

## Needs Discourses, Teen Mothers, & Girls Educational Attainment

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Need is also a political instrument, meticulously prepared, calculated, and used.  
Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

It is a recent but growing belief that girls are doing better than boys in US schools. Repeated images of girls seemingly over-represented in academic honors to stories of how girls are excelling in schools while boys languish are prevalent in the media. President Bush, in his 2005 State of the Union address, singled out the need to focus on improving boys' educational performance and the same year a USA Today article announced, "As women march forward, more boys seem to be falling by the wayside" (Marklein, 2005). In result, the education of boys has been situated as "the boy crisis"; a crisis created by gender equity programs for girls being too successful, gone too far, and thus now harming male students. This sentiment is captured in a 2008 article "Boys in Crisis: How Boys are Falling Behind," sponsored by the Men's Health Network:

The scope of the boy crisis is broad, but the information available makes it clear that the boy crisis is not an isolated academic problem, but part of a more disturbing social trend that is marginalizing boys and impeding their success....Meanwhile, boys, lacking their own special advocates and champions, have slipped further and further behind, opening a new achievement gap that threatens the futures of millions of young men.

In addition to the glaring backlash themes in the above account, the desire to situate discussions of what ails US schools as a gender issue, as boys needs against girls needs, boys needs *or* girls needs, obscures and ignores the fact that the US continues to have an unacceptably high rate of high school non-completion for all students. Current estimates place the US high school non-completion rate at 30% (Levin, et. al., 2007). While emphasis on drop out rates has been constructed as a male problem, non-completion of high school is a growing problem for female students.

Despite dramatic increases in girls' access to schooling and increasing educational attainment rates over the past one hundred years, recent data indicates that for some girls, educational attainment remains elusive and a close look at school completion rates provides a different story of the success of girls and education. Overall, it is estimated that 1 in 4 girls will not graduate or receive a regular high school diploma (NWLC, 2007). Further, non-completion rates rise exponentially for certain groups of girls with 50% of American Indian girls and 40% of African American girls and Latina's not completing high school (NWLC, 2007).

Non-completion of high school has a negative impact on every student and my intent is not to situate the issues of female students as worse than males. However, while increasing attention continues to focus upon boys in schools, female drop out rates have

been under studied. Further, the impact of not completing high school holds increasingly negative consequences for females. As the recent National Women’s Law Center (NWLC) publication *When Girl’s Don’t Graduate, We all Fail: A Call to Improve High School Graduation Rates for Girls* report states, “as compared to their male peers, girls who fail to graduate from high school have higher rates of unemployment; make significantly lower wages; and are more likely to rely upon public support programs to provide for their families” (5). This disparity holds across racial and ethnic groups.

While a renewed research emphasis upon gender and education and girls’ education is necessary, in order for such research and policy to be effective, the discourses framing gender and education and specifically girls’ education must be examined and rethought. Utilizing Nancy Fraser’s discursive model of the “politics of needs interpretation” I ask what we think girls “need” in terms of an education and how these needs are determined and defined. This approach shifts the lens of analysis from the problems of girls’ education to how girls’ education is defined by the discourses that surround what we think girls need. In other words, what are the purposes of education for female students and how are these purposes defined? This question, despite over one hundred years of educational reform, still has resonance particularly for certain groups of girls in the US.

I further situate this analysis upon a particular group of girls—pregnant and mothering students—in order to focus the analysis and provide a working example to examine needs talk surrounding education for girls. Pregnancy—specifically pregnancy among school-aged girls—provides a heightened arena to view how discourses surrounding gender, race, sexuality, and class impact how girls’ education is defined and the discourses surrounding these students provide insight into continuing constructions of gender, race, class, sexuality that impact all female students. After an introduction to key gender policy in the US, I provide specific examples of the impact of differential needs based discourses on the provision of education to pregnant and mothering students and conclude by identifying the challenges that would face a discursive model of education for girls that is based not only on the education that girls need, but the education that all girls deserve and have a right to.

## **Overview of Title IX**

Before continuing, it is important to place this discussion within existing gender policy in the US, specifically Title IX. Title IX, passed in 1972, effective July 12, 1975 explicitly addresses gender inequality in any business or institution receiving federal funds. The amendment states that “no person in the US shall, on the basis of sex be excluded from participation in, or denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal aid.” This amendment was applied heavily to education to ensure equality for girls and boys in schools across access, curriculum, school climate, and activities. The most well known result, and thus the misconceived sole purpose, of Title IX was the encouragement and support of girls’ sports teams in public schools. To date, most attention and legal action under Title IX has been around athletics—around issues of creating access to girls for sport and corresponding debates that gender equity in athletics has shortchanged male students access to sport.

The attention to gender equity around athletics has overshadowed the many important guidelines that Title IX establishes for curricular equity and educational access. To date many educational professionals remain unaware of the impetus Title IX provides for gender equity and most are unaware that Title IX specifically addresses the rights of pregnant/mothering students to access the same equal educational opportunities as their peers (Pillow, 2004). Title IX states:

[A] recipient [of federal funding] shall not discriminate against any student, or exclude any student from its education program or activity, including any class or extracurricular activity, on the basis of such student's pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, termination of pregnancy or recovery therefrom, unless the student requests voluntarily to participate in a separate portion of the program (106.40, b)

Furthermore, school districts are responsible for and must "ensure that the instructional program in the separate program is comparable to that offered to non-pregnant students" (106.40, 3).

Before the passage of Title IX, pregnant students were routinely dismissed from school or involuntarily placed in separate schools for wayward girls (Pillow, 2004; Solinger, 1992). However, despite the fact that the language of Title IX is explicit in the requirements for school-aged mothers equal access to public education, at present, beyond forbidding expulsion, there is no case law under Title IX determining what equal education for school-aged mothers looks like (Brake, 1994; Stamm, 1998). There is a similar absence at the national educational policy level, where for example, debates have centered upon the education of teen mother's as a social welfare and economic issue and not focused upon teen mother's access to equal education (Wolf, 2002). Such absences have meant that decisions on how and what type of education to provide to school-aged mothers is left up to local and state level interpretation (Pillow, 2004). This situation makes understanding the discourses surrounding girls' education even more important.

### **The Politics of Needs Interpretation**

How teen mothers are discursively constructed defines who we think the teen mother is, what she is capable of, what she needs, and what she is deserving of (Pillow, 2004). The discourses that define teen mothers influence not only the development of educational research, practice, and policy but how educational practice and policy are implemented. Nancy Fraser's conceptualization of a discursive model of "politics of need interpretation" is useful to an analysis of the discourses surrounding teen mothers and how these discourses affect educational policies and practices. While Fraser developed the model to specifically look at gender and state social welfare, it can be applied to education.

Policy, including educational policy, starts at an assumptive point, taking for granted the needs in question "as if [they] were self-evident and beyond dispute" (145). Fraser's framework provides a way for making the social meanings embedded in needs discourse

explicit. By highlighting the politics of needs and specifically the “politics of needs interpretation” (163), Fraser’s model shifts inquiry from a focus on needs to “discourses about needs” (162). Like Foucault, Fraser situates talk about needs not as neutral, “but is a political act” (145) and the discourses that define needs form “institutionalized patterns of interpretation” (9). For example, in the case of social welfare, this shift in lens of analysis allows us to see how: “social welfare programs provide more than material aid: they also provide clients, and the public at large, with a tacit but powerful interpretive map of normative, differentially valued gender roles and gendered needs” (9). Similarly, education curricula, policies, and practices provide an interpretive map of what is valued, affirmed, and denied in educational settings.

Fraser argues that there are five discursive “resources” available to us, noting that these resources are always historically and culturally specific. The five resources are:

1. Officially recognized idioms in which one can press claims: for example needs talk, rights talk, interests talk
2. The vocabularies available for instantiating claims in these recognized idioms. For example, therapeutic vocabularies, administrative vocabularies, religious vocabularies, feminist vocabularies, etc.
3. The paradigms of argumentation accepted as authoritative in adjudicating conflicting claims; thus, with respect to needs talk, How are conflicts over the interpretation of needs resolved? By appeals to scientific experts? By compromises? By majority rule? By privileging the interpretations of those whose needs are in question?
4. The narrative conventions available for constructing the individual and collective stories that are constitutive of people’s social identities.
5. Modes of subjectification; the ways in which various discourses position the people to whom they are addressed as specific sorts of subjects endowed with specific sorts of capacities for action; for example, as “normal” or “deviant,” as causally conditioned or freely self-determining, as victims or as potential activists, as unique individuals or as member of a social group (164-65).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage a full analysis across the five frameworks Fraser offers, so here I focus upon official [legal] and existing available needs vocabularies that shape the treatment we think teen mothers need versus the kinds of access to educational opportunity pregnant/mothering students have a right to.

### **Setting the stage for Vocabularies of Separation and Reformation**

A discursive analysis of the climate surrounding the education of pregnant/ mothering students reveals two prominent “official” themes that shape the provision of education to school-aged mothers. The first theme—separation—engages “discourses of contamination,” a discourse that has justified removal of the school-aged mother from the school setting based upon accepted fear that her sexual immorality will spread to other students and the pregnant students *need* for a separate environment. The second theme—

reformation—utilizes "discourses of responsibility" and involves a racialized<sup>1</sup> division and shift between discourses and policies that view education for the pregnant/parenting teen as a *right* and those discourses and policies that construct education for the pregnant/parenting teen as a *responsibility*.

Together these themes organize a discursive climate affecting interpretation and implementation of case law and educational policy under Title IX. Common across both is a shifting construction of the problem of teen pregnancy based upon the race of the teen mother that has yielded a two-tiered system of educational policy and practice dependent upon who we think the pregnant/parenting teen is. However, this analysis also demonstrates that even the most entitled teen pregnant subject—the white,<sup>2</sup> 'high-achieving' teen mother—has had severe limitations placed upon her educational opportunity and that the promise and potential of Title IX for equal education of school-aged mothers has not yet been met.

Further, these discourses exist in a paucity of research and information about the pregnant/mothering student. At present, we do not have clear or accurate research that

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms "racialize", "racialized," and "racialization" to refer to the structural, discursive, and epistemological processes of race and racism in the US. I rely upon David Theo Goldberg's understanding of race, racism, and racialization with Michale Omi and Howard Winant's development of "racial formation theory" to theorize race. Goldberg points to the "fluidity" of race and the "masks of race" in order to trace figuratively how "*race* is a discursive object of racialized discourse that differs from *racism*. *Race*, nevertheless, creates the conceptual conditions of possibility in some conjunctural conditions, for racist expression to be formulated." (see Goldberg, *Racist Culture*, 44). Correspondingly, Omi and Winant trace how political and social ideology structures racial formation. Racial formation theory suggests "a new conception of racial time, one which combine genealogical and contingent temporalities," which acknowledges the discursive shiftings of racial formation in the form of racialized discourses to meet state needs. Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 267.

<sup>2</sup> I use the terms 'White' and 'Black' (lower and upper case) throughout this text to denote the structural and institutionalized racism evident in the discursive climate surrounding unwed motherhood and teen pregnancy. By using the term White and not Caucasian and Black instead of African American, I am acknowledging an on-going and persistent racial categorization of individuals as 'black' based upon skin color (i.e., not white) regardless of an individual's racial or ethnic background. In this way, 'black' unwed mothers would historically have included 'black' Puerto Ricans as well as other 'black' Latinas and 'black' Native Americans. Furthermore, incidence rates of teen pregnancy initially were based only on two racial categorizations "black" or "white" and only recently has data on racial and ethnic groups (including 'Hispanic' and 'Asian') been gathered. When referring to present-day research I use the terms African American and Latina or the terms used by the author or report.

identifies and addresses questions of: How many pregnant/mothering teens are in public schools? Where and how are pregnant/mothering students receiving an education? How many pregnant/mothering students graduate? How many pregnant/mothering students return to school to receive their high school diploma? What types of education are pregnant/mothering students receiving? In addition to the above, we also know little about more in-depth questions: What is the purpose of education for the pregnant/mothering student? What are the educational histories and experiences of pregnant/mothering students? What are indicators of success for pregnant/mothering students—are they graduation, economic independence, morality training, marriage, no repeat pregnancy? What educational programs for pregnant/mothering students are effective and why? Are there different educational needs for the pregnant student from the mothering student and how can these differing needs best be addressed? What does equal education look like for pregnant/mothering students? What is a “comparable” education for pregnant/mothering students? What is the impact and possibilities brought about by de facto single-sex education many pregnant/mothering students are receiving?

I include this list of questions not to overwhelm the reader but to point out how little we know about the education of pregnant/mothering students; the research and data simply do not exist. This constructed lack of data not only means that the above questions are unanswerable but that those questions are not even asked; that is, these questions do not register within the discourses of educational policy makers, researchers, and practitioners. Until schools are required to collect data explicitly focused on the education of pregnant/mothering students, they will not move to do so.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the bureaucratic hurdles that affect data collection and tracking of pregnant/mothering students, ideological battles limit research on the education of pregnant/mothering students. Teen pregnancy and mothering strikes at the root of what we fear and debate—female sexuality and mothering—and teen pregnancy compounds issues of female sexuality and mothering within the arena of sexuality and schooling. Sexuality and schooling share a troubled history with the role of schools situated as sites of containment, regulation, and reproduction of appropriate sexual identities and behaviors while controlling and silencing what cannot be regulated (Mayo, 2004; Sears, 1992). The presence of a pregnant student in school implodes all categories of “student” and exposes what is supposedly regulated and silenced in schools. The pregnant female student becomes emblematic of teen female sexuality and the need to control and regulate these bodies.

The discomfort with the teen female pregnant/sexual body is additionally layered with emotional public debates about teen pregnancy and morality, societal decline, welfare

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<sup>3</sup> With this statement I am not suggesting that somehow more school-based data or research will be a panacea and solve issues related to the provision of education to pregnant/mothering students. However, at this point there is such a paucity of data on the educational experiences of pregnant/mothering teens that basic data collected by schools as well as critically informed data collection is needed.

abuse, and deterioration of US family structure. Pregnant teen girls have been and are variously constructed as victims or wanton females, and the reasons for their pregnancies linked to cultural deficits and irresponsibility. These constructions are applied differentially by race of the teen mother and influence policy and practice affecting the education of pregnant/mothering students (Solinger, 1992). The lack of data on the pregnant/mothering student and existing discourses surrounding teen pregnancy sets the stage for available vocabularies about teen mothers that are intensely politicized and ideologically driven.

### **Vocabularies of Separation**

Vocabularies of separation—performed through what I term “discourses of contamination”—are prevalent in historical and present day vocabularies on teen pregnancy. Discourses of contamination circulate the idea that the embodied presence of the sexually active female student (as a pregnant student or as a mother) will contaminate the student body leading to an epidemic of immoral and promiscuous behavior. Contamination discourse inscribes pregnancy as an illness and females as the contaminants. In result, it is commonly asserted that pregnant girls should be removed from school for their own good, their own safety, or for the good of the student body and in the US most teen mothers are served in separate classrooms or school facilities (Manlove, 1998). Practices of separation are not based on research indicating that pregnant/mothering students are indeed better served in such settings, rather practices of separation better reflect the public school's desire to keep pregnant girls out of sight than sound pedagogical and curricula reasons for segregating pregnant teens.

There are many examples of contamination discourses surrounding teen pregnancy. Here I provide a brief overview of discourses of contamination made available and legitimated in legal decisions. One of the earliest usages of contamination discourses in the law was in 1921, when a Decatur, Illinois student was expelled from attending day classes in her public school. The school district successfully argued that the student's presence in school during the day would "contaminate the other students" and that the pregnant student could receive an equal education by attending nighttime GED classes. Key to the court's decision was the issue of "contamination" reinforcing an ideology that the pregnant student presented such a threat to the student body as a whole that the school district was justified in removing the student from attending school.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Schools have also attempted to dismiss students for other behaviors seen as immoral. A 1981 Seventh Circuit court decision ruled that Cobb County School District in Georgia violated a student's constitutional rights when the school district barred her from attending her regular school and required she attend night school after she began living with her boyfriend (*Street v. Cobb County School District*, Georgia, 1981). Teachers also have been targets of contamination logic. As late as 1986 a teacher was dismissed for being an unwed mother. A district court affirmed the jury finding that the school board had violated the teachers constitutional rights (*Eckmann v. Board of Education of Hawthorn School District* (Illinois, 1986).

A 1967 case upheld a schools decision to exclude pregnant students from public school citing that the teen mother “could well be likened to that of a typhoid carrier.” The school was thus justified in identifying “an unwed mother of school age as a threat to the moral health, particularly of all other teenage girls” (Schweitzer, 2000, 81). A 1969 decision, *Perry v. Grenada Municipal Separate School District*, reinforced this sentiment upholding the school board's "fear that the presence of unwed mothers in the schools will be a bad influence on the other students" and leaving it to the board's discretion to determine "whether an unwed mother has requisite moral character to be readmitted to school" (Stamm, 1998, note 149). In a similar 1973 decision (*Houston v. Prosser*), the court upheld a school boards move to require a pregnant student to attend night school and not day school due to the school board's compelling interest in maintaining a "safe environment" for other students. Furthermore the court concluded that "there is no dispute that some students who marry or who become parents are normally more precocious than other students....Because of their precociousness, it is conceivable that their presence in a regular daytime school could result in the disruption thereof" (Belsches-Simmons, 1985, 4).

These cases are important because they laid a foundation for and lend support to practices of not only the need for but also the legitimization of *separate but equal* in the provision of education for school-aged mothers. These cases support an ideology of contamination that requires separation of the school-aged mother for the protection of the pregnant student and the student body as a whole. Thus, the pregnant student *needs* include separate school placement for her own safety and the school *needs* the pregnant student to be separate for its own well being.

Discourses of contamination remain prevalent in the present day legal decisions although recent focus has turned to teen mothers access to extra-curricular and club activities. For instance, some school districts have been challenged on policies prohibiting pregnant and mothering students from membership and participation in cheerleading squads, National Honor Societies, student councils, and debate teams. What is interesting about these cases is that they are focused upon 'high-achieving' white teen mothers--teen mothers who are 'good' students and active in school organizations. Yet, a discourse of contamination can also be found in these cases.

Consider for instance a 1998 decision by the Third Circuit court (*Pfeiffer v. School Board* 1998), which upheld that it is within a local NHS chapter's discretion to terminate a pregnant/parenting female student's membership, while teen fathers are thus far exempt from such limitations. The Court's decision was based on the finding that the local NHS chapter had dismissed Pfeiffer not due to her pregnancy, but due to her engagement in premarital sexual activity, behavior that was determined as not upholding high standards required by NHS (Stamm, 1998). The court found that it is within the NHS "discretion to determine that a student's premarital sexual activity was 'contrary to the qualities of leadership and character essential for membership' which includes upholding 'high standards of moral conduct'" (Stamm, 1998, 1228).

While it is obvious that this NHS chapter was able to determine that this student had been sexually active due to her pregnancy, while not being able to determine if other students (male and female) were also sexually active (because of no pregnancy), the court still decided that such factors did not matter in this decision (Brake, 1994). Although it was pregnancy that made her sexual activity apparent, the school district and the court continued to hold that the student was dismissed for sexual activity not her pregnancy. Another case brought in Williamston Kentucky also involved the dismissal of two white students from the National Honor Society again due to their “immoral conduct of premarital sexual activity.” In addition to these cases, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) had numerous reports of other such dismissals that were not brought to court (Pillow, 2004). As one ACLU official put it: “School personnel found a loophole in the law and became adept at naming a pregnant/parenting girl's dismissal or exclusion to school clubs or activities due to their sexual activity not their pregnancy” (Pillow, 2004).

Thus in 1998 and at present, the pregnant/mothering teen, even the high achieving (white) student, is still seen as immoral, and morally infectious. Here the needs of the school body as a whole, needs of safety and morality, trump the needs of the individual [pregnant] student. The need, and indeed the earned right, of the pregnant student to be in the NHS in these cases is not as legitimate as the need of the school to regulate morality. Such decisions point to a continued discrepancy between how sexually active girls are treated versus sexually active boys. While boy's sexual activity is not apparent, a pregnancy makes apparent and visible that a teen girl is sexually active, and thus exposes her to regulatory consequences. What girls need in these circumstances is a clear message of morality—premarital sexual activity resulting in pregnancy will prevent you participating in and benefiting from merit societies. However, while discourses of contamination do affect all pregnant students, it does not represent all pregnant students similarly—some students are seen as more dangerously infectious than others. Evident in the above review of case law is an absence of African American or Latina teen mothers as legal subjects. Is this because African American and Latina teen mothers are receiving equal education without problem? Research indicates otherwise, yet to date no case law has been brought on behalf of a black pregnant student.

Part of the explanation for this lies in placement patterns that occur under discourses of contamination. As noted earlier, a majority of pregnant/mothering students are placed in separate classrooms or schools. Of that majority, African American girls and increasingly Latina's primarily make up the students who are removed to separate schools (Manlove, 1998; Pillow, 2004). This practice echoes historical trends of service treatment to African American unwed mothers creating a two-tiered system of treatment, with the result that currently white pregnant teens most often remain in their home schools and receive home tutoring services while black pregnant teens are primarily tracked into separate school settings. While separate school settings may be a successful model for the provision of education to teen mothers, at present these settings have operated as separate but not equal—characterized by outdated and inadequate spaces, curricula offerings, and textbooks; lack of access to technology; and inexperienced or poorly rated teaching staff (Manlove, 1998; Pillow, 2004).

Thus, although all pregnant teens are impacted by the needs indicators constructed through discourses of contamination, these indicators are differentially applied by race of the teen mother. Consider that the teen mothers in the NHS cases were not filing suit for access to equal education opportunity in terms of access to their schools, or access to a certain curricula. They already had access to their regular public school and to the school curriculum they were in before becoming teen mothers. These teen mothers, white, mainly middle-class, “high-achieving” teen mothers benefited at least initially from Title IX by being able to continue their education at the same level they were at before pregnancy. A study by UpChurch & McCarthy (1989) supports this claim, noting that white mothers made their greatest gain in graduation rates between 1975 and 1986. In contrast, black mothers made their greatest gains in graduation rates between 1958 and 1975, **before** the implementation of Title IX.

This alarming trend, which as indicated by the NWLC report continues today, is partially explained through the second available discursive needs structure impacting teen mothers education—vocabularies of responsibility.

### **Vocabularies of Responsibility**

Is education a right of the teen mother or a responsibility? Although Title IX seemingly creates legislative intent to situate education for all females, including pregnant/mothering students, as a right, available discourses surrounding the education of teen mothers have focused upon education as a moral and fiscal responsibility. Consider, for example, the linkage of teen pregnancy with social welfare debates; unwed, young pregnancy, particularly among certain groups of women, has been situated as out of control, creating a moral and economic drain. Lisa Ikemoto (1999) describes these 'other' mothers as "unwed adult women, teens, welfare recipients, and/or women of color" who are "too fertile" (1008). The 'too fertile' women are identifiable as a group, "because there were already stories and images attached to these identities" (1042); as a group they are constructed and identifiable and their fertility is situated as a social problem. Linda McCain (1996) identifies three additional discursive models of irresponsibility assigned to the “the single mother, the welfare mother, and the teen mother” those being, “immorality, unaccountability, and incapacity” (342).

These vocabularies replicate historical racialized constructions of unwed mothers. Kunzel (1993) and Solinger (1992) point to the construction of white unwed motherhood in the early 1900s as a psychological problem and thus treatable. By contrast, black women’s illegitimate pregnancies were viewed as a morality problem innate to their race, and thus untreatable. Kunzel and Solinger argue that these differing constructions of the problem of unwed motherhood based on the race of the unwed mother have influenced discourse that has differentially shaped social welfare policy, treatment patterns, and options for the unwed mother. Former President Reagan effectively utilized this sentiment unleashing the image of the “welfare queen,” the [black] unwed mother who lived off the money of hard-working [white] taxpayers, to overhaul the US social welfare system. The “reforms” created stringent rules for disbursement of social welfare funds

and called for work for welfare programs (which remained under-funded and did not account for childcare needs of mothers). The changes in social welfare dramatically affected pregnant teens, particularly racialized poor and low-income pregnant teens, and situated the needs for such girls not as education but as social welfare.

What needs of the pregnant/mothering student are authorized when education is situated as a responsibility? Does she for example need Literature, History, Language, or Art courses? Discourses of responsibility have limited discussion of the educational needs and rights of teen mothers. Instead, focus remains upon the unwed teen mother's need to repay society for her mistakes and to not be a burden to the taxpayer. Out of this logic, the needs of the unwed teen mother educationally include: economic self-sufficiency through graduation with an emphasis upon job training; prevention of a repeat pregnancy; and retraining in values and responsibility.

Correspondingly, most states in the US have adopted curricula programs aimed at the above needs including welfare/school/job training programs like "Learnfare" and programs that seek to reform girls moral and fiscal values through "dual roles" and "reality training" (Pillow, 2004). A major component of both the welfare/job training and moral and fiscal training programs are "rites of redemption" where young girls redeem themselves by learning to practice and defend "morally defensible actions" (Lesko, 1990; Pillow, 2004).

These special programs, developed under a discourse of education as responsibility, are not developed with the white, middle-class girl in mind. These programs are focused upon the low-income, unwed, and assumed "racial minority" teen mother. Such girls are not deserving or capable of a regular education; instead, such a girl is in need of reform and has a responsibility to society to not become a burden on the taxpayer. Education in this way for black teen mothers, who are assumed irresponsible, is a responsibility that the girls must meet for society. This focus shifts the major question from "What is the purpose of education for the school-aged mother?" to "what is the purpose of education for the teen mother on welfare?" This later question lends itself to the development of programs for teen mothers not based on an entitlement to education but education as a responsibility to society.

Further, it was and is assumed that teen mothers in need of this education would not seek it on her own; she is irresponsible, so she must be forced (through social welfare legislation) to get this education. This attitude became prevalent in welfare reform measures requiring school attendance and completion of high school degree in order to qualify for social welfare support. As Mittelstadt (1997) notes, "the very purpose of education was reconfigured from a guaranteed entitlement to an enforced requirement" (33). Certainly, the goal of having teen mothers complete high school is a worthy goal, however when this need is articulated through discourses of responsibility it limits discussions of educational needs and rights of teen mothers and situates certain groups of teen mothers in need of reformation. Discourses of responsibility focus so much attention upon the teen mother and her need to change that discussion of how educational systems impact teen mothers educational attainment remain unexamined.

The discursive focus upon the individual girl instead of the institution means that the many institutionalized barriers teen mothers face in attempting to access education receive little attention. These barriers include: requiring pregnant students to attend an ‘alternative’ school placement; requiring pregnant students to participate in a parenting class that has an emphasis upon development of moral character; hostile reactions from teachers and other school personnel; repeated requirements that pregnant students submit letters from a doctor certifying they are able to be in school; stringent absence and make-up of work or tests policies that result in the pregnant student falling behind or failing courses and thus falling off the graduation track; stringent attendance requirements that do not allow for postpartum recovery and in some cases result in automatic dismissal of the pregnant/parenting mother; no accommodations made for the changing pregnant teen body, so that she literally cannot fit into student desks in her last trimester; and no accommodations made for extended time to travel between classes or for need of additional bathroom breaks (Brake, 1994; Pillow, 2004).

These barriers, which under Title IX should be illegal (Wolf, 2002), are likely the reason that pregnancy is the most oft cited reason given by teen girls who drop out of school and why up to half of all school-aged mothers will not complete high school (Pillow, 2004). Yet, the needs of pregnant/mothering students to access education are not at issue in available discourses shaping and defining teen pregnancy. Debates surrounding the question of whether to provide school-based childcare to mothering students are emblematic of how needs discourses are always affected by societal discomfort with teen pregnancy.

While under a discourse of responsibility, with its resulting focus upon education as vocation and fiscal responsibility, one could infer that what a mothering student would need to achieve this goal is affordable and dependable childcare, very few schools in the US do provide or help coordinate child care services (Pillow, 2004). Schools that have attempted to offer such services often meet community disapproval as vocabularies of responsibility and contamination combine to create fear that offering child care would make it “too easy” for the teen mother and “send a wrong message that being a teen mother is okay” (Pillow, 2004). Thus, the need to reform the teen mother and contain contamination overrides what the pregnant/mothering student needs to access education.

### **Needs Discourses & Girls Educational Attainment**

Contamination and responsibility discourses and the political interpretation of what pregnant/mothering students need remain prevalent in the provision of education to teen mothers today. While these discourses and the politicization of needs affect all teen mothers they also affect teen mothers differentially by race. Although all teen mothers are situated as morally infectious, white teen mothers have been historically situated as entitled to an education and the gain in graduation rates for white teen mothers after Title IX supports the impact of this ideology. In this way, white teen mothers have also been, although unsuccessful in some cases, the only good legal subjects under Title IX to date. At the same time, black teen mothers have been situated not only as infectious, but linked

so strongly with inherent immorality, irresponsibility, and social welfare dependency that education for black teen mothers has been defined, not as an entitlement, but as a social responsibility. Correspondingly, graduation rates after Title IX for black teen mothers rose only slightly after significant gains prior to 1975.

The logic of the discourses of contamination and responsibility and the needs these discourses define override concerns about meeting the intent of Title IX and allow public and political ideology to continue to impact the provision of education to teen mothers. Paying attention to the discursive construction of needs further points out that when it comes to girls, we continue to be overwhelmed by girls' bodies and how these bodies are situated across gender, race, sexuality, and class.

In the case of teen pregnancy, available legal and social welfare discourses of need Schools seek to regulate, control, and reform girls bodies while simultaneously protecting society from the immorality, messiness, and irresponsibility of these bodies. While it is easier to explicitly identify this trend in pregnant/mothering students, these discourses are applicable to all girls and an examination of the discourses constructing teen mothers provides insights into the kinds of discursive needs we place on girls overall.

Questions about and concerns over gender roles, female sexuality, and girls place in society impact how we continue to define the kind of education girls need. Most recently influential discourses constructing a "boy crisis" in the US will impact how the educational needs of girls are defined. What is/are the purpose(s) of education for girls? What needs do girls have in receiving an education? Are girls now too successful at education?

While girls have made tremendous educational gains in the US, continued gender disparity in traditionally male fields of science, math, technology and the racial disparity in graduation rates point to the continued impact of cultural norms and values on who girls are, what they need, what they can be, what society needs from females, and the impact racialization has on these significations. A close examination of the discursive structures shaping the politics of needs interpretation surrounding gender and education will allow for identification of gaps, absences and hopefully allow for work that will disrupt current polemical gendered needs vocabularies.

For me work is not a refutation of the continued need to pay attention to gender and education, but to repoliticize educational discourses and vocabularies of gender and education.

The call for a re-politicization of gender and education is not a call for further emphasis and study upon for example the girl or the teen mother as a problematic object of study, but rather a re-politicization that shifts the lens of analysis from the girl or teen mother to the arena of educational policy and practice. This shift acknowledges that under Title IX girls, including pregnant/mothering students, have the right to an education equal to her peers and that the teen mother is not simply a teen mother but is also a student, a pregnant/mothering student. This perspective would shift from a current emphasis on the

actions and inaction, the characteristics and 'pathologies' of the female student to research and debates that focus upon the actions and inactions, the characteristics, and pathologies of educational institutions, policies, and structures that create and reinforce barriers for girls access, and particularly African American and Latina's access, to education. It is surely time to investigate these practices and policies, written and unwritten, as closely as these girls have themselves been investigated.

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