and I hope that the reader has learned as well) that teen pregnancy neither has a universal origin nor a universal outcome. Each experience is different, but we will not learn that by lumping people into numbers or stereotypes.

Therefore, I sincerely hope that we not only move away from reducing people to stereotypes as discussed with controlling images but also move away from reducing people to numbers. People are wonderfully complex beings with amazing stories that we need to share and that we need to hear.

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## APPENDIX A

### IRB INFORMATION SHEET

Project Title: Stories of Black Women Who Experienced Teen Pregnancy in High School

Principal Investigator: Alia Henderson

Faculty Advisor: Craig Peck

**What is this all about?**

I am asking you to participate in this research study because I believe your thoughts and sentiments regarding your experience with your school would help me better understand the interaction between pregnant Black teens and school-based personnel (i.e., teachers, counselors, administrators, secretaries, bus drivers, cafeteria staff, janitorial staff- any adult who works in the school). This research project will only take about 2 hours and will involve meeting with me once for an individual interview. Your participation in this research project is voluntary.

**How will this negatively affect me?**

No, other than the time you spend on this project, there are no known or foreseeable risks involved with this study.

**What do I get out of this research project?**

The benefits to you by doing this study are that you might learn some new things about yourself, and you might enjoy sharing your thoughts and sentiments regarding your interactions and experience. Additionally, your participation in this study may help me and others better understand how to support pregnant Black teens in high school.

**Will I get paid for participating?**

Participation in this project is voluntary, and there will not be any compensation.

**What about my confidentiality?**

I will do everything possible to make sure that your information is kept confidential. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. I will allow you to choose the name that is used when I write the paper to protect your privacy, and I will keep your information stored on a secure, password-protected computer server.

Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed, although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described in this section.

**What if I do not want to be in this research study?**

You do not have to be part of this project. This project is voluntary, and it is up to you to decide to participate in this research project. If you agree to participate at any time in this project, you may stop participation without penalty.

**What if I have questions?**

You can ask **Alia Henderson (adhender@uncg.edu)** AND **Craig Peck (c\_peck@uncg.edu)** anything about the study. If you have concerns about how you have been treated in this study, call the Office of Research Integrity Director at 1-855-251-2351.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

Below is a list of interview questions for the structured aspect of the interview. During the interview, this list served as a guide for the information I sought to obtain. I utilized appropriate follow-up questions to obtain in-depth responses and created space for the participant to share information outside of the interview questions.

#### **Individual Interview Questions**

##### *High School Pregnancy Experience Questions*

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. I understand you were pregnant in high school; tell me about that experience.
3. How old were you when you found out you were pregnant?
4. How did you feel when you found out you were pregnant?
5. When you became pregnant, what were your expectations of what your life would be like in high school? What was the difference between before you were pregnant and after you were pregnant?
6. When you became pregnant, did you see yourself finishing school? Did you see yourself going to college? How did it differ from before you became pregnant?
7. When you became pregnant, what did you think your future jobs could be? How was that different from before you became pregnant?
8. When you became pregnant, how did you think it would affect your love life- whether it is the person you had the child with or in the future? How did it differ from before you became pregnant?

*Interaction with School-Based Personnel Questions*

9. How do you think the school saw your future before you got pregnant? How did it change after you became pregnant?
10. Was there a difference in how you saw your future and how the school saw your future before you became pregnant? How did it differ after you became pregnant?
11. What was your support system in school academically during your pregnancy?
12. What was your support system in school emotionally during your pregnancy?
13. Thinking about when you were pregnant in high school, how do you think about your experience with the school (explain with teachers, counselors, etc.)?
14. If you could redo your experience with your school while you were a pregnant teen, what would you change?
15. What kind of support from your school would have made it better while you were a pregnant teen?
16. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that I have not asked?
17. The following demographic questions will be specifically asked if it not ascertained earlier in the interview:
  - Racial Identity, Current Age, Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation, Relationship Status, Level of Education (Did you graduate high school? Yes or No; What grade did you leave school?; \*No assuming GED), Current Occupation, Life Goals

\* According to a community-based non-profit organization staff member, assuming a person has a GED could be considered triggering or insulting.