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Understanding Barriers African American Teenage Mothers face in Pursuit of Higher Education

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University 2017

Abstract

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MSW, University of Southern Mississippi, 2010

BS, William Carey University, 2008

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Social Work

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Abstract

Researchers have found that social workers have difficulty identifying their roles in responding to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education. This action research project explored the roles social workers play in responding to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education and how social workers responded. The ecological systems theory was used to help understand this phenomenon. An action research methodology was used to collect data from 6 licensed social workers who worked with African American teenage mothers. Three focus groups were facilitated to explore the social work practice problem. The data were collected, transcribed and coded using an open coding and thematic analysis process. Findings revealed 5 overarching themes: 1) emotions; 2) barriers; 3) support systems; 4) success factors; and 5) social work practice approaches and implications. Findings indicated that these social workers responded to the barriers African American teenage mothers face by exploring teenage mothers' emotions as well as their own emotions, by using appropriate social work practice approaches, and exploring the factors that contribute to teenage mothers' success. Participants also responded by acknowledging teenage mothers' support systems and by addressing the actual barriers while in the roles of case manager, educator, broker, and advocate. These findings affect positive social change across all systems of society by guiding social workers to find and implement feasible and sustainable psychosocial interventions to address identified barriers. Eliminating these barriers provides higher educational opportunities for African-American teenage mothers.

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Dedication

I dedicate my Action Research project to God and my family. Without faith and believing and trusting in the God I serve, completing this action research project would have been impossible. My prayer has always been to remain humble enough to serve and acknowledge God and passionate enough to walk and work in the purpose God has set aside just for me.

A special thanks to my wonderful parents, Mac and Doris Middleton for never letting me give up. They have encouraged me since September 2013 when I began traveling the bumpy road of this doctorate program. No matter how difficult the journey became, my parents were always there. If I hit a bump in the road and had a flat tire, they were there to help me pull over to the side of the road, encourage me, change the tire, and then restart the car to help me back on the road to success.

I will forever be grateful to my cousins, India and Eric and my aunt Ingrid and uncle Eric. My aunt and uncle will never truly understand how much I appreciate their words of encouragement and extra pushes. No matter how much I doubted myself, they believed in me with no worries and always reminded me that anything worth having is worth working hard for. I will forever be grateful to you all, your wisdom, and love.

Lastly, but most importantly, I dedicate this action research project to my son Aiden and husband Fredrick. There were so many nights I asked myself how this action research project would be completed along with stressors of work, family, and life in general. It was during those times I looked at my son and realized he was actually the answer to that question. A special thanks to my husband for his patience. I thank him for withstanding the stress of me completing my doctorate degree in addition to the

unforeseen and unpredictable stress of marriage. I thank him for never giving up even when I wanted to. Thank you all for being my biggest fans.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the entire faculty and staff of Walden University for helping me accomplish this goal of my academic career. A special thanks to Dr. Pablo Arriaza for being more influential and encouraging that he may ever realize. Thank you Dr. Arriaza for helping me achieve the possibilities of what I once thought was impossible. I would also like to thank to Dr. Jeanna Jacobsen for motivating me to exercise my critical thinking skills even when I felt discouraged and thought I would never see the light at the end of this long doctoral tunnel. I am will forever be grateful to the both of you.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Teenage pregnancy is a prevalent and steadily increasing social issue in the United States (Bouchard, 2015). In identifying teenage pregnancy as a community problem, Bouchard noted "one out of every 10 American girls becomes pregnant before age 20, and minority backgrounds are at an even higher risk" (p. 3). Bouchard also explained how many teenage mothers become dependent on entitlement programs and as a result do not seek opportunities to pursue a college education. Pappas (2013) stated that Mississippi is one of the top six states with the highest teenage pregnancy rate. The National Conference of Legislatures (2015) further discussed that in Mississippi less than two percent, of young mothers receive a college education or a higher degree by age 30, with 30% of the population being African American women. The lack of educational opportunities often leads to socio-psychological repercussions such as unemployment and low paying jobs (Florescu, Temneanu, & Mindru, 2016).

In this action research study, I focused on African American teenage mothers who confronted barriers in pursuit of a college education and how clinical social workers responded to this issue. For this action research study, I used the terms *higher education* and *college education* interchangeably. African American teenage mothers in pursuit of higher education included teenage mothers and pregnant teenagers who were currently pursuing a college education after completing high school or obtaining a GED, teenage mothers and pregnant teenagers ages 15-19 who desired to pursue a college education in the future, and young mothers ages 19 and older who had children as a teenager and were currently pursuing a college education or desiring to pursue a college education in the

future. African American teenage mothers when compared to teenagers of other ethnic groups experience more socioeconomic disadvantages as a result of their pregnancy, such as barriers when pursuing a college education (Killebrew, Smith, Nevels, and Weiss, 2014).

Practice Problem

Clinical social workers experience difficulty when responding to African American teenage mothers attempting to pursue a college education. Social workers' difficulty when responding to this issue is a result of their lack of understanding about how to respond to the issue. Social workers also lack the understanding of what roles are needed to respond to this issue. Simigiu (2012) explained that social workers have difficulty responding to this issue as a result of their lack of access to knowledge on how to remove barriers and positively impact teenage mothers from a community perspective. Social workers' lack of knowledge and lack of access to knowledge regarding resources to remove social, emotional, and economical barrier affects their ability to help young mothers educationally, psychologically, and emotionally (Simigiu, 2012).

Without knowledge of resources to remove barriers African American teenage mothers experience when pursuing a college education, social workers may not be able to adequately assist these young mothers. This may further lead to a large number of African American teenage mothers not pursuing a college education and experiencing limited career opportunities in the future. These barriers may include poverty, little or no family support, having more than one child, lack of transportation, or a distorted sense of self-efficacy.

In terms of adolescence being a difficult developmental period, Frey and Alvarez (2011) explained that social workers are challenged to adequately meet teenage mothers' needs because of the different factors that must be considered when providing services to this demographic. These factors are identified as child welfare, developmental disabilities, mental health, possible substance abuse, education, and juvenile justice (Frey and Alvarez, 2011). Social workers have difficulty when responding to barriers teenage mothers face as a result of not knowing how to include external, but important factors in the intervention process.

This study's clinical social work practice problem is how clinical social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education as well as their roles in responding to those barriers. Ultimately, the benefit and societal change I hope to bring about by addressing this problem is to enhance opportunities for African American teenage mothers who want to pursue a college education and attain a degree in higher education. Addressing this problem will bring about positive social change by making clinical social workers more aware of the barriers that African American teenage mothers face and providing insight on the most effective ways to respond to the barriers. With this awareness, social workers will be better able to empower African American teenage mothers to pursue a college education.

Action Research

Action research is a helpful process for clinical social workers to use to address social issues and achieve social justice within the context of minority communities with the intention of implementing more effective clinical practices (Johnston-Goodstar, 2013). I facilitated focus groups among clinical social workers to gain insight on what

their current roles and responsibilities were in addressing the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education in southern Mississippi. The information shared in the focus groups led to discussions among participants about what their roles and responsibilities were and the interventions they utilized in responding to this social issue. Once they had identified their roles, responsibilities, and interventions, they were able to further identify the most effective roles, responsibilities, and interventions.

In identifying what was most effective, participants further discussed what roles, responsibilities, and interventions were ineffective, why, and what could be done to make them more effective in responding to the barriers faced by African American teenage mothers in pursuit of higher education. The action research methodology aligned with the research question because through the use of focus groups, I was able to gain insight on how social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education and their roles in responding to this issue. The action research methodology also guided my exploration of how this social issue impacts clinical social work practice.

Document Organization

To provide clarity and structure, my action research study is organized in systematic sections. The focus of this study was directed to identify social workers' understanding of their roles and responses to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education, specifically in southern Mississippi. The barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education is the social work issue or problem that was addressed by social workers. Clinical social work

is defined as a social work practice within the healthcare profession that requires active listening, empathy, acceptance, and respect from the social worker (Diaconescu, 2014).

I have examined the problem and provided historical background information to support the problem's existence and importance. The major sections and headings of the first part of the action research project include the introduction (practice problem, action research, and document organization), problem statement (benefits, research question, and goals and objectives), purpose statement (focus of the study, gap in clinical social work practice, improving clinical practice), nature of the doctoral program (definition of terms, data collection and analysis, limitations, and biases), theoretical and conceptual framework (rationale and intention), significance of the study (extending knowledge), values and ethics (code of ethics as a guide and relationship to code of ethics), review of the professional and academic, literature review to key variables and or concepts (teenage pregnancy in the United States, ethnicity, rural vs. urban, social workers' roles, and current approaches).

The major sections and heading of the project section include: background and context, methodology, sources of data and data collection, and ethical procedures. The major section and headings of Section 3, presentation of findings include: findings of the action research study, data analysis technique, coding, validation and legitimation, limitations, and findings. The major sections and headings of Section 4, the recommended solutions include: application to professional practice and implication for social change, application for professional practice, solutions for clinical social work practice (systems-oriented solutions and impact on personal practice), and implications for social change.

Using academic literature, I supported the need for investigating the clinical social work practice challenges. I also documented previous researchers' strategies and outcomes when attempting to rectify social issues consistent with those experienced by clinical social workers intervening with similar populations. In presenting my strategy, I detailed the process I used to collect and analyze data, which is consistent with action research methodology, along with the ecological systems theory guiding my study of this social issue.

Problem Statement

In this action research study, I focused specifically on the social work profession in terms of the lack of understanding among clinical social workers about how to respond and what their roles are in responding to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education. Social workers assume many roles to intervene in different capacities when assisting individuals, families, and groups based on the need of the target population (Kerson & McCoyd, 2013). Considering that clinical social workers interact with African American teenage mothers and pregnant teenagers, they are well-positioned to understand, address, and respond to their challenges. Killibrew et al. (2014) indicated there is a low percentage (less than one-half) of African American teenage mothers who obtain a degree in higher education. This indicates the possibility of a lack of understanding on how to respond and what roles to play by professionals who interact with African American teenage mothers facing barriers in pursuit of higher education.

As a former medical social worker, my coworkers and I often discussed difficult cases with our supervisor during weekly staff meetings. One type of case we frequently discussed involved patients who were teenage mothers admitted for the delivery of a

child and in need of social services for discharge planning due to financial instability, multiple pregnancies, or little or no family support. As we discussed these cases during weekly meetings, we realized that these teenage mothers were often African Americans and lacked education higher than high school. This made me realize that the barriers these teenage mothers confronted hindered their ability to pursue a college education to expand their career options, increase their household income, provide for their families, and not be as dependent on assistance from professional entities.

As a social worker who resides in Hattiesburg, a city located in southern Mississippi, I am aware that African American teenage mothers have challenges when pursuing higher education. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2010, 53% of the Hattiesburg resident population was Black or African American alone and 32.2% of all residents had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. I am aware that there is a lack of understanding among clinical social workers regarding their roles in addressing the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education. The inability of professionals to assist the young women in removing barriers to attain their educational goals leads to a future with limited career opportunities. Clinical social workers who understand their roles and responsibilities can advocate for and better assist teenage mothers in their pursuit of higher education despite the barriers they face.

Benefits

Social workers, including myself, could benefit from this action research project. Through sharing and gaining information, these benefits include gaining awareness of current effective methods to address the social issue and developing insight on what roles are useful in assisting African American teenage mothers facing barriers in their pursuit

of a college education. African American teenage mothers may ultimately benefit from the action research project because what social workers learn from their participation in the study and the findings of the study could result in more effective social work approaches.

Research Question

The research questions aligned with the action research methodology in exploring the social phenomenon of how clinical social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education. The research questions for this study were:

-RQ1: How do social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education in southern Mississippi?

-RQ2: What are social workers' roles in response to this issue in an effort to impact clinical social work?

I used these questions to explore the social issue and how it impacts clinical social work practice.

Goals and Objectives

This action research project was conducted to increase the understanding of clinical social workers' response to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education, to understand social workers' roles when responding to this issue, and understand how clinical social workers' response to this issue impacts clinical social work practice. This action research study was also conducted to illustrate to clinical social workers the importance of including cultural and social factors in exploring and addressing social issues. Cultural and social factors associated with

teenage pregnancy (i.e., lack of support to achieve educational success and mental health issues) were important in exploring this social issue in terms of how social workers' respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education and their roles in responding to the barriers (Akella & Jordan, 2015; Leech, Adams, & Littlefield, 2014). Hoskins and Simons (2015) identified these cultural and social factors as poverty, mental health, race and ethnicity, family relationships, family composition, and peer relationships.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of my action research project was to develop an understanding of how clinical social workers respond to barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education and clinical social workers' roles in responding to the barriers. My intention through the action research process was to enhance clinical social workers' practice through enhancing their knowledge about the barriers African American teenage mothers face. Another result was to contribute to the body of academic knowledge. Through this action research project I was able to provide information and insight to clinical social workers about how to address barriers in working with African American teenage mothers in pursuit of higher education. This was important to me because it proved the relevance of conducting this action research project to enhance the knowledge of clinical social workers in the southern Mississippi area.

Focus of the Study

In the southern Mississippi area teenage pregnancy is prevalent, and as reported by the National Conference of State Legislatures (2015), as of 2012, Mississippi had the

third highest rate in the United States of which out of 4,781 teenage births 2,597 were of

African American women ages 15-19. However, the barriers that affect teenage mothers'

abilites to pursue a college education have not been completely identified or understood

by social workers. Clinical social workers interact with African American teenage

mothers initially in the hospital during the teenager's first childbirth. They assist teenage

mothers with safe discharge plans, a safe place to live, food, and the necessary things to

care for the child. Later social workers follow up with teenagers in the community

assisting with their career and academic plans after completing high school, guiding and

counseling teenage mothers with social issues in a school setting, and referring teenage

mothers to appropriate services and community resources to assist with prenatal and

postnatal concerns. Clinical social workers interacting with African American teenage

mothers are in a good position to provide beneficial information and insight on how

clinical social workers respond to these barriers and their roles in their response.

Gap in Clinical Social Work Practice

The gap in clinical social work practice that this study has addressed is that

clinical social workers lack the knowledge of how to respond to the barriers African

American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education and lack the knowledge

of their roles in responding to the barriers. This unawareness leads to ineffective social

work interventions in working with African American teenage mothers, which leads to

fewer higher educational outcomes for this population (Killebrew et al., 2014). This

action research project also explored why this gap exists, and how it can be altered so that

social workers can become more effective in working with African American teenage

mothers confronting barriers in pursuit of a college education. By understanding clinical

social workers' roles in responding to the barriers African American teenage mothers experience in pursuit of a college education this action research project has the potential to bridge this gap.

In bridging the gaps in clinical social work practice through use of action research, I identified the different social work roles needed in addressing the issue of attaining a college education among African American teenage mothers in southern Mississippi. I also used this action research project to bridge the gaps in clinical social work practice by providing insight on how clinical social workers respond to the social issue in different capacities. Through learning how social workers respond to this issue in different capacities, this action research study helped bridge the gaps to understand which responses and social work roles are most effective. My action research project addressed these gaps by exploring how social workers currently respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers confront in pursuit of a college education.

Improving Clinical Practice

This action research project provided me with new information which will improve my clinical practice. This information consisted of social work strategies and roles conducive to positively changing African American teenage mothers' ability to pursue a college education, despite the barriers they face. The information I gained from this action research project has helped me to consider the importance of gaining others' perspectives in expanding knowledge to understand social workers' roles and responses to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education. Conducting this study also increased my personal appreciation of the social work

profession and my ability to be sensitive to the needs of others experiencing social disadvantages I never experienced.

My hope is this action research project created new perspectives for me and the participants, and will create new perspectives for future researchers who review this action research project through the sharing of information, insight, and expertise. During focus groups, participants shared professional experiences and gained insight from one another that influenced them and me as the researcher to consider new interventions and approaches and view this social issue from different perspectives. Sharing information among different professional disciplines, as explained by Treleaven, Sykes, and Ormiston (2012), leads to developing new ideas and building strong social connections.

Nature of the Doctoral Project

Action research was the most appropriate methodology because it is an approach that allows the researcher an opportunity to learn and participants to share professional experiences based on their area of expertise to enhance one another's practices. According to Branom (2012), action research is beneficial in supporting social work practice because it is participatory, empowering, and geared toward providing social justice. These factors define the nature of social workers' profession which is to collaborate and participate with those directly and indirectly affected by a given issue, empower the affected population, and provide social justice to the affected population's situation (Branom, 2012). Through this action research project, social workers learned about strategies to effectively address the barriers African American teenage mothers confront in pursuit of a college education.

I used constructivism as the epistemological paradigm to aid in understanding the reality of this action research study in terms of how social workers respond to the social issue and their roles in their response. Constructivism is a theoretical framework that explains how people learn and construct their realities based on their experiences and their reflection on those experiences (Ultinar, 2012). As it relates to this action research study, participants discussed their knowledge about assisting African American teenage mothers facing barriers in pursuit of a college education based on their experiences with this particular social issue.

The knowledge shared during the focus groups demonstrated how the participants' experiences and reflection on those experiences impact how they respond to mothers' barriers to education and what roles the participants play in responding to those barriers. Participants also learned new and more effective ways to respond to the barriers while in focus groups with other social workers. For this action research project, I worked indirectly with the target population by engaging directly with professionals who regularly interact with African American teenage mothers confronting barriers in their pursuit of a college education.

Definition of Terms

Beaulieu (2013) defined *Action research:* (a methodology that focuses on the perspectives of those affected both directly and indirectly by a social issue in an effort to better understand a phenomenon). In terms of my action research study, this article means action research was an appropriate research methodology because it allowed me to use focus groups to explore the issue. Action research also helped me gain the perspective of clinical social workers' who work directly with the target population.

Information obtained from participants in the focus groups provided me with pertinent information from professional and personal perspectives which is the focus of action research (Beaulieu, 2013).

Action research is a research methodology that serves as a learning experience for participants by providing them with more effective interventions to achieve social justice within minority communities (Johnston-Goodstar, 2013). *Co-learner:* is (any group or individual that will be gaining knowledge from the research and its participants). I, as well as future researchers, and the participants are considered co-learners of this project. As the researcher, I facilitated focus groups to explore a phenomenon in terms of how clinical social workers view and respond to a specific social issue. This action research project was a tool for future clinical social workers wanting to understand how to respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face when pursuing a college education and their roles in their responses.

Participants: was used to refer to (clinical social workers from different areas of the social work field that participate in focus groups). The participants in this study were the social workers from different areas of the social work field. In working with professionals who interact with the target population, I defined terms specific to this action research project. *Stakeholders:* include (clinical social workers participating in the action research study and African American teenage mothers). These stakeholders were important because they are the individuals who influenced the results and outcome of this action research project. My hope is that African American teenage mothers will benefit from the implementation of more effective social work interventions resulting from the knowledge gained by the participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

For this action research project, the data was collected while conducting focus groups with clinical social work participants. To collect the data, I used voice recorders during the focus groups and later transcribed what was recorded to read through the data for accuracy. This method of collecting data allowed information to be shared among social workers who work with African American teenage mothers facing barriers while pursuing a college education. This data collection method was less time consuming than other methods and allowed multiple participants to share information and experiences while in a group setting. Next through data analysis, I identified similarities and differences of the participants' experiences, feelings, thoughts, and current clinical practices in working with African American teenage mothers facing barriers in pursuit of a college education.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the self-selection process in terms of who participated. To recruit participants, I posted an announcement to a closed Facebook social work group. After posting the announcement, I awaited a response from social workers who were interested in participating in the study. This process is known as self-selection or volunteer bias (Pahwa et al., 2012). Self-selection is a limitation of this action research study because it had some effect on the relevance and accuracy of the information shared in focus groups. Through use of self-selection, participants were selected on a voluntary basis and their interest in the study as opposed to selecting participants with more knowledge about the study's topic.

Pahwa et al. (2014) identified self-selection as a method of recruiting that increases the number of participants, but decreases the chance of selecting participants who have more experience and knowledge about the issue being explored in the action research study. I addressed this limitation by specifically including in the Facebook post inclusion criteria participants should meet prior to responding to the post via email, phone call, or Facebook inbox messages. This decreased the chances of clinical social workers' participating that were not knowledgeable about working with the target population. From reading the specific inclusion criteria, potential participants were aware of whether or not they met the criteria prior to responding indicating they were interested in becoming a participant.

Another limitation is that this action research study is applicable to clinical social workers practicing in the southern Mississippi area, but not generalizable to clinical social workers in other geographical locations. For this action research project social work participants practiced in the southern Mississippi area. Considering southern Mississippi was the geographical location participants incorporated in discussing their responses to the social work practice issue, the information was limited as it applies to other locations. In working with African American teenage mothers, clinical social workers may be employed at the following type of agencies: hospitals, daycares, health departments, high schools, and universities or colleges.

By involving social work participants who practice in the southern Mississippi area, similar information was shared during the focus groups. This limitation created results, insight, and knowledge specifically for the southern Mississippi area, and may result in different outcomes when exploring this issue in other geographical locations.

Considering I had no control over the geographical location of which participants practice, I could not actually address this limitation, but I was careful to not draw conclusions based on this limitation. In identifying my sample, I was also careful to identify other factors such as participants' years of experience and the capacity in which they work with African American teenage mothers in pursuit of a college education.

A third limitation to this action research study was having similar information shared during the focus groups because all participants were of the same race. As an African American female, I found myself utilizing my reflexive journal a lot during the focus groups to account for my personal values and biases, but remaining in the researcher role during these groups. Through journaling, I became more aware of the feelings participants may have identified and dealt with during the focus groups.

The focus groups consisted of clinical social workers, all African American, who work with African American teenage mothers in different capacities. This group of participants was different from any other group of social workers of different races working with the target population because some of the participants could identify with the social issue being explored from personal experiences. As a result of participants experiencing barriers to pursuing a college education as a teenage mother themselves; there was some emotional attachment to the discussions during the focus groups.

Biases

A difficult task during the data collection process was remaining in the researcher and facilitator roles. During the focus groups there were times I wanted to assume the role of educator and be an active part of the discussions, but could not considering my roles as the researcher and facilitator. During such discussions I found myself thinking

about how I would respond to what was being discussed and the feelings and thoughts I had regarding what was being discussed. Even though this may have been a normal process of the researcher and facilitator roles in focus groups, I knew my thoughts, feelings, and expectations created biases and that I had to account for those biases.

To account for this bias, I remained in the researcher role by not actively participating or offering my thoughts and opinions, but asking the focus group questions to facilitate the discussion. If there was a question someone did not understand, I would repeat the question with different wording to make sure participants understood what was being asked. Also, at the beginning of each focus group I informed the participants I would be in the researcher and facilitator roles with the main goal of learning more about the social issue from what they shared in the focus groups.

In completing a reflexive journal, I arrived to the focus groups 30 minutes early and recorded my thoughts, feelings, and expectations prior to the focus group. Once the focus group ended, I stayed 30 minutes later to reflect on my thoughts, feelings, and expectations of what happened. Within the reflexive journal, I reflected on how my thoughts, feelings, and expectations changed from the beginning to the end of the focus group. By assuming the role of researcher and facilitator, I did not place myself in a position to express my professional and personal thoughts and feelings in the focus groups, which may have overwhelmed participants and hindered the research process. However, as it relates to the constructivist paradigm, participants shared their experiences, feelings, thoughts and realities of responding to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education. By remaining in the researcher and facilitator roles, the participants' reality was honored during the focus

group process in which they constructed understanding and knowledge of the social issue being explored.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

For this action research project, I used the ecological systems theory (EST), a theoretical framework. Norton (2012) defined EST as a theory that focuses on the person-in-environment and strives to explain how a person's environment affects their behavior and dictates their current situation. Bronfenbrenner developed EST and included distinct phases of human development that best explain how an individual's environment influences their current circumstances (Rosa and Tudge, 2013). EST was developed to understand phenomena through identifying the target population's influences, both direct and indirect (Patton, Hong, Williams & Allen-Meares, 2013).

For example, direct influences include African American teenage mothers' family support and faith systems while indirect influences include their ineligibility for financial aid to fund their college education. Through use of EST, I explored the environmental influences that serve as barriers for African American teenage mothers in order to better explain and understand how social workers respond to those barriers and the roles social workers play in doing so. I also explored social workers' responses in terms of systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem). By identifying each system, Paat (2013) used EST to explore adolescent development and the effects family relationships have on this developmental stage. According to Paat (2013), the microsystem involves the client and their immediate surroundings (i.e. family members, peers, etc.); the mesosystem includes the client's relationships, connections, or interactions (i.e. faith system, school, etc.); the exosystem is identified as settings that

have an indirect effect on the client (i.e. neighborhood); the macrosystem includes the community's values, beliefs, or policies, and the chronosystem is identified as transitions the client experiences (i.e. childhood, adolescence, adulthood).

On the micro level, a few of the barriers that affect African American teenage mothers' ability to pursue a college education include their self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-image, which are factors that directly influence social issues' outcomes (Sabri, Hong, Campbell, and Cho, 2013). Self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-image are all factors that directly (internally) influence African American teenage mothers and serve as barriers to their pursuit of a college education. Their immediate relationships also influence self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-image. According to Sabri et al. (2013), teenage mothers' self-image and interpersonal relationships are considered as part of their microsystem. For example, if an African American teenage mother has low self-esteem, unsupportive parents, and does not think she is capable of achieving a college education her self-perception and lack of support becomes a barrier for her to pursue a college education.

On the mezzo level, some barriers for African American teenage mothers to pursue a college education include family support, religious beliefs, educational attainment of family members, community resources, and financial instability (Onwueguzie, Collins, & Frels, 2013). With little family support, African American teenage mothers do not have the encouragement they need to pursue a college education which indicates their need for resources to increase their level of support. Also, in order to provide financially for their families, African American teenage mothers may have to work extended hours or multiple jobs. This makes it difficult for them to devote extra time to attend college.

Barriers of the exosystem include the neighborhoods in which African American teenage mothers live. For example, African American teenage mothers living in impoverished neighborhoods may experience more difficulty in pursuing a college education because they have to work overtime at a minimum wage job to provide for their family. As explained by Paat (2013), neighborhoods affect individuals socially and stigmatize them based on society's views of what they can and cannot accomplish while residing in impoverished neighborhoods.

Macro level barriers include policies and guidelines that affect social work practice in working with African American teenage mothers to pursue a college education. Sabri et al. (2013) defined macro level factors in the EST as factors that impact society as a whole. Some policies that affect social work involvement include the hiring and utilization of school counselors in the school system instead of school social workers. For example, in my community, Hattiesburg, MS, there are no social workers employed at any of the high schools, but there are guidance counselors. This limits social work interaction with the target population and decreases their chances to assist African American teenage mothers in preparing for a college education.

Life events and transitions are chronosystem leveled barriers African American teenage mothers face when in pursuit of a college education. Changes in the child welfare system are considered a barrier on this level which impacts African American teenage mothers' pursuit of higher education. For example, in 1996 the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to reduce welfare dependency and promote parents to seek jobs to increase their self-

sufficiency (Huang, Porterfield, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2012). One reason the AFDC was removed was because the program placed a burden on the state by causing them to make individual eligibility requirements for each child within the welfare system (Armstrong, 2015).

TANF has restrictions regarding work requirements and time limits to decrease the chances of welfare dependency (Wang, 2015). This transition in the child welfare system creates a barrier for African American teenage mothers to pursue a college education. This is a barrier because mothers are required to work a certain amount of hours and make a certain amount of money which affects their ability to provide financially and limits the amount of time they can devote to further their education.

Rationale

The ecological system theory was useful in completing this action research project because it focused on how an individual's external systems impact them internally. The EST defines the impact an individual's external influences has on their ability to establish and maintain self-efficacy and influence their behavior (Sabri et al., 2013). For example, the lack of family support (external influence) causes African American teenage mothers to feel (internal perspective) as if they are unable to pursue and obtain a college education, and lead to depression and a distorted self-image.

Intention

The intention of this project was to enhance the understanding of clinical social workers' response to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education, specifically in southern Mississippi. This action research study was also used to explore the most current clinical social work interventions in addressing the

barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education. The ecosystems perspective was used to explore this social issue and understanding clinical social workers' response by explaining how teenage mothers' external factors (barriers) affect them internally (ability to pursue a college education).

Significance of the Study

Contributions of this action research study include: more effective social work involvement with teenage mothers who want to pursue a college education and the identification and development of the most effective social work roles and interventions to assist this population. These contributions demonstrate the importance of this action research study within the social work profession, which is the need for change in the way social workers respond to this social issue. These contributions also fill the gaps of social workers' response by focusing on what clinical social work interventions are currently being used, what interventions have been successful, and what interventions can be improved. This knowledge enhanced my research perspective by allowing me to gain insight on the importance of research in identifying and solving a social issue within the context of clinical social work.

Extending Knowledge

In southern Mississippi, the barriers African American teenage mothers face to pursue higher education is an issue that has not been addressed. In extending my knowledge of this social issue, focusing on the barriers allowed me to be more specific about what the issue is, the need for addressing it, who benefits from addressing it, and how addressing this issue influences the social work profession. Potential implications for positive social change consistent with the scope of the project include a better

understanding of the barriers African American teenage mothers experience when

pursuing a college education, increased awareness among social workers about those

identified barriers, and a change in social workers' perspectives regarding how they may

respond to those barriers. With a change in social workers' perspectives and increased

awareness, they will have insight on how to better respond to the barriers African

American teenage mothers face when pursuing a college education.

Values and Ethics

The social work values related to the clinical social work problem included *social

justice*, *service to the client*, and *competence.* The National Association of Social

Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics guides social work practice in these areas by serving

as the foundation for effective practice (2008). The NASW Code of Ethics (2008) also

provides rules and regulations regarding the social work profession in an effort to uphold

the integrity of the profession and provide high quality service. Lastly, the NASW Code

of Ethics impacts research by assuring the participants that the researcher will not violate

any ethical responsibilities, and with the use of informed consent minimize potential

harm. Social work values are pertinent in aligning with the intention of the project by

providing participants and myself with an ethical method of exploring the social issue

further.

The participants who interact with African American teenage mothers serve as

advocates for the social injustices experienced by this population. Northridge (2014)

include racial inequality in defining injustices. Research is helpful because it deepens the

understanding of the realities within the daily lives of those experiencing this inequality

(Northridge, 2014). The social realities for African American teenage mothers include

their inability to remain in high school because they have to work a full time job to provide for their family, which also decreases their chances of later pursuing a college education. African American teenage mothers may have the desire to pursue a college education, but with little support they are unable to due to being a mother, full time employee, and head of their household.

Code of Ethics as a Guide

In terms of how social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face to pursue a college education, this study explored how social workers currently respond to the barriers and are currently assisting this target population. According to the NASW (2008) Code of Ethics, the value of service states social workers' main focus is to assist those in need. This study also focused on what social work interventions and roles were perceived to be most effective to remove the barriers African American teenage mothers face when pursuing a college education. The focus groups allowed social workers the opportunity to explain their current roles and responses to the social issue, which further generated discussions and ideas about what responses and roles are most effective and what responses and roles can be improved.

The NASW (2008) Code of Ethics states social workers assist clients within their scope of expertise and seek to enhance their knowledge. By allowing participants an opportunity to discuss their experiences and knowledge in working with African American teenage mothers, they gained insight and knowledge in terms of working more effectively with this population. The knowledge gained from this action research study helped clinical social work participants develop the competence they need to effectively address the barriers these young mothers face. The clinical social work participants will

also now be able to share this knowledge with other clinical social workers to influence and possibly improve their clinical practice.

Relationship to Code of Ethics

The purpose of this action research project was for me to understand how the barriers African American teenage mothers face are addressed by social workers, which further impacts the social work profession. Each of the participants represented a social work organization or agency with values that guides its practice and influences the services provided to clients. Each organization or agency represented by participants in the focus groups possessed the values of providing high quality service with competence and commitment and effectively advocating for the client. In an effort to understand this social issue from a clinical social work perspective, the values of social work aligned with the organizations' values and expectations of its social workers.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Current literature supports this action research study and links the importance of the barriers (external influences) African American teenage mothers face to pursue a college education to clinical social work practice. The literature review helped me focus on different concepts to better explain why and how certain barriers exist among African American teenage mothers in pursuit of a college education in southern Mississippi. Current literature also focuses on African American teenage mothers' interaction with external resources that influences their inability to pursue a college education.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

To better explain the variables that impacted this action research study, the literature review is organized in sub-sections composed of central concepts. The

following concepts include: (a) teenage pregnancy in the United States and how it affects the teenager and their family, (b) ethnicity, (c) urban and rural areas in regards to how teenage mothers' geographical location affects their ability to receive necessary services and support, (d) social workers' roles in addressing issues of teenage pregnancy, and (e) current social work approaches.

Teenage Pregnancy in the United States

Teenage women living in the United States are two and a half times more likely to give birth than teenagers living in Canada, four times more likely compared to teenagers living in Germany or Norway, and 10 times more likely than teenagers living in Switzerland (Kearney & Levine, 2012). Kearney and Levine further explained that within the United States, teenage women who live in Mississippi are 15 times more likely to give birth than teenagers who live in other countries. According to Solomon-Fears (2015) teenage pregnancy in the United States varies by state which southern states have higher rates than northern states. Solomon-Fears (2015) also explained that in the United States teenagers with the highest birth rates were of African American women ages 15-19.

Teenage pregnancy affects teenagers and their families financially, socially, physically, educationally, and psychologically (Solomon Fears & Basch, 2011). Solomon-Fears (2015) elaborated on how teenage pregnancy affects teenagers and their families by stating that teenage births lead to high economic, social, and health costs for teenage mothers and their families. Teenage pregnancy in the United States also cost taxpayers approximately $9.4 billion in 2010 (Solomon-Fears, 2015). Teenage births often have a negative impact on educational attainment and teenage mothers are 10-12%

less likely to complete high school and are 14-29% less likely to attend college (Basch, 2011).

Depression and stress are psychological factors that affect teenage parents and their families (Campbell-Grossman et al., 2016; Huang, Costeines, Kaufman, & Ayala, 2014). Huang et al. (2014) explained that maternal stress and depression among ethnic minority teenage mothers has a negative impact on child development, such as causing separation anxiety, depression, and attention problems. Patel and Sin (2012) also identified teenage pregnancy as a social issue in the United States that causes poorer health conditions for teenage mothers as compared to other women.

Ethnicity

Cultural differences such as ethnicity contribute to the outcomes of teenage pregnancy (Derlan et al., 2014). This variable affected this action research study because clinical social work participants may consider teenage pregnancy common among African American teenagers. This resulted in social workers not addressing or incorporating ethnicity in their responses to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education. For example, clinical social workers may address the barriers from the perspective of the teenager's support system (mesosystem) which may be teenagers' families (mesosystem).

Teenage pregnancy is a social issue that results from adolescent women interaction with their environmental influences; more specifically their relationship and communication with their family (Aparicio et al., 2014). This communication varies among different ethnic groups. Aparicio et al. (2014) identified this communication as some cultures valuing the relationship and communication style between parent and

child. Aparicio et al. (2014) explained this concept by referring to the influence parents have on the sexual behaviors of their children in the Latino community. This relates to the African American community because, like the Latino community, African American families value their relationships with one another.

Ethnicity also impacts teenage pregnancy prevention. Teenage pregnancy is often influenced by cultural norms (macrosystems) such as teenagers' perceptions of pregnancy, recurring pregnancies, and family support in teenage parenting (Hagen, Skenandore, Scow, Schanen, & Clary, 2012). Understanding culture is essential in exploring teenage pregnancy (Hagen et al., 2012), including how it is prevented within different cultures and why teenage mothers and teenage women without children are not educated on pregnancy prevention (Palacios, Strickland, Chesla, Kennedy, & Portillo, 2014).

Ethnicity affected this action research study because some clinical social work participants may address barriers based on teenage mothers' perception of teenage pregnancy. For example, a clinical social worker may link an African American teenage mother of three to a community resource that assists with pregnancy prevention and refer a Caucasian teenage mother of one to a daycare facility that provides affordable childcare to low income families. Each teenage mother desires to pursue a college education, but views teenage pregnancy differently causing them to have different needs to remove barriers in pursuit of a college education. This also affected the experiences shared among social work participants.

Rural vs. Urban

Where teenage mothers live impacted the action research project because their geographical location (exosystem) determines their accessibility to certain resources. Where teenagers live affects their accessibility to healthcare, further determining their health status, outcomes, and disparities (Murphy-Erby, Stauss, & Estupinian, 2013). According to Murphy-Erby et al. (2013), in rural communities the birth rates are higher among teenagers because of their limited access to hospitals and other healthcare resources (Roos, Walld, & Witt, 2014 & Hagen et al., 2012).

Teenage mothers' geographical location determines what services clinical social workers can provide. For example, a clinical social worker working in a rural community may not be able to assist with a referral to a local daycare that assists low-income single mothers. In urban areas, teenage mothers would have access to local daycares that assist low-income single mothers. Rural communities are farther from many helpful resources such as childcare classes. Teenage mothers are in need of clinical social work intervention; however, depending on where they live, clinical social workers are limited to how they can address certain barriers which will also affect the information that is shared in the focus groups.

Teenagers in rural communities also have limited access to other resources such as sex education within the school system, more specifically high school, as opposed to those living in urban communities (Anderman, Gray, O'Connell, Cupp, & Lane, 2012). Because of limited access to high school sex education, there is an increase in HIV rates in rural communities (Anderman et al., 2012). In rural communities, there is also a decrease in teenagers' access to appropriate socialization with others they share social commonalities with (e.g., age, socioeconomic status, and pregnancy status; Roberts,

Graham, Barter-Godfrey, 2011). Sex education in the classroom is also limited in rural areas because of the assumption that teenagers living in rural areas are more conservative and less diverse (Jones, Jensen, & Selzer, 2014).

A clinical social worker employed at an urban high school would be more involved with a teenage mother in need of sex education to prevent multiple pregnancies to decrease difficulty pursuing a college education in the future. In contrast to the urban area, a clinical school social worker in a rural area may assist with providing resources for expecting mothers to educate them on what to expect during pregnancy and childbirth. Considering expecting teenage mothers living in rural areas may live further distances from a hospital, having this knowledge may help in identifying when it is time for them to go to the hospital. This may also increase their chances of receiving adequate care within the hospital for their overall health as well as their baby's. This example is a demonstration of how teenage mothers can have the same needs, but receive different services because of residing in different geographical areas.

 Urban areas have an increased poverty rate which leads to inadequate or no prenatal care due to the lack of insurance (Leech et al., 2014; Tanner, Ma, Roof, Rodgers, Brooks, and Paluzzi, 2015). Adolescents in rural areas also have easier access to community resources, but have some difficulty receiving services due to the large and diverse teenage pregnancy population in urban areas (Tanner et al., 2015; Fuxman, De Los Santos, Finklestein, Landon, & O'Donnell, 2015). Urban areas are generally well developed and sometimes overcrowded with homes, businesses, and citizens.

Because urban areas are overcrowded and well developed, an implication from literature is that there may also not be enough workers to service the population within

this area. This creates difficulty for the area's citizens to access needed resources to improve their overall psychosocial well-being. In the school system of urban areas, educators are more open to discussing options associated with teenage pregnancy due to the diversity within urban areas (Taylor, Dlamini, Khanyile, Mpanza, & Sathiparsad, 2015) and the liberal nature of adolescence within urban school systems (Cronin, Heflin, & Price, 2014). This concept affects the study because it determines the extent to which clinical social workers can become involved in addressing the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a higher education.

Social Workers' Roles

When assisting teenage mothers, social workers fill the role of educator and advocate (Slater, Mitschke, & Douthit, 2011). Clinical social workers interact with African American teenage mothers by referring them to appropriate services and resources, educating them on parenting, and assisting them with making career, academic, and life decisions after becoming parents. Clinical social workers interacting with African American teenage mothers are also considered a part of the mesosystem because they interact with the individual.

Slater et al. (2011) and Linton and Adams (2011) explained that in the role of educator, social workers provide information on parenting skills, sex education, and family preservation, often in school settings. The role of educator, according to Linton and Adams (2014), also allows school social workers the opportunity to explore family issues that may exist within pregnant teenagers' family system. As advocates, social workers can speak on behalf of teenage mothers experiencing psychosocial disadvantages such as disabilities (Linton & Adams, 2014).

Assuming the role of educator helps determine clinical social workers' level of involvement and expertise in working with the target population. This affected the action research study because some clinical social workers shared different experiences in the focus groups. This also allowed clinical social work participants the opportunity to share similar and different experiences as it related to their interaction with African American teenage mothers. Sharing this information provided insight, knowledge, and new perspectives.

Current Approaches

One way that social work researchers have approached responding to barriers is by promoting social justice when working with minority adolescents (Johnston-Goodstar, 2013). Focusing on social justice in social work research addresses issues based on the perception of how society is being affected (Johnston-Goodstar, 2013). Johnston-Goodstar also explained that theorizing social justice is important to clinical social work practice because the way social workers perceive society determines the way they approach the issues within society. The strength of this approach is that it leads to more client specific interventions, while the weakness is that biases exist as a result of how the social work researcher views their society.

Social workers' misunderstanding of how to respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education was identified as a gap within the presented social issue. Previous researchers suggested that social workers should be prepared to be responsive to the needs of the target populations they assist. Researchers also indicated that clinical social workers' need proper education on how to respond to a multitude of social issues. Aparicio et al. (2014) discussed this concept in

terms of social workers receiving adequate training to be culturally prepared to provide services to teenage parents and expecting teenagers. With proper education and training, clinical social workers can assist clients according to what is most important to them based on their beliefs and perspectives.

Using action research helped me understand social workers' responses and roles to the barriers African American teenage mothers confront when pursuing a college education, how the issue is currently being addressed, and how it was addressed in the past. Clinical social workers and social work researchers explored how addressing the barriers African American teenage mothers confront when pursuing a college education was approached as evidenced in past research. Exploring the barriers minority teenage mothers experience when pursuing a college education helps to develop effective interventions to address those barriers (Bicks, Combellick, Arons, & Brindis, 2013).

EST (ecological systems theory) aligned with the literature review for this action research study because I explored how different environmental systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) affect African American teenage mothers' ability to pursue a college education. Kamenopoulou (2016) also explained that EST help explain the influence micro, mezzo, and macro levels have on human development. Each of the concepts discussed in the literature review explain how African American teenage mothers' human development and their ability to pursue a college education is influenced.

Summary

This section introduced the social issue that was explored which is how social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a

college education and their roles in responding to this issue. This section also provided information regarding the problem, research question, purpose statement, the nature of this doctoral project, the theoretical or conceptual framework used to explore the presented social issue, the significance of this study, values and ethics of this study, and a review of professional and academic literature and its key variables and or concepts applicable to this action research study.

Part 2: The Project

In southern Mississippi, clinical social workers lack the understanding of how to more effectively respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education. I explored how social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education and their roles when responding to the barriers. I also used this action research study to impact future social workers' practice by providing participants an opportunity to obtain knowledge through the process of participating in focus groups.

Teenage pregnancy continues to be a prevalent issue in the United States that increases minority teenage mothers' chances of living in poverty and facing barriers in their pursuit of a college education (Bouchard, 2015). As documented in current literature, there is an increase in teenage mothers' risk for poverty and lack of education that affects them psychologically, emotionally, socially, educationally, and financially (Killebrew et al., 2014). Social workers assist teenage mothers in their efforts to pursue higher education despite the barriers they confront, which is justification for conducting this action research study.

As a medical social worker providing services to teenage mothers in their efforts to pursue higher education, I experienced this social issue. I also talked to fellow co-workers who experienced this issue more frequently as social workers assigned to other floors within the hospital which I worked. The literature review is divided into the following sections: (a) teenage pregnancy in the United States, (b) ethnicity, (c) rural vs. urban, (d) social workers' roles, and (d) current approaches. Dividing these sections helps explain how different risk factors may create barriers for African American teenage mothers in different areas, including the pursuit of a college education.

The purpose of this action research project was to gain a better understanding of social workers' response to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuing a college education and social workers' roles in responding to this issue. The clinical social work problem explored in this action research study was the potential lack of understanding among social workers about how to respond to psychosocial barriers to pursuing a college education. This section of the action research project is focused on literature related to social workers' response to barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education, the methodology, sources of data collection, and ethical procedures.

Background and Context

The findings of this project are intended to enhance clinical social work practice for social workers working with African American teenage mothers and support them to respond more effectively in addressing how social workers respond to educational barriers and their roles in those responses. Social workers currently view the problem of African American teenage mothers and educational attainment as an issue involving at-

risk minority adolescents who are also at an increased risk for poverty (Killebrew et al., 2014). Social work involvement is important in assisting minority teenage mothers with addressing barriers to increase their chance of obtaining a college education. Social work involvement is also needed to help minority teenage mothers remove those barriers.

To identify social work roles and responses within different social work specialty areas, I collected data from social workers who interact with African American teenage mothers on a regular basis. In doing this, I gathered information from different perspectives. I recruited social workers from multiple agencies within the southern Mississippi area. These agencies included local teenage pregnancy and parenting programs, the local department of human services, and hospitals. The social workers provided information regarding their roles and responses to the barriers African American teenage mothers confront when pursuing a college education as well as the relevance of this social issue in clinical social work practice. This project empowered stakeholders and participants by providing them with insight on ways to approach this social issue most conducive to bringing about social change and empowering their communities as a whole. In an effort to bring about social change within communities, stakeholders have to learn about the social issue in need of change within their community.

Co-learner in the context of this action research study, as defined by Rutherford (2011), consists of all parties working together collaboratively to gain a better understanding of a certain issue and generate more complex ideas. Richards and Yearwood (2010) explained these complex ideas ultimately create more complex research. Each participant assumed the role of co-learner by learning from one another.

This co-learning also affected participants' perspectives of the social issue and how they respond to the issue in their clinical practice. As a researcher and co-learner, I found myself playing dual roles. To maintain clarity and avoid influencing the findings with my biases, I used a reflexive journal to process my reactions, roles, and insights.

Action research is a collaborative and informative process that generates ideas and expands knowledge among participants and researcher. As a researcher, I gained information and insight from participants by exploring the social issue through the use of focus groups and peer reviewed articles. This exploration process consisted of me facilitating the group, asking questions, and gaining information from participants' responses. As the researcher, I did not participate in discussions with participants, but I recorded the information as it was shared during the focus groups. As a co-learner, I gained insight regarding how social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education and the roles they play in responding to this issue. I also gained awareness of personal biases that existed in exploring this social issue, which I accounted for in my reflexive journal (See Appendix A).

Methodology

I used focus groups to collect data. I conducted a total of three focus groups to explore the social work practice problem and identify possible solutions. A total of six social workers participated in the study. Four of the participants were licensed master social workers, one participant was a licensed clinical social worker, and one participant was a licensed social worker currently enrolled in the master of social work program and providing some clinical services under the licensure and supervision of her internship

supervisor, an licensed clinical social worker (LCSW). All participants were currently

working or had worked in the social work field and provided services to African

American teenage mothers (i.e. educational system, community organizations, or health

care).

A smaller sample size provided diversity and was manageable. Kidd and

colleagues (2015) explained that when facilitating focus groups, a smaller sample size

provides a way to manage the group process and balance and power-differentials. This

small sample size of six participants was sufficient to complete this study. The data

obtained via the focus groups were rich and meaningful.

As a means of recruiting, I used purposive sampling which Robinson (2014)

identified as a non-random sampling method in which certain participants, based on

specific criteria, may affect the results of the research. Robinson also explained that

when using purposive sampling the participants are believed to provide important and

unique perspectives to explore the phenomenon in question. For this action research

study participants were selected based on specific inclusion criteria which included: (a)

being a social worker, and (b) have experience working with African American teenage

mothers. By meeting the specific inclusion criteria, social work participants provided

pertinent and relevant information specifically related to responding to the barriers

African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education and their roles in

responding to this issue.

Sample.

All six participants were African American female social workers who

participated in all three focus groups. One participant with 4 years of social work

experience worked in the specialty area of child and family services. One participant with 6 years of social work experience worked as a pregnancy counselor with an adoption agency under the supervision of her internship supervisor. This participant also had experience in the specialty area of child and human services. The third participant had 8 years' of social work experience and worked as a medical social worker and also had professional experience working in the specialty area of child and family services and mental health. The fourth participant, with 5 years of social work experience worked in the specialty area of mental health and children services. The fifth participant had 6 years of social work experience and worked in the specialty area of child and family services, but also had experience in hospice, mental health, and adolescent offenders. The last participant had 15 years of social work experience and worked with hospice patients and their families, including teenage mothers wanting to pursue a college education. This participant also had social work experience in the specialty areas of child and family services and school social work.

I used snowball sampling which Emerson (2015) identified as a sampling method that helps researchers obtain a desired amount of participants by asking participants to tell their friends about the study. Considering participants were required to be licensed and currently work to have worked specifically in some capacity with African American teenage mothers in southern Mississippi, finding social workers who met these specific criteria was challenging. Using snowball sampling helped recruit one of the participants while the other five participants were recruited from the initial Facebook post.

To begin recruitment, I utilized the social work group on Facebook, which is a closed group that I am a member of. Utilizing a closed group made it easier for me to

recruit professionals who met the inclusion criteria and could provide the most beneficial information. I first contacted one of the moderators of the social work group to obtain approval to post in the closed group for recruitment purposes (See Appendix B). Once I received a response of approval from a moderator, I posted a message to all social workers in Hattiesburg, Mississippi and surrounding areas to inform them of my action research study and invited them to participate (See Appendix C).

When potential participants expressed interest in participating by inbox messages via Facebook, emails, text messages, and/or phone calls, I responded thanking them for their interest. I also asked for their email addresses to provide them with an electronic consent form prior to the initial focus group. To indicate they agreed to the consent form, they were asked to respond to the email with the words "I consent." Once they gave their consent via email, I responded back with information regarding the time, date, and location of the initial focus group (See Appendix F). In this response, I also let them know when recruitment would be closed (5 days from the initial Facebook post) and I asked them to invite other social workers they knew who met the criteria to participate in the action research study (See Appendix F).

After posting the initial Facebook post on the social work group site, I waited 3 days and posted a reminder (See Appendix E). Two days after posting the reminder, I closed recruitment. Once recruitment was closed, I made sure I had received an email back for all informed consents from all participants and sent an email to all participants informing them of the time, date, and location of the initial focus group (See Appendix F). The date of the initial focus group was 2 weeks after the close of recruitment to allow participants time to prepare to attend.

The original date for the initial focus group was set for January 1, 2017, but had to be canceled and rescheduled for January 10, 2017 due to an ice advisory and weather alerts for the southern Mississippi area. Having to cancel and reschedule the initial focus group caused me to experience feelings of discouragement, hopelessness, and disappointment. I used the reflexive journal to process these feelings. These feelings occurred because, although the initial focus group had been planned, established, and confirmed, a weather advisory was an unforeseen yet inevitable circumstance. After rescheduling the initial focus group, there were no more cancellations and the remaining focus groups were completed as scheduled.

Source of Data/Data Collection

Focus groups were the method of collecting data for this action research project. Focus groups are most appropriate for this type of research because of their collaborative and informative nature. Gaizauskaite (2012) explained that social work research has been enhanced with the contribution of focus groups which allows participants an opportunity to generate ideas and perspectives. With the use of focus groups, I was better able to gain needed information while being a researcher in addition to learning about the social issue in the process.

To collect data, I facilitated three focus groups with six participants. Initially, I had considered facilitating two separate 90-minute focus groups to collect data. However, while completing the IRB application, I reconsidered my methods and the structure for collecting data. The IRB application requested detailed information about each intricate step throughout data collection. I quickly realized that two focus groups would be insufficient to thoroughly explore the topic of this research study. After

considering various structures and reviewing the literature (Gaizauskaite, 2012; Beaulieu, 2013) to determine the appropriate length of focus groups, I focused on identifying specific aims for each focus group. This was a necessary step to determine that facilitating three 45-minute focus groups was more manageable and effective.

I also realized that perhaps participants would find it easier to make a commitment to a 45-minute group instead of a 90-minute group. I separated the focus groups according to three different goals. Group 1 provided participants opportunities to meet and greet each other and begin exploring the topic of this action research study. Group 2 focused on the goal of defining the social work practice problem. Group 3 focused on exploring feasible and sustainable solutions to the identified problems discussed in Groups 1 and 2. I facilitated two 45-minute groups and one 60-minute focus group. These groups were facilitated at the public library.

The first focus group served as an introduction for participants, in which they provided information regarding their specialty areas in social work practice, level of licensure, and years of social work experience. This introductory focus group created a comfortable atmosphere and aided in helping participants build rapport and foster trust with one another. The interview questions asked during the initial focus group were both closed and open-ended questions to give participants an opportunity to introduce themselves and get to know more about one another (See Appendix G). An aim of the first focus group was to set the atmosphere for the subsequent focus groups and data collection process by encouraging the participants to relax and find comfort in knowing they shared some professional and personal similarities.

At the beginning of the second focus group, I reviewed what was discussed in the first focus group as a reminder for me as the researcher and participants. I also asked participants if there was anything that was not discussed in the first focus group that they would like to discuss during the second focus group. During the second focus group, I introduced the social issue and participants discussed how they interacted with African American teenage mothers in pursuit of higher education. Participants also discussed how they address certain barriers among African American teenage mothers on each of the levels of the ecological systems theory. Questions asked during the second focus group were used to explore the social issue in terms of participants' experiences in responding to the barriers African American teenage mothers face when pursuing a college education (See Appendix G). During this second focus group, I was able to gain insight on how participants respond to this social issue on the different levels according to the ecological systems theory (micro, mezzo, and macro levels).

At the beginning of the third focus group, I reviewed what was discussed in the first and second focus groups as a reminder of what had already been shared and discussed. I also asked if there was anything that was not discussed in previous focus groups that should be discussed or addressed during this last focus group. During the third focus group participants discussed the effectiveness and areas of improvement of their current interventions in working with African American teenage mothers in pursuit of higher education. Participants also discussed their experiences with addressing barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education and how they think these barriers can better be addressed.

To analyze the data collected, I took written notes and voice recorded all three focus groups. I chose to use two voice recorders to avoid hindering information due to technical difficulties. Voice recording was also a beneficial tool for gathering any information that may have been missed in my written notes. Voice recording is usually recommended because it provides higher quality descriptive data and assures the researcher does not miss any information (Gaizauskaite, 2012).

After gathering the data from voice recordings, I transcribed the recordings verbatim and matched the recordings to what was transcribed to check for accuracy. When reading the transcripts while simultaneously listening to the recordings, I noticed several times I missed parts of information because multiple participants were speaking at one time. I revised the transcripts according to the exact voice recording. This process provided an additional step of rigor to my study. The written notes were also used as a means of checking for accuracy.

The data collected was further used to analyze the findings and find emerging themes. This analysis began by comparing experiences and ideas that had been shared by the participants to identify themes. Reviewing common experiences within the different specialty areas provided detailed information regarding common barriers. The method of data analysis I used was content analysis which is further explained in the next section. After considering other methods of data analysis, I chose to use content analysis. Beatty and colleagues (2015) and Gaizauskaite (2012) demonstrated how using content analysis was beneficial in managing data from action research and focus groups.

To code data, I sorted the information based on the topics discussed in the focus groups, and their level of importance. Each topic's level of importance was based on

how often participants discussed the particular topic and made reference to it during the focus groups. For example, during the focus groups participants repeatedly brought up the issue of funding as it relates to the barriers social workers experience when trying to provide service to the target population. Since funding was brought up multiple times, it seemed to be of high importance in regards to exploring the research question. As a result, I labeled *funding* as a code.

To create a visual aid for coding, I used a table to code and record the data collected (See Appendix I). This process involves coding of data collected for research studies to better understand what is being explored in terms of what participants report as the most important and relevant concepts of the issue being explored (Beatty, Wilson, Ciecior, & Stringer, 2015). In recording and coding the data, I remained open to address any biases and enhance self-awareness through use of my reflexive journal (See Appendix A).

For example, when I began the coding process I felt unsure of my research skills. I was able to identify this feeling and processed it by allowing myself to engage in the coding process and find clarity in this feeling of uncertainty. Because of this uncertainty, I realized I needed to find evidence of my research skills. I then realized I am a good student and effective social worker with the desire to never stop learning. I also realized that I had done well in my research courses. What I needed was internal validation that my research skills were sufficient and would result in a successful and complete action research study.

The data collected during this action research project helped me identify themes, outcomes and the components or units of analysis (variables). By identifying themes,

outcomes, and variables I was able to better understand how social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face. This study's variables are the units of analysis which are social worker roles, African American teenage mother, pregnancy, and education. The focus groups were helpful in identifying the barriers, how they are currently addressed, and how social workers can be more effective in practice approaches.

Instruments.

The instrument used for this action research study was an interview guide as identified in the previous section (See Appendix G). The interview questions were developed based on the action research methodology and personal social work practice experience. The IRB asked me to revise the approved interview guide to better align with the ecological system theory. As a result of this, I further revised the interview guide based on the IRB's feedback.

This three part questionnaire consisted of questions which I asked participants to gain information about their licensure, professional experience, capacity in which they work with African American teenage mothers, their thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding the social issues, and possible solutions to the social issue. The first part of the questionnaire for the initial focus group was composed of questions that gave participants an opportunity to introduce themselves to other participants. These questions served the purpose of creating a relaxed and comfortable environment for participants.

The second part of the questionnaire asked during the second focus group was to explore the social issue of how clinical social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education and their roles in

responding to this issue. These questions provided much of the information needed to better understand the issue from participants' perspectives. These questions also led to discussions that gave participants' an opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings, and professional and personal opinions.

The third part of the questionnaire asked during the final focus group were to explore possible solutions to how social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face and their roles in responding to this issue. These questions led to discussions regarding what interventions and practices they thought were most effective or ineffective. Participants were also able to share how they thought this issue could best be addressed based on their experiences and knowledge of the social issue. These questions were formulated to bring the focus groups to a close and discuss how the issue could be addressed.

Ethical Procedures

Before beginning the research process, I secured IRB approval from Walden University (12-05-16-0441484). I also received informed consent agreements from every participant to assure my research was conducted ethically. Informed consent assures that participants are aware of the purpose and process of the research study and understand that they are not forced to participate in research (Mockler, 2013). To make sure all participants were knowledgeable of specifics regarding their participation throughout the research process, I provided a copy of the informed consent to all participants at the beginning of the first focus group. This document included written details about the purpose of the research, background information, the procedure, and potential risks and

benefits. I also discussed the informed consent document in its entirety with participants and made sure they understood it and had no questions or concerns.

Once all the data was collected, the information was stored on a secured computer system only accessible with my fingerprint. As an extra method of securing data, I created a secret password to encrypt the files saved on the computer. Hard copies of the data were stored in a safe located in the privacy of my home; I am the only person with a key to access the data. This stored information included all written notes, voice recordings, and other pertinent information related to this action research study.

Once this action research study is completed, the research's findings will be available to participants in a number of ways. Once this entire study has been completed and I have graduated, a summary of the completed study will be emailed to all participants. This summary will provide participants with an overview of the study's findings as a result of their participation in the focus groups. Information from the action research study will also be disseminated through peer-reviewed publications. When the article is available, I will post the information on the wall of the closed Facebook group, The Social Work Group. Future social work conferences and workshops will also be a tool for disseminating information from this action research study. This will give me an opportunity to present the information to a multitude of social workers who interact with the target population in some capacity as it relates to the topic of the action research study.

Considering the purpose of this action research project was to enhance clinical social work practice, allowing participants to have access to this information aids in enhancing their clinical practice and personal and professional development. However,

in disseminating information from this action research project identifiable information will be disguised to avoid breeching confidentiality. After five years, all information from this action research study will be destroyed according to IRB protocol.

Summary

This section reviewed in detail the overall project used to complete the action research study to explore the presented social issue and answer the proposed research questions. This section reviewed the study's background and context, methodology, sources of data collection, and ethical procedures. Each of the subsections was used to explain how the project was conducted and what measures were taken to collect the data to best explore the social phenomenon presented.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

Findings of the Action Research Study

The purpose of this action research study was to explore six social workers' roles and their responses to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education. The purpose directly relates to the research questions posed at the beginning of the study, "How do social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education and what are their roles in responding to this issue?" To explore this phenomenon, data were collected through focus groups with social workers who work with African American teenage mothers in some capacity. Section 3 includes data analysis techniques used in completing the action research study, findings, and a summary of the section overall.

To gather information, I facilitated three focus groups lasting between 45-60 minutes with six social workers who work directly or indirectly with African American

teenage mothers in pursuit of a college education. These focus groups explored the

variables of this study which are: (a) social worker roles, (b) African American teenage

mothers, (c) education, and (d) teenage pregnancy. These focus groups took place over

the course of 2 weeks. To recruit participants for the focus groups, I utilized the social

work group, a closed group on Facebook, after obtaining approval from one of its

moderators. I then posted in the group to inform potential participants of the action

research study.

When I made the initial post, I had no responses that day which was discouraging

and made me nervous because I began to wonder if I would have enough participants to

complete the focus groups. To be fully aware of and account for these thoughts and

feelings, I wrote in my reflexive journal (See Appendix A). The day after making the

initial post, I began to receive responses from social workers who were interested in

participating. As I began receiving responses, I responded with a message via email,

Facebook inbox message, or text message thanking them for their interest and asked for

the best email address to send the informed consent. The informed consent included the

purpose and rationale of the action research study, who was conducting it, and the

benefits and risks of participating in the study. To consent, I asked participants to

respond with the words "I consent" via email and send the reply to me. All six

participants completed the informed consent form.

To recruit more participants, I posted a reminder post in the social work group 3

days after the initial post (See Appendix E). A few more participants responded, which

made me hopeful that the focus groups would be successful and provide good

information. Two days after posting the reminder post, I closed recruitment, resulting in

six social workers willing to participate in the focus groups. Five of the participants were social workers who responded to the initial and reminder Facebook posts, and one participant was a social worker invited to participate by a potential participant, an example of snowball sampling.

During these focus groups, social workers answered questions (See Appendix G) which led to further discussion that provided qualitative data. Prior to each focus group, I arrived at the public library at least 30 minutes before participants and wrote in my reflexive journal (See Appendix A). Arriving 30 minutes before the focus group began allowed me to focus on journaling my feelings, thoughts, and expectations while alone and in a quiet environment. A quiet environment helped me to relax, ease the nervousness I felt, and enhanced clarity while journaling. I found this very helpful to the research process and arrived 30 minutes early to journal for all focus groups.

This reflexive journal was used as a tool to acknowledge any personal biases, thoughts, feelings, and expectations that may have interfered with or had an effect on the atmosphere of the focus group. For example, by reflecting on my feelings of nervousness and uncertainty prior to the focus groups, I paid close attention to how my tone of voice and body language may have relayed the message to participants that I was nervous or unsure. This awareness helped me to focus more on being relaxed and creating a more comfortable environment for participants.

Reflecting on my thoughts, feelings, and expectations prior to each focus group increased my awareness of how my behavior transferred energy to the group. After each focus group and all participants departed, I remained at the library for at least 30 minutes to reflect on my thoughts, feelings, and expectations by writing in the reflexive journal.

This brought awareness to how my thoughts and feelings before each focus group may have influenced participants' discussions, attitudes, and behaviors. Staying 30 minutes after focus groups ended helped me relax, journal with enhanced clarity, and be more aware of my thoughts, feelings, and expectations.

During each focus group, I used two voice recorders to record the discussions for transcription purposes later. I kept written notes in addition to the voice recordings. During the focus groups, I made written notes of words that I heard multiple times. Writing repetitive words signaled to me the importance of the word as it related to the research question and exploring this phenomenon.

Data Analysis Technique

I decided to wait until completing all three focus groups before transcribing the recordings for a more systematic method of transcribing. This systematic method of transcribing gave me the opportunity to focus on one aspect at a time during the transcribing process. By completing all three focus groups before transcribing, I was able to focus only on transcribing without having to prepare for focus groups or worry about anything else related to the study at that time.

For example, during the focus groups I focused on the information shared by participants, was aware of any biases that may hinder focus groups, and made sure I had all necessary materials for focus groups. Once the focus groups were completed and I was ready to transcribe, I was able to focus on the recordings and written notes to make sure all information was transcribed accurately. By focusing on one task at a time, I was able to give my undivided attention to a particular task to increase my ability to be accurate and not miss any information shared.

Unless multiple participants were speaking at one time, I transcribed according to the speaker's voice, and then rewound the voice recording to the beginning of their statement to check for accuracy. I chose to transcribe the recordings during evenings because I found myself more focused and relaxed. The first focus group took approximately 3 hours to transcribe. Initially, I thought this process was very time consuming and repetitive and I even thought that having a professional transcribe the information for me would have been less stressful. However, the more I transcribed, the less I felt this way, because I realized that as the researcher seeking to explore this social issue, I was interested and even excited to transcribe and review what I had recorded. To account for these thoughts, emotions, and feelings, I recorded this experience in my reflexive journal. Recording this information in my reflexive journal motivated me to explore the phenomenon in its entirety.

Transcribing the second focus group took approximately 6 hours over the course of 3 nights with transcribing 2 hours per night. It took longer to transcribe this focus group because there was a lot more data collected due to participants sharing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences all fueled by passion and compassion for the social issue being explored. After approximately an hour of transcribing the second focus group I became frustrated because I realized this would take longer compared to transcribing the first focus group.

I was so focused on transcribing all three focus groups within a certain amount of time that I failed to realize that hasty transcribing would result in missing pertinent information that would later affect my findings and overall study. At that point, I took a 30 minute break, sat on the patio and enjoyed the night air and a cup of green tea, and

prayed for peace, patience, and the ability to regain focus. Once I had taken a break, I decided to transcribe the second focus group for only 2 hours per night until it was completed.

The third focus group took approximately 3 hours on 1 night and 2 hours the next night. Since I was more focused on the quality and accuracy of my study, I was more relaxed and patient with the transcribing process. The more I listened to the voice recordings and read through what I had transcribed, I found myself increasingly intrigued and interested in what participants had shared during the focus groups. This caused me to spend an extra hour the first night of transcribing the third focus group. While transcribing the third focus group, I was surprised that despite the fact this was a rigorous process, it was much needed for my personal, professional and academic growth.

There were several lessons I learned from the process of transcribing. Personally, I learned about the power of self-evaluation which I enhanced using my reflexive journal. Professionally, I learned the importance of enhancing my knowledge as a social worker. Furthermore, academically, I learned to trust my research skills and embrace feelings of fear and doubt surrounding unknown research processes. By embracing these feelings, I became more focused, calmer, and engaged with data. To further add rigor to the transcription process, I used the second recorder. I transcribed each focus group by listening to the first voice recorder. I used the second voice recorder to listen to the focus groups while I read the transcripts and made any necessary corrections to the transcripts.

Coding

After transcribing a total of 39 pages and checking for accuracy, I began the process of coding. I started this process by reading aloud each line of the transcriptions and writing on the right side of the margins what was meant by the participant. To avoid coding based on what I thought participants meant I also included an explanation of how some codes were created (See Appendix H). I did this for every line of the transcribed focus group. When I was unable to code anything from a particular line, I would go to the next few lines until a code emerged.

Once I completed the first coding attempt for each focus group, I went through the process again a second, third, and fourth time. I repeated the process four times to make sure I was thorough in the coding process, but careful to not code too much. It was amazing to see how each code was simplified to fewer words with each attempt. During each coding attempt I was also able to identify repetitive codes which I highlighted to serve as a reminder. During the coding process, I also used my handwritten notes to identify common codes. For example, when I read codes from the third focus group regarding funding as a barrier for social workers to provide services, I reviewed my handwritten notes and noted I had identified the same code.

At this point my action research study began to make sense because I was able to answer the research questions were the codes and overarching themes. For example the research question is: "How do social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education?" and "What are their roles in responding to the barriers?" The answer to the first question is that social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education by; (a) Emotionally connecting with African American teenage mothers while

exploring the barriers, (b) Being aware of and accounting for their personal thoughts and feelings as a professional, (c) Being aware of the actual barriers African American teenage mothers face to best link them to resources to address those barriers, (d) Identifying their support systems and helping them develop positive support systems, (e) Exploring the factors that are positively or negatively impacting their ability to be successful, and (f) Utilizing social work practices, approaches, and implications most appropriate to overcoming the barriers African American teenage mother face in pursuit of a college education. Social workers assume the following roles when responding to the barriers: (a) Educator, (b) Advocate, (c) Mediator, (d) Case manager, (e) Broker, (f) Facilitator, and (g) Support system (See Appendix I).

I could see how the overarching themes were created from the category one codes and further how all codes were connected to one another.   It was at this point I connected the overarching themes with the ecological systems theory. Each overarching theme impacts social workers' responses and roles in responding to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education. For example *emotions* can affect social workers' responses in terms of their emotional connection with African American teenage mothers (micro level); while *support systems* can affect the factors social workers include in assisting African American teenage mothers (mezzo level).

After considering various methods of coding, I decided to create a table and list every code from all three focus groups. This resulted in a total of 153 codes that I labeled as category one codes (See Appendix I). I then reviewed the category one codes multiple times to group and categorize them into fewer codes based on their similarities and labeled these as category two codes (See Appendix I). After grouping the category two

codes, I reviewed them multiple times to further group them into five themes which I labeled as category three codes on the code management chart (See Appendix I).

As I reviewed each category of codes, I wanted to make it easier for someone reading my study to be able to identify which codes share similarities. Reviewing each category of codes consisted of me reading over every code and being very attentive to find similarities between each code. This process was completed at nighttime when everyone else in my home was asleep, the atmosphere was quiet, and I was able to concentrate. Grouping each category of codes by designating each group a specific color appeared to make it easier to identify each group of codes. Once the code management chart was completed, I could see how the themes related to the first and second category codes.

For example, the overarching theme of emotions began as category one codes such as feelings of discouragement for teen mothers and social workers' frustration. These category one codes demonstrated the similarity between teen mothers' emotions and social workers' emotions. The similarity of teen mothers' emotions and social workers' emotions was used to develop the category two codes of emotions. Teen mothers' emotions and social workers' emotions were later coded in to the overarching theme of emotions (See Appendix I).

Green was used to represent emotions, both clients' and social workers. Purple represented barriers to pursuing higher education and providing services to clients. Red was used to represent African American teenage mothers' support systems. Blue represented success factors that affect African American teenage mothers' ability or inability to pursue a college education. Turquoise was used to represent social work

practice approaches and implications used in responding to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education (See Appendix I). For example, the codes labeled turquoise related to social work practice approaches and implications which had direct connections to micro level social work. This further made me consider the connection social work practice approaches and implications have to macro level social work. By exploring social work practice approaches and implications in terms of social workers' responses and roles on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, I was able to demonstrate how the ecological systems theory was utilized and incorporated in the data analysis process.

Validation and Legitimation

To make sure my study was credible I first sought to recruit participants who have experience in working directly with African American teenage mothers facing barriers in pursuit of a college education. The participants would also be credible sources to help explore the phenomenon and inform my research question. Once participants were chosen I engaged in three focus groups, as a facilitator and researcher, to build rapport and establish trust so that participants would feel comfortable with disclosing personal information regarding their professional and personal experiences.

I then used member checking as a means of checking for accuracy of what was discussed in the focus groups. Member checking is a validation technique that involves exploring the credibility of information by asking participants to check for accuracy in accordance with their experiences (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). I also used reflexivity to make sure my personal biases did not distort the data. According to Rinaldi (2013) research reflexivity is a research methodological tool that consists of

researchers positioning themselves in the situations of the population being researched by disclosing their own experiences. To remain in the researcher role, I used reflexivity by accounting for personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings in my reflexive journal. I used my reflexive journal to account for any biases and to be more aware of how those biases may affect the data.

Once I completed the coding process and found the themes, I read over the transcripts again. This time I read the transcripts with the research question and findings in mind. This was an extra step in the validation process to make sure I did not overlook anything.

Limitations

A limitation of conducting this study was the possibility of missing some quality information from participants due to the duration of the focus groups. Prior to actually beginning the focus groups, I wondered if 45 minutes for each focus group was too long. However, when the focus groups started, the participants became more comfortable with one another as evidenced from their willingness to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. I also noted participants' had become more comfortable as a result of the second focus group lasting longer than the first because participants were eagerly engaging in discussions.

It was at this point I realized 45 minutes may not be enough time for the focus groups. This caused me to bring an end to some discussions to make sure I was able to ask all questions within the 45 minute time frame. For example, the second focus group consisted of exploring and defining the actual social work practice issue and getting to the core of the phenomenon. The participants were highly interested in the focus group

and were sharing plenty of helpful information, but no one realized we had gone 15 minutes over time making the second focus group last 60 minutes. Also, considering the fact I reserved the room at the local library, other small groups were scheduled to use the meeting room after our focus group. Therefore going 15 minutes over our allotted time placed a strain on other scheduled group meetings.

Another limitation of conducting this study was the possibility of limited transferability and usefulness to the larger southern Mississippi area. The sample consisted of six social workers who were all African American females who worked in the Hattiesburg or Jackson areas. Considering the sample for this study may not represent the larger population of social workers in the southern Mississippi area, the findings of this study may not be transferrable to the greater southern Mississippi area. This limitation may also mean the findings of this study may not be applicable to social work practice in other southern Mississippi areas besides Hattiesburg and Jackson.

For example, northern states may not have as many funding issues social workers in southern Mississippi in terms of resources to address the issue of African American teenage mothers facing barriers in pursuing higher education. Social workers in other geographical locations may not have issues with African American teenage mothers pursuing higher degrees. Also, on the macro level, policies may differ across the state of Mississippi or within other states which affects the delivery of services or how the issue is perceived. This limits the usefulness of this study because it may not be applicable to all geographical areas.

Utilizing Facebook and the closed group, The Social Work, as a recruiting method is another limitation. This is a limitation because of the fact not all social workers who

meet the criteria to participate in the study utilize Facebook or are members of the closed

group. Since all social workers do not use Facebook or may not be a member of the

closed group, this creates a bias towards social workers. This also affects my recruitment

by possibly not recruiting social workers who have more knowledge and more experience

than the chosen participants in working with African American teenage mothers.

Findings

This action research study's findings emerged systematically through data

analysis and coding. Once the focus groups had been completed and the recordings had

been transcribed. I used the transcriptions and handwritten notes to begin the data

analysis process. I began by reading transcripts line by line to reflect on the meaning of

what participants shared during focus groups and to identify emerging codes to symbolize

such meaning. I engaged in this process of reading and coding carefully while

concurrently accounting for my reactions and at times biases on the reflexive journal.

During the coding and data analysis processes I was also able to identify connections

among the various systems of EST. Intersectionality has been used to explain how the

different systems intersect one another to provide an understanding of the disadvantages

African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education, how social

workers respond to this issue, and social workers' roles in their responses. This

intersectionality identified among the different systems will be further discussed in terms

of informing the social work practice problem.

The category one codes consisted of 151 codes (See Appendix I). The category

one codes were then grouped and grouped into 19 category two codes which were later

grouped into five overarching themes (See Appendix I). The 19 category two codes

emerged from the 151 category one codes that were similar in some way. For example, four of the 151 category one codes described roles social workers play in responding to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education. Since each of these category one codes identified a social work role, I simplified the category two code to the overarching theme of roles. This process helped provide meaning to all the data collected, analyzed, transcribed, and coded. The five overarching themes of this study include: (a) Emotions, (b) Barriers, (c) Support systems, (d) Success factors, and (e) Social work practice approaches and implications.

Emotions.

Social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education by identifying, acknowledging, and addressing their emotions as well as African American teenage mothers' emotions. Emotions is a unique theme because emotions may impact social workers' roles and how they respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education. The variations of this theme are the different emotions both social workers and African American teenage mothers experience which include: discouragement, passion, fear, low self-esteem, hope, embarrassment, self-pity, distress, patience, grief, and feelings of inadequacy (See Appendix I).

Social workers' roles and responses are impacted by the emotions they experience as professionals. For example, during the focus groups one participant stated, "If you don't try to put the services in and have these programs you don't… I mean you don't know… and it's frustrating like you said…" while another participant stated, "And then you know, my personal fear is, you know, with me being a black woman trying to

change, trying to say, you know, ok governor we want this here." These responses focus

on four emotions social workers experience in responding to the social issue,

discouragement, frustration, feelings of inadequacy and fear.

The second statement focuses on the participants' fear and feelings of inadequacy

in addressing the issue on the macro level by presenting the social issue to governing

bodies in an effort to change policies. Social workers' feelings of fear may cause them to

not be persistent or confident in advocating for clients and presenting the social issue as a

result of thinking their efforts will be overlooked. Social workers fear of having their

efforts overlooked could also lead to feelings of inadequacy in their ability to help create

social change for target populations. This further demonstrates the uniqueness of the

theme emotions by illustrating how emotions impact social workers' responses and roles

in responding to barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher

education. In relation to the EST, social workers' feeling impact how they respond to the

barriers African American teenage mothers face on the macro level.

How social workers respond to African American teenage mothers' emotions also

impacts how they respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in

pursuit of higher education as well as their roles as social workers on each level of EST.

During the focus groups, one participant stated, "A lot of 'em have fear they won't be

successful…" while another participant stated, "As a result of teenage mothers

experiencing fear of being unsuccessful, social workers may have to assume the role of

support system and respond by encouraging and instilling hope in African American

teenage mothers in pursuit of higher education. As a part of African American teenage

mothers' support system, social workers' respond to barriers teenage mothers face on the

mezzo level by creating a healthy therapeutic relationship. Social workers' passion for

their profession also impacts their responses and their roles in responding to the barriers

African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education. For example,

during a focus group one participant stated, "support system because you care and not

because you're assigned to them, it really makes them flourish to wanna do better, and

want to do more…" This statement demonstrates how passion impacts a social workers'

ability to help African American teenage mothers flourish reach their highest potential

academically as well as in their personal life.

While reviewing the frustrations participants shared in working with African

American teenage mothers, I was reminded of my own frustrations as a social worker.

As a researcher, I did not engage in the focus group discussions with participants, but I

felt different emotions before, during, and after focus groups related to the social work

practice issue. To account for and acknowledge these feelings, I wrote in my reflexive

journal which I consulted during the coding process. By doing this I was able to identify

my frustrations as a social worker and researcher which further helped me develop the

overarching theme of emotions.

When viewing the theme of emotions as it relates to what African American

teenage mothers' experience in their pursuit of a college education, participants shared

information that helped me identify those feelings of distress, grief, low self-esteem,

hope, fear, self-pity, and embarrassment. For example, when discussing teenage

mothers' feelings regarding their inability to further their education one participant stated,

"I started talking to her and she was like, you know like, you know woe me I can't do any

better," while another participant stated, "you know, they're giving me a goal they know

I can't reach right now," and another participant stated, "The young lady I was working with in August was sitting there with her head down…" Each of these statements demonstrate the fear, discouragement, embarrassment, self-pity, and grief African American teenage mothers feel as a result of the difficulty they face in pursuit of higher education.

During another focus group participants discussed the low self-esteem of African American teenage mothers in their efforts to pursue a college education. One participant stated, "so with that separation on top of I don't have a support system, I don't have family I don't know what I'm gonna do," while another participant stated, "They can, you know, thrive and they can be what they wanna be…" The first statement illustrates hopelessness African American teenage mothers' may feel in not knowing how to overcome barriers which may lead to low self-esteem issues related to not have adequate support systems to motivate them in their efforts to be successful. The second statement illustrates the hope African American teenage mothers have in wanting to be successful to best provide for themselves and their families.

Barriers.

Barriers is the second overarching theme that is unique because it can be considered a factor of the other four overarching themes, emotions (micro level), support systems (mezzo level), social work practice approaches and implications (mezzo and macro levels), and success factors (micro and mezzo levels). Emotions can become a barrier to social workers' responses. For example, one participant stated, "That's the frustration and the barrier because of lack of resources…" This statement demonstrates how the lack of resources as a barrier creates frustration for social workers which impacts

their response to helping African American teenage mothers in their pursuit of a college education.

Support systems can also become barriers to African American teenage mothers' pursuit of higher education by hindering them to actually pursue an education. For example, during one of the focus groups, one participant stated, "A lot of times they don't have support whether it's emotional, physical support or what have you…" while another participant stated, "you know, it was just a struggle tryna find those people that, you know, she could depend on to help her with that." These statements show how the lack of support can become a barrier and struggle for African American teenage mothers to pursue a higher education. These statements also demonstrate how African American teenage mothers are affected on the micro level (self-esteem and close relationships) as a result of the lack of support.

Barriers are also a unique theme because it brings awareness to the difficulties African American teenage mothers actually experience on each level of the EST. The theme of barriers also help identify and define the difficulty social workers experience in assuming roles and responding to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education. As depicted in the code management chart, on the micro level African American teenage mothers experience the following barriers: self-esteem issues, embarrassment, self-pity, distress, patience, grief, and fear (See Appendix I).

During a focus group when discussing fear, grief and distress as barriers African American teenage mothers experience one participant stated, "once I started saying that she started to cry…" while another participant stated, "A lot of 'em have fear that they won't be successful…succeed in it. That they'll fail. So they even have fear to take the

steps to do it." Each of the statements illustrates how the emotions of fear, grief, and distress are also barriers that create difficulty and may hinder African American teenage mothers from pursuing a college education. During one of the focus group a participant discussed patience in terms of its importance in accomplishing other tasks while in the process of pursuing a college education. This participant stated, "she found a job that they have um childcare is included at her job. So she can take her baby to work and baby is in the um nursery, and so she's working. And uh, so to me that's a huge step."

The barriers African American teenage mothers experience on the micro level are all emotions that affect how they view their social problem. On the mezzo level African American teenage mothers experience the following barriers: family, friends, family issues, and family dynamics. The barrier of family issues and family dynamics was illustrated by a participant who stated in a focus group, "said that she didn't register, you know, for school because, you know, the father needed her" while another participant stated, "their mother had died when they were young and their father was on drugs and alcohol." Each of the barriers on the mezzo level are connections or relationships African American teenage mothers' have established that impacts their lives in some way.

On the exo level African American teenage mothers experience the following barriers: housing, childcare, parenting knowledge, and health insurance. Barriers on the exo level are indirect environmental factors that affect African American teenage mothers' ability to pursue a college education. To explain how housing, childcare, and parenting knowledge are barriers that impact African American teenage mothers' ability to pursue a college education during a focus group one participant stated, "I mean how are they gonna expect these mothers to raise these kids if they don't know how? If

they… if they can't even get themselves together," while another participant stated, "then sometimes it's even going as far as going to talk with the daycare owners and just saying look this is the situation…" and another participant stated, "Baby clothes, just housing. This is the situation we have. This is what we workin' with…" Each of these statements illustrate how parenting knowledge or the lack thereof, housing, and childcare play an important role in impacted African American teenage mothers' lives and decisions for themselves and their child or children.

When identifying and explaining health insurance as a barrier one participant stated, "They didn't extend the Medicaid to the people who were not eligible for Obamacare. So you have to be at a certain income to get, you know, affordable healthcare" while another participant stated, "that was a Medicaid requirement for the wraparound piece…" These two statements illustrate the role insurance plays in African American teenage mothers' ability to receive adequate services to help their situation. These statements also show how stringent insurance guidelines create a barrier for social workers to provide adequate services.

On the macro level, African American teenage mothers experience the following barriers: society's view of the social issue and the community's lack of awareness regarding the social issue. For example, one participant stated, "I can remember it being that if you did get pregnant as a teenager, you just might as well… You just lost everything. You done messed up your life. So I think it was a bad view" while another participant stated, "And I think it's easier sometimes for the community to say what's… what's… you know it's easy to say, well you know, you done lost your life because now you got a problem." Each of these barriers are social values that affect African American

teenage mothers. On the chrono level, African American teenage mothers experience the following barriers: maturity, responsibility, and adolescent development. Each of these chrono level barriers are factors that consist of transitions and create difficulty for African American teenage mother face barriers in their pursuit of higher education. Throughout the data analysis, the intersection of the micro, mezzo, exo, macro, and chrono systems became clear. I was able to see how each system informs the other.

For example when discussing African American teenage mothers' lack of responsibility and structure, one participant stated, "You know there's rules and stuff and they're not use to it, but that's the only way that you'll kinda just… can move on and be an adult, but it's scary for them at the same time." This statement demonstrates the importance of African American teenage mothers learning responsibility and having structure in their lives to help them with daily decisions for themselves and their child or children. In further discussing adolescent development and maturity in terms of how it impacts African American teenage mothers' ability to pursue a college education one participant stated, "Kids raising kids." This statement shows how teenage mothers may experience some parenting difficulty as a result of not possessing the maturity to handle the demands of child rearing and parenting.

Support Systems.

Social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education by acknowledging and including their support systems, and by being a part of that support system. During one of the focus groups a participant stated, "Sometimes you're the initial person to start all that for them…" while another participant stated, "just to make sure. And sometimes you gotta be momma,

grandmomma, auntie, friend…" These statements demonstrate how social workers respond to the social issue by ensuring African American teenage mothers have adequate supports systems, even if they are the support needed. Social workers are viewed as support on the mezzo level as a result of their connection to African American teenage mothers that impacts their life decisions, experiences, and the resources and assistance they receive.

Also on the mezzo level, family, friends, and neighbors are sources of support for African American teenage mothers. These supports are illustrated by a participant who stated, "A lot of them do not have positive role models." This statement explains African American teenage mothers' are affected by their support systems or the lack thereof which may affect them in many different areas. This also illustrates how different levels of EST are connected to one another with social workers as the support source of that connection.

While providing support to African American teenage mothers, social workers assume the roles of educator, mediator, and case manager. As educators, social workers may provide African American teenage mothers with new knowledge or expand on what they already know related to parenting or adolescent development. As mediators, social workers may provide support by intervening to reach an agreement between African American teenage mothers and inadequate support systems during disputes or disagreements. As case managers, social workers may provide support by linking African American teenage mothers to appropriate resources.

Success Factors.

Social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face by identifying and exploring the factors that impact teenage mothers' success on different levels of EST. The roles social workers assume in identifying and exploring success factors depends on the actual success factor. On the micro level, success factors include: teenage mothers' desires and resiliency. These micro level success factors were presented by a participant who stated, "there are times it is hard, but if you keep pushing through you can do it and um I think as a social worker we need to make sure that we find really good supports for these young ladies" while another participant stated, "teen mother and really wanting to go back to school and wanting to do better for yourself and your child."

In terms of intersectionality, mezzo level success factors are connected to support systems and barriers which are factors of teenage mothers' ability to succeed. Macro level success factors are connected to barriers in terms of policies and procedures. For example, during the focus groups one participant stated, "Like the competing agencies um they don't allow you to use their services if your client is enrolled in… in yours" while during another focus group one participant stated, "And these programs they putting in place to make it harder… Ok, well if you gon' get EBT, you gotta come to this class, but is that class really helpful…" These statements illustrate the strict guidelines associated with agency and insurance policies and procedures that impact social workers' ability to assist African American teenage mothers. Social workers' inability to assist African American teenage mothers further impacts teenage mothers' ability to be successful.

Success factors of African American teenage mothers' ability to pursue a college education impacts how social workers respond because those factors determine what aspect is most important for social workers to respond to. For example, African American teenage mothers facing barriers of unaffordable and unreliable childcare may benefit from social workers responding to their basic needs in an effort to help them succeed in pursing higher education. In response to the mothers' basic needs, social workers' roles may be broker, case manager, and advocate. As a broker, social workers may link African American teenage mothers to affordable and reliable childcare or community resources to provide assistance. As case managers social workers may assure teenage mothers receive those services while also advocating for them in the event there is conflict for them to receive the needed services.

Social Work Practice Approaches/Implications.

Social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education by utilizing practice approaches and implications. In utilizing the most appropriate social work practice approaches and implications, social workers assume the roles of case manager, educator, facilitator, advocate and broker. Social workers are able to respond to this issue in terms of their practice and approaches on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of EST.

On the micro level, social workers are able to build a healthy therapeutic relationship with African American teenage mothers to best explore and help them overcome barriers to pursuing higher education. Social workers may create a healthy therapeutic relationship by their ability to personally relate to the issue, establishing trust, building rapport, using self-disclosure, understanding the issue from the client's reality,

normalization, follow-up once the therapeutic and working relationship has ended, instilling hope, respecting African American teenage mothers' dignity and respect, setting boundaries, maintaining confidentiality, and being honest.

In terms of creating a healthy therapeutic relationship by being able to personally relate to the issue social workers exhibit empathy. For example, during one focus group a participant stated, "when I got pregnant, and uh I know how hard it is, but I also know you can do this." This statement illustrates social workers' building a healthy therapeutic relationship by empathizing with African American teenage mothers and utilizing self-disclosure. Social workers also establish a healthy therapeutic relationship by building rapport and trust and setting boundaries as explained by a participant in a focus group who stated, "You're more than just their social worker. And when they start to trust, that's when they start gettin' power that they can do this," while another participant stated, "I never initiated contact with her. I allowed her to initiate contact with me, and left the door open." The first statement demonstrates how building rapport and trust within the therapeutic relationship motivates African American teenage mothers to achieve their goals. The second statement illustrates how setting boundaries even after the therapeutic relationship has been terminated gives social workers the opportunity to continue being a source of support for clients.

These methods of establishing a healthy therapeutic relationship were explained by a participant in a focus group who shared, "I say about four years right when she turned 18 or 19. She would call me. I left that door opened, and um encouraged her" while another participant stated, "to put aside my biases my prejudices and work with her to realize that um she had rights." In terms of normalization, a participant stated, "she

needed to know somebody cared, but she also needed to know that somebody could identify with her."

On the mezzo level, social workers are able to implement the most appropriate practices to help African American teenage mothers overcome barriers. These useful practices and approaches may include: incorporating and addressing mental health issues, working within the child welfare system or other specialty areas, exhibiting empathy, continuing education opportunities, understanding the adolescent stage of development, person-centered approach, self-determination, goal setting on all levels of EST, incorporating clients' input in goal setting, and utilizing a solution-focused approach. Utilizing a client-centered approach and self-disclosure in the therapeutic process was discussed in the focus groups by one participant who stated, "So, with that person… it don't work with everybody, but with that particular young lady…" while another participant stated, "I have learned now to use a little bit more disclosure."

On the macro level, social workers are able to network with other social workers and present the issue to lawmakers to bring about change in policies. Social workers assume the role of advocate in responding with macro level approaches. One participant stated in the focus group, "Like taxpayers. Medicaid. WIC. Like all that stuff. That's really what they be wanting to hung in on. How… how it's gon' affect us. Not how it's affecting that child that just got pregnant, but how it's gon' affect us." This participant discussed taxpayers' concern with how government assistance programs will affect them instead of how it will help those in need of those programs. This illustrates the need for social workers to advocate on African American teenage mothers' behalf in regards to issues on the political level, the macro level.

Social workers can also expand their knowledge by networking to gain information to better assist their clients. Networking refers to social workers working together and uniting within their profession and community to create change and improve their practice. During the third focus group when asking participants what areas they thought needed improvement in regards to social workers creating social change within their communities, one participant stated, "Being involved with the community" while another participant stated, "And pulling together… Because often times we can see something different… something totally different from them and they're the ones living it and we need to be more involved in…"

The first statement illustrates the need for social workers to go beyond helping their clients within their agencies, but uniting and networking within their communities to become more actively involved. This active involvement may include reaching out to disadvantaged citizens within the community to have a better understanding of existing social issues or arranging community meetings to hear from those in the community about the issues they are experiencing. The second statement further demonstrates the need for social workers to unite within their communities and the importance of better understanding social issues from the reality of the target population. As a result of what participants shared during focus groups, it can be concluded that these recommendations may lead to social change.

During the third focus groups, one of the participants discussed the improvement that may take place within the community if there were more social work groups in the community for the purpose of discussing pertinent and pressing social issues. The participant stated, "everybody gets together just like this kinda, and just talks about, like

what they can do or what they need." She further explained how these small groups of social workers would consist of brainstorming ideas and exploring different solutions to acknowledge and address the issue of how social workers' respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education and provide education for social workers possibly to improve their practices.

Intersectionality of Ecological Systems Theory and Findings.

Each level of the ecological systems theory intersects to further explain the social issue that was explored in this action research study. The social issue is how social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education as well as the roles they play in responding to those barriers. Intersectionality among these systems fuels the social work practice issue by illustrating how environmental influences impact social workers' responses and roles. Intersectionality is used to explain the intersection of the various systems in informing the social work practice problem. Intersectionality also fuels the social work practice issue by showing how each environmental level of EST impacts African American teenage mothers facing barriers in their pursuit of higher education.

African American teenage mothers are affected by their immediate relationships with family, friends, and peers (microsystem). The interactions between African American teenage mothers' family, friends, church, and peers (mesosystem) further impacts their development, either negatively or positively. The mesosystem is composed of connections among the microsystems.

The exosystem encompasses connections between African American teenage mothers and social systems they do not actively participate in, but are affected by in some

way. Exosystem influences may include African American teenage mother's parents not having a high school or college education. Exosystems influences may also consist of African American teenage mothers who live in single parent households. The macrosystem focuses on African American teenage mothers' cultural context as well as norms within their culture or community. Chronosystem refers to life transitions that may occur in adolescence when relating EST to African American teenagers.

Unexpected Findings.

The unexpected finding of my action research study was that social workers are actually unaware of available programs to help assist African American teenage mothers with overcoming barriers to pursuing their college education. Prior to completing focus groups, I was aware of the funding issues in the state of Mississippi as it relates to services provided by social workers. However, I was not completely aware of the fact social workers were unaware of the available programs that currently assist this target population. Social workers discussed this lack of awareness by one social worker stating during a focus group, "finding out what type of resources are out there because I didn't know that this um your current job is Canopy, but it was Mississippi Children's Homes services. I don't even know what all services they offer …" while another participant stated, "there are services out here, but I don't think the word is out about the… the need, and the… the resources that are available."

Each of these statements illustrates social workers' lack of knowledge regarding resources in their own communities. This finding was unexpected to me because prior to the focus groups, I was under the impression the social workers present would be aware of the available resources within the community considering five of the six social

workers resided in the same community. This was very surprising to me as the researcher

also because I thought I was aware of all the available resources for African American

teenage mothers in the community, but I was also educated on available resources from

participants' discussions in the focus groups.

Section 4: Recommended Solution

Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

I conducted this action research study to explore how clinical social workers

respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college

education and what their roles are when responding to this issue. Action research was an

effective methodology for this study because it allowed me as the researcher to learn

from participants with whom I share common professional social work roles. Using

action research methodology also provided opportunities to explore the phenomenon

using focus groups composed of individuals who work both directly and indirectly with

the target population. Action research also allowed me to confirm or disconfirm findings

and extend knowledge by comparing the findings with peer-reviewed literature.

The key findings of this action research study were that social workers respond in

the following ways: (a) Identifying and acknowledging the barriers, (b) Identifying and

acknowledging their emotions and clients' emotions, (c) Identifying and exploring

support systems, (d) Utilizing social work approaches and implications used when

assisting African American teenage mothers, and by (e) Identifying the different factors

that contribute to African American teenage mothers' success in pursuing higher

education. This section includes application for professional practice, solutions for

clinical social work setting, and implications for social change.

Application for Professional Practice

Three values from the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) related to the social practice problem explored in this action research study are the importance of human relationships, competence, and service. As revealed in this study's findings, support systems are an overarching theme explaining how social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education. Support systems for African American teenage mothers in this context include their families, friends, community, and social workers.

As discussed in focus groups, participants reported that African American teenage mothers' support systems influence their ability to pursue higher education. This indicates the importance of support systems for African American teenage mothers to pursue a college education. During the second focus group one participant stated, "A lot of them do not have positive role models. A lot of times they don't have the support…" This illustrates the importance of human relationships. According to the NASW Code of Ethics (2008), social workers are expected to identify and acknowledge the importance of human relationships and utilize those human relationships throughout the helping process. Considering participants reported African American teenage mothers' support systems are important human relationships, this aligns with the NASW Code of Ethics by guiding and encouraging the social worker to utilize these human relationships to aid in helping clients to overcome barriers.

The NASW Code of Ethics (2008) further stated that social workers are expected to strengthen the relationships among people to enhance their overall psychosocial well-being. This relates to the social work problem being explored in this action research

project because social workers provide services that strengthen African American teenage mothers' relationships. This also relates to the theme of support systems and barriers by illustrating how inadequate support can be a barrier to pursuing a college education. Their relationships with their support systems and community help them pursue a college education, obtain a degree, and adequately support their family. Findings revealed that African American teenage mothers who have inadequate support systems may rely on social workers as a source of social and emotional support. This role helps teenage mothers establish an avenue of support that does not already exist. In viewing this ethical principle in terms of how it relates to the ecological systems theory, strengthening human relationships among African American teenage mothers to enhance their overall well-being further illustrates how systems are affected by one another. Support systems may affect how African American teenage mothers view their ability to succeed in their pursuit of higher education.

Aparicio et al. (2014) stated that teenage pregnancy is a social issue affected by teenagers' environmental influences. These authors stated that teenagers' families are an important part of their environmental influences (Aparicio et al., 2014). Vinson and Stevens (2014) also discussed the impact support systems have on teenage mothers, but in terms of the support they receive within the school system. As identified in my study's findings, support system is an overarching theme developed from codes of which family and professionals were included.

Aparicio's findings support my study's findings by showing the importance of establishing support systems in addressing more specific issues of teenage pregnancy. Aparicio and Vinson and Steven's studies further support EST as discussed in this action

research study. I found that social workers respond to the barriers African American

teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education by acknowledging and addressing

support systems or the lack thereof, and being the support system if needed.

For example, during the helping process a social worker focuses on the

importance of human relationships in working with an African American teenage mother.

Kamenopoulou (2016) explained social inclusion in terms of the ecological systems

theory and how an individual's life is impacted through social inclusion with other people

and systems. To incorporate the human relationships on each level of EST, the social

worker may begin by working to strengthen the relationship the teenage mother has with

her mother in hopes of increasing her self-esteem (microsystem). The social worker may

then work to strengthen the African American teenage mother's relationship with her

family and friends (mesosystem). After strengthening the relationship with her support

systems, the social worker may work to improve the teenage mother's involvement with

other African American teenage mothers within the community. As a result of

interacting with other African American teenage mothers facing the same barriers, the

teenage mothers may now have the motivation needed to pursue their college education

despite the policies that may make it difficult for them to do so (macrosystem). One of

the barriers African American teenage mothers often encounter during the transition from

adolescence to adulthood is related to developmental changes (chronosystem). Examples

of developmental change in adolescence may include puberty (physical) and sexual

maturation (physiological).

The NASW Code of Ethics guides clinical social work practice by assuring clients

receive services conducive to accomplishing their career goals. For example, African

American teenage mothers' support systems are an important factor in addressing this social issue. Therefore, the NASW Code of Ethics guides clinical social workers to recognize those relationships to be most effective in their practice. Without the value of human relationships, social workers may fail to include what is most important to clients, their relationships with their environmental influences. This further demonstrates the importance of considering all systems in the helping process and how not doing so affects clients on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

The findings from this action research study have the potential to impact social work practice in terms of professional ethics by encouraging social workers to become more aware of how human relationship affect social issues. Findings from this study show that human relationships can also become barriers to pursuing a college education. For example, inadequate support from family members would be a human relationship that creates a barrier for African American teenage mothers because they may not have the support and encouragement they need to accomplish their goals.

By upholding the NASW Code of Ethics' value of human relationships, clinical social work practice could be impacted by making sure the importance of human relationships is acknowledged, included within the exploring and helping processes, and integrating within social work practice interventions to meet clients' needs. Findings show African American teenage mothers are more successful in their pursuit of higher education when they have adequate support systems.

Another value from the NASW Code of Ethics related to this social work practice problem is competence which relates to the theme social work practice approaches and implications. The NASW Code of Ethics (2008) defines competence as social workers

practicing within their area of competence and skill; furthering their education to ensure

they are aware of evolving social issues, practices, and approaches; and contributing to

the knowledge base of the social work profession. As shown in my study's findings, one

barrier African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education is the lack

of awareness about the social issue within the community and among social workers.

This barrier is a result of social workers and community members not having adequate

knowledge about the issue. In an effort to make a community and its social workers

knowledgeable about a social issue, finding innovative ways to enhance awareness by

promoting educational models may be required. For example, education could be shaped

in the community by organizing a community event that includes fun, food, and

education about social issues present within the community. Welch and Plaxton-Moore

(2017) discussed community education and engagement in terms of involving

communities based on current trends to increase community involvement.

 As findings from the literature review indicated, geographical areas impact

teenage mothers in terms of their ability to access helpful resources and information to

address the issues they experience as teenage parents (Murphy-Erby, 2013). Because

teenage parents' ability to access resources, their ability to become successful is also

impacted, which relates to the theme of success factors.

 The findings from previous literature extended knowledge of my findings

regarding how geographical location can also affect a community's awareness of the

actual social issue, including social workers within their community. Murphy-Erby and

colleagues (2013) concluded that teenagers residing in rural areas do not have as much

accessibility to resources and helpful information as their counterparts residing in urban areas further indicating the possibility of their lack of awareness.

For example, a social worker lives in a community where its community members are unaware of the socioeconomic issues that exist among African American teenage mothers. The social worker wants to educate community members about the fact majority of the community's African American teenage mothers lack a college education and are categorized as low income. In order to share knowledge with the community, the social worker must first be competent about social issues. This example illustrates the importance of competence in addressing the social work practice problem explored in this action research study.

Practicing within the realm of the NASW Code of Ethics guides clinical social work practice by assuring clients' social issues are addressed and psychosocial needs are met. According to the NASW Code of Ethics (2008), the ethical principle of the value of service is that social workers' primary goal of clinical practice is to address clients' social issues. This demonstrates social workers' commitment to ensure clients' social issues are acknowledged and addressed through advocacy, linking clients to proper resources, educating, mediating between clients and third parties and support systems, assuming the role of case manager, facilitating conversations and meetings between clients and support systems, and organizing resources for clients. These social work duties are fulfilled on either the mezzo level, macro level, or both.

The findings of this action research study may also impact clinical social work practice by encouraging social workers to consider utilizing person-centered services more often. According to the NASW Code of Ethics' (2008) the value of service focuses

on the importance of providing services to clients that leads to a positive change in their situation. These findings could impact clinical social work practice ethically. This could be done by encouraging social workers to explore and address the multiple barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education with consideration of their adolescent development. This study's findings confirm and extend knowledge by comparison to findings of previous literature. My study's findings are compared to the findings of previous peer-reviewed literature to show a connection and show how my findings fit with other literature. Each theme from my study identified relates to findings from other literature.

Emotions is an overarching theme used to explain how social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education. As discussed in previous peer-reviewed literature, depression and stress are emotional and psychological factors that affect teenage parents (Campbell-Grossman, et al., 2016; Huang et al., 2014). Campbell-Grossman et al. & Huang et al. also explained maternal stress among minority teenage mothers leads to separation anxiety and depression and attention problems for the child. The emotions theme confirms this study's findings by showing the importance of emotions in working with minority (African American) teenage mothers facing barriers in pursuit of a college education. Emotions also fits with previous peer-reviewed literature because as depicted in the code management chart emotional distress is an emotion experienced by African American teenage mothers which is also discussed in the literature by Campbell-Grossman et al. & Huang et al. from previous sections (See Appendix J).

The theme of barriers confirms this study's findings and extends knowledge in the discipline. Previous literature showed that teenage pregnancy affects teenage parents and their child or children financially, socially, physically, educationally, and psychologically (Soloman-Fears & Basch, 2011). Each of these areas in which teenage mothers and their children are affected creates barriers for them to pursue a college education.

Soloman-Fears (2015) also explained that teenage pregnancy has a negative impact on academic achievement in terms of higher education, and teenage parents in the United States are 10-12% less likely to complete high school and 14-29% less likely to actually to attend college (Bouchard, 2015). Teenage pregnancy among minority teenagers in the United States increases teenage mothers' chances of living in poverty and facing barriers in their pursuit of a college education (Bouchard, 2015). This further confirms my study's findings by showing teenage pregnancy as a barrier to pursuing a college education. Knowledge is also extended as a result of my study's findings revealing more barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education as illustrated in the code management chart (See Appendix I).

The theme of support systems confirms my study's findings when compared to previous peer-reviewed literature by demonstrating how African American teenage mothers' external influences impacts their ability to pursue a college education. For example, Aparicio (2014) explained teenage pregnancy is a social issue that exists as a result of teenage females' communication, relationship, and interaction with their family which varies among ethnic groups. When comparing my study's finding to those of Aparcio's, it can be concluded that teenage mothers' external influences or support systems impacts their ability to succeed in their efforts to pursue a college education.

This comparison also shows that communication between teenage mothers' and their support systems is important. In the findings section, support systems is presented in terms of the impact positive support systems have on African American teenage mothers' ability to succeed in pursuit of a college education.

The theme of success factors connects to previous peer-reviewed literature by focusing on what factors impact African American teenage mothers' ability to pursue a college education either negatively or positively. Previous literature identified those success factors. For example, Derlan et al. (2014) explained that ethnicity plays an important role in the outcomes of teenage pregnancy. For example, one of those outcomes can be whether or not an African American teenage mother pursued a college education. This outcome is a result of the factors that motivate or hinder an African American teenage mothers' success or lack thereof.

As explained by Murphy-Erby et al. (2013) geographical location also determines what resources teenage mothers have access to which can be a success factor. For example, one of those resources could be assistance with career planning and development. African American teenage mothers' access to this resource impacts their ability to succeed. This peer-reviewed literature confirms that success factors fit with previously discussed literature and a theme of this study's findings.

The theme of social work practice approaches and implications confirm and extend knowledge of my study's findings. This theme connects with previously discussed literature by showing social work practice approaches and implications are a vital component in responding to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education. This theme is also connected to previously peer-reviewed

literature by confirming there are current approaches used by social workers assisting teenage mothers in pursuit of a college education.

A current social work approach in working with minority adolescents is promoting social justice in viewing minority adolescents' unfavorable situations in terms of how it affects society as a whole (Johnston-Goodstar, 2013). Johnston-Goodstar further explained how this approach is beneficial to social work practice because the way social workers approach an issue within society is based on how they perceive society. Social work practice approaches and implications fits with the findings of this peer-reviewed literature because this theme focuses on what approaches are currently utilized to understand and respond to the social issues (barriers in pursuing a college education) minority adolescents (African teenage mothers) face.

The theme of social work practice approaches and implications is also a finding that extends knowledge in the discipline by providing more information regarding social work practice and approaches. Previous peer-reviewed literature discussed the approach of promoting social justice. However, my study's finding of social work practice approaches and implications discussed other approaches and implications such as building a healthy therapeutic relationship, implementing the most appropriate interventions for clients, and networking with other social workers to extend knowledge and work together to create social change.

Solutions for Clinical Social Work Practice

Systems-Oriented Solutions

Based on what participants reported in the focus groups, the codes that emerged from the focus groups, and findings from the literature reviewed, there are three

recommended action steps for clinical social work practitioners working on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. The three recommendations are for social workers to become more involved in the community and unite as social workers, work to understand clients' reality of social issues, and to better understand their roles in providing services to African American teenage mothers.

Microsystem.

As presented in the code management chart (See Appendix I), networking among social workers is a code associated with the overarching theme of social work practice approaches and implications. Jones & Phillips (2016) showed how proper education and training is essential in terms of social workers discovering knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward helping clients. This may also apply to social workers' current approaches to responding to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education. This study's findings further showed lobbying as a method of networking among social workers. Networking is also a means of sharing information and experiences to impact social workers' approaches to the presented social issue. By gaining proper knowledge and training, social workers' perspective may be impacted further leading to a change in their practice approaches.

Mesosystem.

Recommendations to further this research grounded in the strengths and limitation of this current study would be to have focus groups with African American teenage mothers facing barriers in pursuit of higher education. Another recommendation would be to have focus groups with African American teenage mothers' supports systems. This current study explores the issue within the realm of clinical social work practice, but in

furthering the study, exploring the issue from the perspective of African American teenage mothers and their environmental influences may provide more information. The information provided would be useful in creating new programs or improving current programs (mezzo and macro levels) based on African American teenage mothers and their environmental influences' report of how they are affected by the issue. One way social workers could evaluate the recommended solutions would be to compare the results and information shared from focus groups comprised of African American teenage mothers in pursuit of higher education with the results from this action research study.

   Macrosystem.

       By creating unity, social workers' could be empowered to work together to advocate for their community members at the political level for changes in policies. Better understanding how social issues affects communities may also empower social workers to advocate for communities to bring about social change to those directly and indirectly affected. During the third focus group, one participant stated, "so as a professional, what can I do? Is lobbying something I need to start doing? …" This demonstrated the possible use of lobbying as a means to work together with other social workers to bring about change. In this statement the participant inquired about whether or not lobbying may be a useful method to unite as social workers and actively contribute to social change. If the participant and other social workers did lobby for social change regarding the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education, this would be a macro level system solution for clinical social work practice at the political level.

Impact on Personal Practice

As an advanced practitioner, this study will impact my social work practice by making me more aware of personal biases, thoughts, feelings, and expectations, encouraging me to be adequately educated about social issues prior to helping target populations, and by encouraging me to be more involved within my community. The reflexive journal (See Appendix A), was very beneficial for me throughout the various stages of my research study. Writing in the reflexive journal allowed me to reflect on my feelings, thoughts, and expectations.

The reflexive journal also helped me become more aware of how my thoughts, feelings, and expectations were either hindering or helping my progress as a researcher as well as social worker. For example, during the data collection and analysis process as I reviewed my reflexive journals I was amazed at my thoughts, feelings, and expectations before the focus groups began and once they were completed. The fear I wrote about in the reflexive journal during the research process reminded me of the same fear I experience as a social worker when working to solve problems in areas in which I have little experience. I was able to see how my feelings affect my helping relationship with clients and my approach to different social issues.

My findings indicated that support systems impact African American teenage mothers in their pursuit of higher education in terms of whether or not they are motivated or discouraged to do so. As discussed later in the findings section, African American teenage mothers' relationships with family, friends, and social workers (mezzo level) impacts their ability to overcome barriers in their pursuit of higher education. Supporting teenage mothers in their future endeavors as opposed to encouraging teenage pregnancy

prevention is a topic of interest to me. Considering the importance of supporting systems for teenage mothers, there is very little research on the particular topic of providing support to teenage mothers as opposed to encouraging pregnancy prevention for teenage parents as well as teenagers without children.

Being aware and knowledgeable about social issues as a social worker will give me the opportunity to better help educate community about social issues. Education may be essential in increasing the community's awareness and encouraging them to help create social change. On the mezzo level, education would take place through the use of community meetings in which literature could be provided.   These meetings and literature would provide community members with more knowledge about social issues and possibly encourage them to become more involved. Without education, community members may not be aware the social issue exists, why it exists, and why it is imperative for the community to play a role in creating social change.

The findings of this action research study are useful to the broader field of social work by providing social workers with insight on the importance of connecting with communities to help bring about social change, being mindful of the importance of funding, and being aware of the lack of awareness among some social workers working directly and indirectly with target populations. In terms of EST, social workers working directly with target populations may address issues on the micro and mezzo levels. Social workers working with target populations indirectly may address issues on the mezzo and macro levels.

The findings of this action research study illustrated the effect clients' environmental influences have on their psychosocial situations, with communities being

one of those influences. This further demonstrated the importance of including communities within the helping process to better understand the social phenomenon, to have a better understanding of how society views the issues, and to gain insight on possible ways to help alleviate stress caused by the social issue and promote social change. This concept is useful by encouraging social workers to consider the community as a collaborative factor in working with African American teenage mothers facing barriers while in pursuit of higher education.

All information from this action research study may be useful for myself and other social workers working directly and indirectly with African American teenage mothers in pursuit of higher education. Two ways to disseminate the information in this project would be presented at an established local social work conference to present the information and through publication. Both methods of disseminating this action research study would gain the attention of social workers either working in this area of social work expertise, interested in this particular topic, or social workers who lack knowledge in this area.

Stakeholders could evaluate the recommended solutions by developing and participating in an evaluation team. An evaluation team of stakeholders would be beneficial in identifying what recommended solutions were beneficial, why they were beneficial, what solutions needed improvement, and in what ways solutions needed improvement. During these collaborative evaluation team meetings, stakeholders and program staff work together to share ideas and thoughts about the success of a program and what can be done to improve the program (O'Sullivan, 2012).

Implication for Social Change

In viewing this action research project from an ecological systems theoretical perspective, this study has the potential to impact positive social change at all levels. On the micro level, this study has the potential to help social workers become more aware of their feelings, thoughts, and biases in working with this target population. Considering I used my reflexive journal throughout the research process, future social workers may become aware of the importance of reflecting on their thoughts, feelings, and biases to impact their involvement with this target population. As it relates to social change, social workers' awareness of their feelings, thoughts, and biases may equip them to better address social issues by focusing on the needs of their client. By acknowledging personal biases, thoughts, and feelings social workers may be able to make self-improvements while in the process of helping others in an effort to promote social change.

This study also has the potential to educate social workers on different aspects of this social issue to influence their response to the barriers African American teenage mothers face. Social workers cognizant of their personal biases, thoughts, and feelings may change the way they view the social issue as well as their approach to it. Social workers expanding their knowledge may also have a change of mindset which may also affect their practice which further affects African American teenage mothers. Therefore social workers will have the knowledge to provide adequate services to respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of a college education. This later leads to social change.

On the mezzo level, social work practice could be positively impacted by helping social workers respond to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit

of a college education in terms of how barriers make it difficult for them to respond professionally. For example, this action research study may help social workers explore funding resources to help develop and implement programs to support African American teenage mothers to pursue a college education. This further has the potential to impact African American teenage mothers on the mezzo level also by assuring they receive adequate services and programs are created and goals set within the boundaries of available funding.

Mezzo level interventions that may intersect social change include the role of communities. With awareness and knowledge of the actual social issue, communities can play both roles of support and influence in terms of impacting social workers' response to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education. For example, community organizations may play the role of financial support by raising funds to assist in social workers' efforts to help African American teenage mothers overcome those barriers. Another example is that organizations within the community may volunteer to organize a community event to educate community members about the social issue and how it is affects the community as a whole.

On the macro level, social work practice may be positively impacted by social workers being more active within the community to voice their concerns regarding the issue to possibly gain the attention and support of lawmakers and local officials. For example, this study may encourage social workers to come together, create groups to discuss this issue and brainstorm ideas, lobby to advocate for clients' rights, and change the way lawmakers and local officials view the problem in terms of how pertinent it is for social workers to be fully equipped to address the issue. This may possibly lead to a

change in policies and procedures to positively impact how lawmakers approach this issue in terms of assistance. This would be the ultimate goal and may take time to achieve, but this study has the potential to assist in creating that social change.

Summary

This used this action research study to explore social workers' responses to the barriers African American teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education. Being able to pursue higher education and further obtain a degree is a dream of many African American teenage mothers that we as social workers can acknowledge and address to make a reality. Achieving this goal provides financial, emotional, and social stability for African American teenage mothers and their families. As social workers we are concerned with meeting the needs of individuals, couples, families, and groups who are often vulnerable and disenfranchised. This study focused on the vulnerable and disenfranchised population of African American teenage mothers facing barriers when pursuing higher education. It has been said in the past that "Life comes full circle." My hope is that this study will change the way social workers view this problem and motivate them to be an influential mechanism in helping African American teenage mothers change the way they view their current situation, motivate them to pursue and obtain a higher degree, and broaden their career opportunities to better provide for themselves and their families. That may possibly even influence these same teenage mothers to become social workers to help change the lives of others. This is the definition of changing the world one person at a time, but in full circle.

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Appendix A: Reflexive Journal

Before focus groups

Date:__December 7, 2016_____   Time:_____5:30

pm_____

Thoughts	Feelings	Expectations
"I can't believe the IRB finally approved my study."	Excited Nervous	The remainder of the action research process will be challenging.
"Now it is time to get to the core of the action research project and do the work."	Nervous Excited Unsure	To learn a lot from the other social workers during the focus groups.
"Will I be able to find people to participate in my study."	Nervous Discouraged Scared	Difficulty finding participants.

Date:_December 12, 2017_____   Time:___6:00 pm_____

Thoughts	Feelings	Expectations
"I sent the moderator a message today and she responded today with approval!"	Excited	Participants may be more willing and interested in participating that I anticipate.
"I posted the first post in the group for participants, but didn't have anyone to respond."	Nervous Scared	Difficulty completing the recruitment process.
"Will I have enough participants?"	Nervous Discouraged Scared	The possibility of a small sample size and possibly having to restructure my action research project as a result.
"Are people even interested in my action research study."	Unsure	Difficulty finding social workers who are as interested in exploring this phenomenon as I am.

Date:__December 13, 2016_____

Time:_____12:30pm_____

Thoughts	Feelings	Expectations
"3 social workers inboxed me on Facebook and texted me to voice their interest in the study!"	Hopeful Excited	Recruiting process possibly being not as difficult as I initially expected.
"Am I moving too fast."	Excited	Continuing to be consistent and persistent will be very helpful throughout this portion of the action research project.

Date:___December 19, 2016____   Time:_____5:00 pm____

Thoughts	Feelings	Expectations
"Everyone agreed to the Informed consent and we are ready to rock and roll."	Relieved Excited	Willing participants
"The first focus group has been set for January 1, 2017 at 9 am. I hope that's feasible for everyone."	Nervous Excited	No scheduling conflict for the initial focus group.

Date:_____January 6, 2017_____

Time:_____12:30pm_____

Thoughts	Feelings	Expectations
"Of course there's an ice advisory and weather alerts for tomorrow which is the day for the first focus group."	Discouraged Helpless	The possibility of participants not being able to make the rescheduled date.

"I know this seems inconsiderate, but I wish the advisory and alerts would be lifted so I could get this focus group out the way.'	Disappointed	Rescheduling the first focus group won't be a big issue and participants will still be willing and interested.
"I went ahead and rescheduled the first focus group to January 14, 2017 and I hope nothing else unexpected happens before then."	Disappointed	Everyone will still be willing and able to participate

Date:_____January 14,2017_____

     Time:_____8:30am_____

Before focus group

Thoughts	Feelings	Expectations
"The first focus group is finally here and I hope it goes well. I hope everyone is interested and provides great information."	Optimistic Nervous Excited	The first focus group will be successful and everyone will get involved and provide great information
"I hope I didn't forget anything that's important to this first group."	Nervous	I will be well prepared for this first focus group.
"I hope I'm able to keep everyone interested so they'll want to come back to the next 2 focus groups."	Nervous	Everyone will be interested and participate as a group.

After focus group   Time:__10:15am_____

Thoughts	Feelings	Expectations
"That went great."	Optimistic	The remaining 2 focus groups will be great as well.
"This group of social workers seem very interested and	Amazed Optimistic Excited	All 3 focus groups will be a success

knowledgeable about working teenage mothers in pursuit of a college education. They also seem interested to want to know more."		
"I hope the focus group wasn't too long for participants.'	Unsure Excited	The 45 minute duration for focus groups will be sufficient enough and not too tiring for participants.

How my thoughts, feelings, and expectations change from the beginning to the end of the

focus groups?

<u>Before the first focus group began I was nervous yet optimistic because I didn't know</u>

<u>what to expect. I've never had to do anything like this before so I wanted to make sure</u>

<u>everything was done correctly for fear of having to re-do everything if it weren't done</u>

<u>correctly. By the end of the focus group, I felt more relieved that it wasn't as difficult as</u>

<u>I thought it'd be. I am now more optimistic about the focus groups overall.</u>

Date: _____January 21, 2017_____

Time:____8:30am_____

Thoughts	Feelings	Expectations
"Will I have enough information and not have to facilitate an extra focus group?"	Unsure	I will have great information for my study
"Will participants feel as if they've learned something from this?"	Hopeful	Participants will be glad they participated and will be able to share this information and experience with other social workers who work with African American teenage mothers in pursuit of higher education.

"Now how do I start with transcribing?"	Confused	I will be successful with transcribing even though it will be time consuming.

After focus groups

Time:

10:15am_____

Thoughts	Feelings	Expectations
"Focus groups are finally over."	Accomplished Relieved	I will have good qualitative information for my study.
"That was easier and more fun than I expected."	Relieved Amazed	I will be able to share this experience with other social workers and doctoral candidates.
"Now how do I start transcribing."	Confused	I will transcribe successfully even though it will be time consuming.

How my thoughts, feelings, and expectations change from the beginning to the end of the focus groups?

The first two focus groups were such a success, I can honestly say I was relaxed prior to this last focus group. During the focus group I found myself becoming more anxious because I had come to the realization I was finishing the focus groups and next was the hard part, data analysis. I was excited to see the focus groups come to an end and I felt accomplished. However, I was nervous and slightly confused about what the next step is.

Appendix B: Copy of the Inbox Message to Moderator

Hello (Name of Moderator),

My name is Aldison Middleton and I am currently a member of The Social Work Group which I find it very helpful, uplifting, and informative. I'm also completing my Action Research project to obtain my Doctorate of Social Work from Walden University. I'm reaching out to you as the group's moderator because I would like to obtain the proper approval to post in The Social Work group information about my Action Research project to invite social workers in Hattiesburg and surrounding areas to participate in my study. I would love to be able to post this information in The Social Work group, but would not want to do so with the proper approval.

Thank you,

Aldison Middleton-Hinton, LMSW, Doctoral Candidate

Appendix C: First Facebook Post to The Social Work Group

SOCIAL WORK PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR AN

ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

Be a part of an action research study

- Are you at least 18 years of age?

- Are you a licensed (Bachelor's or Master's level) social worker?

- Do you work with African American teenage mothers in any way?

If you answered YES to any of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in an action research study.

PURPOSE OF STUDY: I, Aldison Middleton-Hinton am completing this Action Research study as a doctoral candidate to complete my Doctorate of Social Work degree at Walden University. The purpose of this study is to understand how social workers' roles and their responses to the barriers African American teenage mothers face when pursuing a college education.

This study will be conducted in the form of a focus group of social workers.

Appendix D: Message Thanking Participants for Interest

Dear potential participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my action research study! I am excited

that you are interested and would like to send you a copy of the informed consent to

make sure you have all the information you need before agreeing to become a participant.

Please respond to this message with the email address you would like for me to send the

informed consent.

I look forward to working with you.

Respectfully,

Aldison Middleton-Hinton, LMSW, Doctoral Candidate

Appendix E: Reminder Facebook Post to The Social Work Group

JUST A REMINDER:

SOCIAL WORK PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR AN

ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

Be a part of an action research study

- Are you a licensed (Bachelor's or Master's level) social worker?

- Do you work with African American teenage mothers in any way?

If you answered YES to any of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in an action research study.

PURPOSE OF STUDY: I, Aldison Middleton am completing this Action Research study as a doctoral candidate to complete my Doctorate of Social Work degree at Walden University. To understand how social workers' roles and their responses to the barriers African American teenage mothers face when pursuing a college education.

This study will be conducted in the form of a focus group of social workers.

Appendix F: Email to Participants

Dear Participants,

Thank you so much for you interest in participating in this Action Research study. This

email is to provide you with detail about the first focus group

January 7, 2017

9:00am

Hattiesburg Public Library (329 Hardy Street, Hattiesburg, MS 39401)

Duration: 45 minutes

You are welcomed to invite other social workers you know who meet the criteria and are

interested in participating in this action research study. Recruitment will be closed on

December 17, 2016.

I look forward to seeing you on January 7, 2017!

Thank you,

Aldison Middleton

Appendix G: Interview Guide for Focus Groups

1st Focus Group- Getting to know participants

1. Can you share with the group your professional background as a social worker, including your current social work position?

2. How long have you been a social worker?

3. How long have you been a social worker in your current position?

4. Can you share with us your level of licensure?

5. When you received the notification about this action research study, what interested you and made you want to participate?

2nd Focus Group- Understanding and Identifying the Issue

1. Will you share with the group what you know about how social workers respond to the barriers African American (AA) teenage mothers face in pursuit of higher education?

2. Will you share with us what you know about the roles social workers play in responding to these barriers?

3. As a social worker, how have you interacted with AA teenage mothers facing barriers in pursuit of a higher education?

4. What are some social work practice challenges in working with AA teenage mothers pursuing higher education? For example, are there certain policies that make it difficult for you to provide certain services or resources?

5. In your experience as a social worker, how does the community view this problem?

6. What are your personal thoughts, feelings, and opinions, about barriers AA teenage mothers face in pursuit of a higher education in the southern Mississippi area?

7. What are your professional thoughts, feelings, and opinions about barriers AA teenage mothers face in pursuit of a higher education?

8. As a social worker, what are some common themes you have identified when working with AA teenage mothers pursuing higher education?

9. What are some common barriers you have identified when working with African American teenage mothers pursuing higher education in the southern Mississippi area?

3rd Focus Group- Exploring possible solutions

1. As a social worker, how do you play a role in creating social change for your community as it relates to addressing barriers AA teenage mothers face in pursuit of a higher education?

2. What would you like to see social workers do more of to create to social change for your community as it relates to assisting AA teenage mothers facing barriers in pursuit of a higher education?

3. What are some local resources you use with in assisting AA teenage mothers?

4. What are some local resources you do not use that you think would be helpful in assisting AA teenage mothers?

5. What are some possible solutions to improve social work practice in working with AA teenage mothers pursuing higher education?

6. Key stakeholders for an action research study are individuals or organizations that have a particular interest in or concern for the issue being explored. With this in mind, if this action research study was explored further in the future, who are key stakeholders you think would be beneficial?

7. How could the findings of this study have an effect on social work practice?

Appendix H: Example of Notes During Coding Process

Teen mothers aren't able to afford essentials to aide in their pursuit to higher education

Final code: FINANCIAL BARRIERS

AA TEENAGE MOTHERS ARE NOT AWARE OF OR PROPERLY EDUCATED ON THE NECESSARY STEPS TO PURSUE HIGHER EDUCATION

Final Code: AWARENESS ISSUES

AA TEENAGE MOTHERS NEED POSITIVE PEOPLE IN THEIR LIVES TO HELP THEM REACH THEIR GOALS

POSITIVE SUPPORT SYSTEM (MESO LEVEL)

Final Code: TEEN MOTHERS' NEED FOR POSITIVE ROLE MODELS

CONSIDERING IMMEDIATE NEEDS AND PRIORITIES HINDERS AA FROM MOVING TOWARD FUTURE GOALS

CURRENT SITUATION HINDERING PROGRESS

**Notes: AA teen mothers may have difficulty being optimistic about the future because of their present circumstances.

Final code: AA TEEN MOTHERS' INABILITY TO ACHIEVE GOALS DUE TO PRIORITIZING

Appendix I: Code Management Chart

Code Management Key: T= Turquoise F= Fuchsia B= Blue LG= Lime Green DB= Dark Blue Y= Yellow R= Red DG= Dark Green P= Purple DP= Dark Purple BU= Burgundy G= Gold GR= Gray PI= Pink BR= Brown O= Orange BL=Black BO= Burnt Orange A= Aqua		
1. The influence specialty areas have on social work practice (T)	1(a) Client emotions (LG)	1(b) Emotions (LG)
2. Addressing mental health issues (T)	2(a) Social worker emotions (Y)	2(b) Barriers (P)
3. Social work interventions within the child welfare system (T)	3(a) Factors that influence Social work practice (T)	3(b) Support systems (R)
4. Medical social workers roles in assisting teen mothers (F)	4(a) Roles (F)	4(b) Success factors (B)
5. Lack of social work experience (T)	5(a) Support systems (R)	5(b) Social Work practice approaches/ implications (T)
6. Diversity in social work specialty areas (T)	6(a) Healthy Therapeutic relationship (G)	
7. Social worker roles (T)	7(a) Barriers of social work Practice (DG)	
8. Social work practice knowledge (T)	8(a) Client centered Approach (A)	
9. Social workers' response to stress (T)	9(a) Teen mothers' needs (BU)	
10. Diverse situations in social work practice (T)	10(a) Networking (B)	

11. The effect diverse educational background has on social work practice (T)	11(a) Community (BO)	
12. Years of social work experience (T)	12(a) Funding (O)	
13. Stress among social workers (T)		
14. Different levels of social work licensure (T)	14(a) Politics (PI)	
15. Networking and sharing knowledge (B)	15(a) Resources (BR)	
16. Empathy from social workers (G)	16(a) Social work practice Strategies/Approaches (GR)	
17. Continuing education (T)	17(a) Awareness issues (L)	
18. Feelings of discouragement for teen mothers (LG)	18(a) Goal settings (BL)	
19. Teen Mothers' Desires (DB)	19(a) Factors influencing teen mothers' ability to succeed (DB)	
20. Passion (Y)	20(a) Barriers of teen mothers' success (P)	
21. Family (R)		
22. Friends (R)		
Overcoming barriers (DB)		
Goal accomplishments (DB)		
25. Learning as a social worker (B)		
26. Understanding developmental stages in adolescence (T)		
27. Limited resources (DG)		
28. New practice ideas (B)		
29. Resource importance (T)		
30. Limited resources in southern MS area (DG)		
31. Social media as a networking tool (B)		
32. Level of licensure affects social workers' response (T)		
Limited funding affects social workers response (DG)		
Transportation barrier (P)		
Financial barrier (P)		
36. Awareness issues (T)		
Teen mothers' need for positive role models (BU)		
Teen mothers' inability to		

achieve goals due to prioritizing (P)		
39. Fear (LG)		
40. Social workers' ability to relate to issue personally (G)		
41. Resiliency (DB)		
42. Lack of awareness among social workers (L)		
43. Overlooking client's need because of complexity of their situation (DG)		
44. Addressing barriers from holistic standpoint (T)		
Agency policies (DG)		
Limited resources because of age (DG)		
Adequate support systems (DB)		
Age appropriate goals (A)		
49. Unrealistic goals leading to discouragement (P)		
50. Person centered approach (GR)		
Age restrictions (P)		
Limited resources for mother and child (P)		
53. Self-esteem issues (LG)		
Social workers as part of teen mothers' support system (G)		
Responsibility (BU)		
Structure (BU)		
57. Need for more resources in Southern MS area (BR)		
58. Hope (LG)		
Insurance issues (DG)		
Intervention instability because of insurance issues (DG)		
61. Advocating (F)		
62. Awareness of resources (L)		
63. Building therapeutic relationships (T)		
Establishing trust (G)		
Building rapport (G)		
66. Self-Disclosure (G)		
67. Embarrassment (LG)		
68. Self-pity (LG)		
69. Understanding as a professional		

(G)		
70. Emotional distress (LG)		
Normalization through identification (G)		
Follow-up (G)		
73. Patience (LG)		
74. Realistic Goals (BL)		
75. Self-determination (A)		
76. Prioritizing (BL)		
Instilling hope (G)		
Exploring underlying issues (G)		
79. Direct and indirect social work involvement (T)		
80. Personal biases (T)		
81. Respecting client's reality (GR)		
Respecting client's rights (G)		
Treating teen mothers with dignity and respect (G)		
84. Social workers' knowledge of teen mothers' rights (T)		
85. Goal setting on all levels (BL)		
86. Client input when setting goals		
Setting boundaries (A)		
Maintaining confidentiality (G)		
Honesty from social worker (G)		
90. Self-care to avoid burnout (T)		
91. Family issues (P)		
92. Grief (LG)		
Family dynamics (P)		
Maturity level (P)		
Teen parent with adult responsibilities (P)		
96. Solution-focused (GR)		
97. Basic needs (BR)		
98. Service intensity (T)		
99. Stringent insurance guidelines (DG)		
100. Society's view of teen pregnancy and education (G)		
101. Unity (G)		
102. Difficulty to provide services due to insurance (P)		
103. Community complacency (BO)		
104. Community's lack of		

awareness (BO)		
105. Community education (BO)		
106. Political issues (DG)		
107. Overlooked population (P)		
108. Unsecure funding (BR)		
109. Social workers' frustration (Y)		
Lack of practice material (DG)		
Unrealistic strategies (DG)		
112. Social workers' inability to access helpful programs (T)		
113. Teen mothers' lack of parenting knowledge (P)		
114. Evolving guidelines for assistance programs (P)		
115. Lack of awareness among lawmakers (L)		
116. Social workers' role as problem solvers (F)		
117. Exploring solutions (B)		
118. Difficulty for social workers to respond to barriers (DG)		
119. Affordable healthcare issues (P)		
120. Evolving government and federal policies (P)		
121. Lobbying (b)		
122. Social workers' fear to initiate social change (Y)		
123. Social Workers' feelings of inadequacy (Y)		
124. Limited resources currently available in Southern MS (DG)		
125. Social workers' race (T)		
126. Adequate funding BR)		
127. Productivity (B)		
128. Fear of being unsuccessful (LG)		
129. Target population		

overlooked (T)		
130. Social workers' inability to identify target population (T)		
131. Sharing Resources and knowledge (B)		
132. Client's reality (GR)		
133. Active social work participation (B)		
134. Improving social work practice (B)		
135. Sharing social work experiences (B)		
136. Social workers' fear that their voice won't be enough (Y)		
137. Importance of the social work profession (G)		
138. Active community involvement (G)		
139. Unity in the community (G)		
140. Social workers' consistency and persistency (T)		
141. Childcare issues (P)		
142. Exploring all options as a social worker (T)		
143. Housing issues (P)		
144. Community clinics (G)		
Important documentation (BU)		
Agency competition (DG)		
147. Representation and lawmakers (P)		
148. Key stakeholders (R)		
149. Unity among social workers (B)		
150. Educator (F)		
151. Importance of spirituality in Southern MS (T)		