

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION PROJECT: The College Student as Mother: A Phenomenological

Examination of Community College Student Experiences

STUDENT: Tiffany Erk

DEGREE: Doctor of Education

COLLEGE: Teachers College

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The purpose of this study is to identify how low-SES women who are providing primary childcare for children ages 0-10 experience higher education. In-depth phenomenological interviewing combined with document analysis were the methods utilized. This exploration used a purposive/ snowball sample of low-SES mothers who were making satisfactory progress toward a degree. Participants were screened using the following inclusion criteria: enrolled at least half-time, degree-seeking, minimum 2.5 G.P.A., Pell eligible and first-generation, had one or more children ages 0-10 living in the home. There were seven total participants in the study. Five themes emerged from the participant data: support systems, lack of college preparation, family as a priority, education as self-fulfillment, and balance.

The themes were consistent with the findings in the literature. Each of the participants had full and busy lives with multiple responsibilities necessitating, for the most part, a part-time schedule as a student. None of them had entered community college directly out of high school and if they had attempted higher education immediately following high school at another institution, they were unsuccessful.

Independent students are most clearly different from their dependent counterparts in their family and work responsibilities and this was found to be absolutely true for the participants in this study whose primary responsibility was to their family and that their pursuit of higher education was something they were doing to further their family's future. While participants indicated that education was partially for self-fulfillment, they viewed this as an almost unexpected positive side effect of the path to a better job, higher income and benefits to themselves and their children. The "good mother—bad mother" dualism that is a part of our cultural script was evident in the self-sacrificing long-term goals and daily routines of the participants.