

**Educational Experiences of Adolescent Mothers
while Studying College in the Philippines**

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Abstract

Adolescent pregnancy is a significant societal issue that results in lost opportunities for teenage girls in both developed and developing countries. This phenomenological research study explored the lived experience of adolescent mothers during their college years. Eight participants were asked, via unstructured interview, to share their experiences as college students in the midst of pregnancy. Data was analyzed using Colaizzi's method, while member checks and expert audits of interview outputs were done to ensure trustworthiness. Results show that the participants went through several stages in their plight: they faced the complexities of adolescent pregnancy alongside college education; dealt with life and educational conflicts; appreciated the importance of education; found the resolve to carry on for their child; and dreamt of a better future for their families. These findings were clustered into themes and related to Parson's Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, and Latency theory, as adolescent pregnancy paved the way for teenagers to assimilate society's expectations of responsible adulthood. Consistent with academic literature, the participants' experiences show that adolescent mothers are vulnerable in the education setting, and need proper guidance to achieve their full potential. This research can serve as groundwork for initiating several educational reforms. A multicomponent intervention program was developed that is rooted in school and community partnerships.

Keywords: adolescent development, educational resilience, inclusive education

Adolescent pregnancy is an issue with significant societal impact worldwide. Around 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 years old give birth every year (World Health Organization, 2014). In the Philippines, it is estimated that 1 in 10 Filipino teenagers get pregnant (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2018), making the country the only Asia Pacific nation with a significant rise in teenage pregnancy. Poverty is inextricably linked to adolescent childbearing because it hinders young mothers' ability to attend school and find good job opportunities.

Several studies have been undertaken to shed light on the issues pertaining to adolescent pregnancy, but most of them have explored the matter with little regard for its human element. This study is particularly relevant today, particularly in the Philippine setting given the rising number of teenage pregnancies in the country and the less-than-ideal circumstances they have to deal with in the course of their childbearing.

This study, therefore, seeks to take an in-depth look at adolescent pregnancy, with a focus on its human element. It aims to answer the research question, "What is the lived experience of college students who are adolescent parents?" Such understanding is key to implementing truly meaningful programs that will benefit this vulnerable and disadvantaged group.

Literature Review

Education as a tool for social progress is an important solution to global challenges as it gives people access to science and technology (Hang-Chuon, 2017), familiarizes them with social norms and develops moral sense (Shah et al., 2016), and fosters innovative work attitudes (Overtoom, 2000). Furthermore, educating people improves personal (Shogren et al., 2017) and professional outcomes (Benett et al., 2011) that transcend nations (Ampofo et al., 2015) and lead to sustainable development (Chey & Khieu, 2017).

Education drives the movement of the social conditions of these changing times as long as it is implemented in an inclusive manner that will not contribute to the collective destruction of nations and communities (UNESCO-MGIEP [Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development], 2017; United Nations, 2015). In particular, education should be made accessible to everyone regardless of gender and vulnerabilities. This inclusivity can be actualized by streamlining curriculums and integrating inclusive educational policies for female students (Bericat & Sánchez Bermejo, 2016; Hsiao-Chin & Shu-Ching, 2014; Karam, 2014). In the Philippines, several steps have been considered to ensure that all women will get equal access to quality education, notably the institution of laws that discourage oppression of women, such as the Magna Carta of Women, Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012, and Gender Streamlining of Higher Education.

Research shows that causes of adolescent pregnancy are rooted in the interplay of many factors. In particular, family, peer, community, and societal influence are among the major reasons for early pregnancy of adolescent girls (Asnong et al., 2018; Campero et al., 2014; Fuller et al., 2018; Krugu et al., 2016; Morón-Duarte et al., 2014; Sámano et al., 2017; Sycharuen et al., 2018; Yakubu & Salisu, 2018). Economic and situational circumstances also discourage young women from early pregnancy due to the perceived consequences of childbearing (Charlton et al., 2018; Psaki, 2016). Other precursors of early parenthood include the presence or lack of formal schooling (Almeida & Aquino, 2011; Devkota et al., 2018; Glynn et al., 2018), parental supervision and involvement (Copeland, 2017), aggressive behavior and substance abuse (Allen & Walter, 2018), and knowledge of oral contraception (Burr et al., 2013; Caffè et al., 2017).

According to literature, choices in resolving issues of adolescent pregnancy revolve around three options: parenthood, abortion, and adoption (Derlan et al., 2018; Gama Ibiapina et al., 2016; Gomez-Scott & Cooney, 2014; Lohan et al., 2013; Mann et al., 2015; Mokwena et al., 2016;). These options are guided by personal, religious, filial, and educational orientation (Bell et al., 2013; Biney & Nyarko, 2017; Challa et al., 2017; Chi Watts et al., 2015; Loke & Lam, 2014; Ndjukendi et al., 2017; Shahabuddin et al., 2017).

There are several implications to early pregnancy. Physically, it affects the adolescent mother because the pregnancy stresses both her body and the growing baby (Jeha et al., 2015; Kansu-Celice et al., 2017; Loto et al., 2009; Pauli et al., 2013; Pires et al., 2014; Sokulmez & Ozenoglu, 2013; Xavier et al., 2018). Socially, adolescent pregnancy results in significant changes to family roles and to community functioning (Annang et al., 2014; Aparicio et al., 2016; Dalton, 2015; Epstein et al., 2018; Hindin, 2014; Kleine, 2005; Shpiegel & Cascardi, 2018; Yussif et al., 2017). Educationally, teenage pregnancy poses difficulties to students as parenting roles can sometimes come into conflict with academic tasks (Almeida & Aquino, 2011; Glynn et al., 2018; Kleine, 2005). Ultimately, social stigma arises, further complicating the already complex circumstances the adolescent mother has to deal with (Banerjee et al., 2009; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2002). Interspersing the literature, the findings of this research were understood in the lens of Parson's theory of Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, and Latency or the AGIL model (1970).

The majority of research cited was quantitative in nature and failed to explain the whole phenomenon of adolescent pregnancy. The interplay of the many factors and stories leading to young motherhood were not documented properly and adequately. The meaning of the teenage pregnancy experience was reduced in richness because of the quantitative understanding of it. This is the reason why a more nuanced exploration of this issue is needed moving forward.

Method

Research design and setting

This study used the phenomenological approach that explored the lived experiences of adolescent mothers during their college education. In particular, this study took a descriptive phenomenology approach, which discovered the invariant or universal essence of schooling while being pregnant and parenting. It was conducted in the context of Philippine higher education, with all participants living and studying in urban areas within Metro Manila.

Sampling and sample size

Eight participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Maximum variation was employed in selecting adolescent mothers who have shared demographic characteristics that cut across cases and have emerged out of heterogeneity. The following characteristics were considered: experienced teenage pregnancy while in college, current age, type of school attended, religion, and life circumstances. The only exclusion criterion is adolescent pregnancy outside college education. Preliminary interpretation of responses was done vis-à-vis data collection to identify data saturation. No new themes and significant statements were identified after the 8th participant was interviewed. At this point, the sample size was deemed sufficient since data saturation had been reached based on the inductive thematic saturation model proposed by Saunders et al. (2017).

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, the researcher kept a reflexive journal on his own feelings and prejudgment of the phenomenon. In this way, judgmental attitudes were kept in check and were not conveyed to the participants. They were interviewed in-depth in an unstructured manner to find out the answer to the question: “What is the lived experience of college students who are adolescent parents?” Follow-up questions were asked such as, “What was your initial reaction when you learned of your situation?” and “What was the reaction of your significant others when they learned that you were pregnant?” Contextual questions were also asked as the interview unfolded naturally.

Some adolescent mothers were selected based on the researcher’s knowledge of them meeting the aforementioned criteria. Others were selected based on referrals from previous participants. Interviews were conducted in private, with the participants’ convenience and comfort in mind. The researcher listened to the participants and offered neither advice nor personal experience. A psychologist was also on standby to provide psychological support where necessary. The participants were allowed to have a support person with them throughout the interview.

Data Analysis

Conversations were transcribed and assigned codes using a scheme. Data were analyzed using Collaizi’s method for procedural interpretation of phenomenology. The steps involve familiarization with the narratives, identifying and assigning codes to significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, developing exhaustive descriptions, producing the fundamental structure, and verifying the fundamental structure. Themes ultimately emerged as data were sorted and perused. Total immersion in the data gathered was necessary to ensure a thorough description and understanding of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness of Data

Trustworthiness of data is an important cornerstone of qualitative research. Its four dimensions of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were given careful consideration. Strengthening these aspects is necessary to properly portray the phenomenon of adolescent pregnancy. Credibility, or the confidence in the truth of data and its interpretation, was ensured through member checking. Each participant was given a chance to review the outputs of the analysis. Interview transcripts were appended in the full manuscript to ensure transferability, or the extent to which the findings can be applied to other settings. Transferability provides a paper trail from which other researchers can get ideas to transfer the conclusions of this study to other circumstances. Independent expert auditing was conducted to ensure confirmability (objectivity of data) and dependability (stability of data over time and conditions).

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was secured for this study from the University Ethics Review Committee of Adamson University (Protocol Number: 2018-04-GRA-01). The participants were asked if they were willing to participate in the study. The processes, risks, and benefits of this research were explained thoroughly to the participants, and their written consent was obtained. They were assigned pseudonyms to keep their identities private, and the interviews themselves were conducted privately. The interview transcripts were kept confidential, audio records were deleted after transcription, and personal information were not disclosed to anyone.

Limitations of the Study

This study has potential limitations. Transferability, or the extent to which qualitative findings can be transferred to other settings, may be limited due to the sample size. However, the in-depth interviews generated significant descriptions of observed transactions and processes. Data transcription and management can dilute the richness of data, as expected, in handling qualitative information. This was addressed by thoughtful transcription of narratives.

Findings

The participants shared their thoughts, feelings, and rationalizations on the circumstances, complexities, struggles, challenges, worth, and meaning of life as a pregnant young woman enrolled in college. They come from different family backgrounds, religious orientation, and socioeconomic classes. Table 1 describes the profile of the participants.

Table 1: Summary of the participants' demographic profile

Participant	Age at First Pregnancy	Current Age	School Attended	Religion	Life Circumstances
Aliyah	17	24	Private, non-sectarian	Catholic	Eldest among 4 children; not allowed to be in civil union
Bettina	18	22	Private, non-sectarian	Catholic	Lived with the child's father and eventually got married
Candice	19	21	Private, non-sectarian	Catholic	Mother also experienced teenage pregnancy
Denise	18	23	Private, non-sectarian	Iglesia ni Cristo	Lives with foster parents; a victim of partner violence
Erich	18	31	Private, sectarian	Catholic	Supported by relatives in her studies and eventually obtained her doctoral degree
Florence	18	25	Private, sectarian	Iglesia ni Cristo	Stopped studying during her first pregnancy; lived with husband after giving birth
Geneva	19	21	Public, non-sectarian	Catholic	Mother and sister also had adolescent pregnancy
Halima	19	24	Public, non-sectarian	Born-again Christian	Got pregnant in cohabitation; stopped studying due to parenting

Data from the interviews revealed five significant themes: *Facing the ordeal*, *Path to parenthood*, *Embracing the value of education*, *Standing up and being strong*, and *Envisioning the family*. These themes were related to each other to capture the full meaning of the phenomenon.

Theme I: Facing the Ordeal

Facing the ordeal describes the college students' experiences, including gender and sexuality issues, during the pregnancy. The complexities and circumstances of adolescent pregnancy were narrated and related to their college education. They explained the different emotional challenges they faced during the pregnancy, such as fear of what will happen, uncertainty with

the future, anger to oneself, denial, social stigma, prejudice from family and friends, and discontinued education.

This theme is best described by Aliyah's statement:

I was apprehensive of my child's future. Of course, I was anxious because this is what I did. I don't want this to happen also to my child. I thought of how I will raise my child if I go abroad, with my boyfriend. I will bring him.

Erich also aired her similar concern:

My initial response was fear. I felt afraid that I won't be able to fulfill my dream. I got afraid to the point that when I had an ultrasound and I learned that I was pregnant, I cried because I want to finish my studies.

Theme II: Path to Parenthood

Path to parenthood describes the college students' experiences during and immediately after the pregnancy. It explains the internal and external battles of the young mothers during childbearing and after giving birth. It is characterized by health issues (their own and their child's), socioeconomic sacrifices, educational struggles, and family adjustments. The participants described how they struggled with the demands of motherhood and the difficulties they continuously face to fulfill this role. It also portrays the totality of the life lived by the participants after their pregnancy.

Bettina talks about her hardships in balancing studies and parenting roles:

It's really staying late. It's really about sleep. Sometimes, I cry already. Because during duty, you need to wake up early. My baby's awake in the evening. That's why my husband and I seem to get colds and cough every month. Every time I go to our clinic, the doctor says it must be due to fatigue.

Denise shared her experience as a battered wife:

He punches me. One time, I even went to the police because I had bruises all over. It's like this, there was no one at their place, and a relative died. Relatives came to help at the wake, like in bayanihan [community cooperation]. Then the kids and our child were left with us. When it was just the two of us, we had an argument. The kids saw us quarreling. He hit me with an arnis [cane], which the tanods [public safety officers] use.

Theme III: Embracing the Value of Education

Embracing the value of education explains how the young mothers developed a deeper appreciation of their college education after their pregnancy. It also tackles issues about their individual worth and how they view the significance of completing their college education vis-a-vis providing a quality family life.

Geneva's view best reflects the essence of this theme:

Now, my plan is to finish school. Hopefully, I really can finish for my family's future.

Denise's statement also supports this theme:

It's like this, Mama said that she will petition us in the US when I am done with my schooling. What I plan is to go abroad also so I can provide for my child's needs.

Theme IV: Standing up and Being Strong

Standing up and being Strong reveals the adolescent mothers' resolve to carry on for the benefit of their child. It highlights the different support systems that have helped them better navigate this unexpected and difficult period.

Bettina considers this life event as transformative, noting:

It's life-changing. Because before I got pregnant, I sleep in anyone's home (cries). I am closer with my friends. I am always at my friend's house, like that. Because my Mama is not looking for me anyway. But when I got pregnant, it suddenly became okay. My approach in life became better. Before, I really don't care. Now, I know how to decide and am more responsible (smiles).

Candice's sharing captures the support she received during her plight:

It's my father. He was the one who supported me. Even now, it's a good thing that he is supportive. I thought he will send me away. But I am thankful that my father gave me a chance to study.

Theme V: Envisioning the Family

Envisioning the family encapsulates the adolescent mothers' dream for a better future for their child and family. It takes a look at their mental picture of their family's bright future and the reconciliation of all conflicts and grief during the pregnancy.

As Erich shared:

I continued with my studies but he stopped. Now, he is the one studying. He is taking Criminology. I continued because I thought, what if I become the dean, or be the university president? My husband might get insecure that I have many achievements but not him. I've enrolled him at San Sebastian.

Halima's religious belief helped in her experience:

But there were times that fate tests us. But thank God, we still remained together.

Table 2: Summary of emerging themes, categories, and subcategories

Theme	Category	Subcategory
I: Facing the ordeal	Emotional challenges	Fear of what will happen
		Uncertainty with the future
		Anger to self
		Denial
	Consequences of action	Stigma from community
		Prejudice from family and friends
Discontinued education		
II: Path to parenthood	Health concerns	Carrying the child to term
		Effects on general wellbeing
	Socioeconomic sacrifices	Finding ways to provide for the child
		Fewer social meetups
	Educational struggles	Difficulty in studying
		Unable to continue studying
		Frequent absenteeism
	Family adjustments	Isolation from partner
		Co-parenting
		Violence or neglect
		Transition to parenthood
	III: Embracing the value of education	Key to progress
Moving forward in life		
Key to independence		Emancipation from current situation
		Freedom to decide for the child's future
IV: Standing up and being strong	Support of partner and family	Educational support
		Affective support
		Financial support
		Caregiving support
	Lessons learned	Accepting the things that will not change
		Maturity in one's outlook
Motivation for self-improvement		
V: Envisioning the family	A bright future	For my family
		For myself
	Resolution of conflicts	Forgiveness
		Marriage and togetherness

Discussion

Theme I: Facing the Ordeal

Emotional challenges include fear of what will happen, uncertainty with the future, anger to oneself, and denial. These emotions were identified because of the seemingly insurmountable adversities that these women experienced during their pregnancy (Asnong et al., 2018; Chi Watts et al., 2015; Ndjukendi et al., 2017).

Perceptions of emotional burden on the part of the adolescent mothers emanate from the thought of communicating their situation to their parents (Lloyd, 2010). Consequently, the feelings of the young mothers correspond to the stages of grieving, where humans undergo the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance in the face of losing something

(Kübler-Ross, 1969). The thought of losing academic opportunities due to early pregnancy evokes feelings of fear, uncertainty, anger, and denial, which also correspond to the five phases of grief. The consequences of adolescent pregnancy, on the other hand, include stigma from the community, prejudice from family and friends, and discontinued education.

Early pregnancy outside of marriage also begets social stigma (Banerjee et al., 2009; Copeland, 2017; Mokwena et al., 2016). This stigma is likely a direct consequence of conservative cultural sensibilities shaped by Catholic doctrines in a predominantly Christian country. Theoretically, the participants' reactions to their pregnancy can be best explained by, and are related to, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development.

Identity formation is a primary task that adolescents are expected to learn. During this stage, adolescents are concerned with their individuality and how others would perceive them (Erikson, 1959). Their perceptions of what other people would say would explain the subcategories of stigma from the community and prejudice from family and friends that emerged from the interviews.

Theme II: Path to Parenthood

The health concerns of adolescent mothers include carrying their child to term and their own wellbeing. Many research studies suggest that adolescent pregnancy increases the risk of maternal complications, such as anemia, preeclampsia, depressive episodes, and other severe health conditions (Jeha et al., 2015; Loto et al., 2009; Pauli et al., 2013; Sokulmez & Ozenoglu, 2013).

Additionally, adolescent pregnancy and motherhood were predictors of poor economic outcomes, as the young mother would need to find means to support childbearing and childrearing expenses (Banerjee et al., 2009; Shpiegel & Cascardi, 2018; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2002).

Educational struggles experienced by adolescent mothers include difficulty studying, inability to continue schooling, and frequent absenteeism. The demands of motherhood can divide the attention of college students (Almeida & Aquino, 2011; Glynn et al., 2018; Kleine, 2005), and not getting a college degree can, in turn, impact the adolescent mothers' immediate and future families (Tang et al., 2016). A vicious cycle is inevitably created even as it can be remedied by education.

Family adjustments include the subcategories of isolation from their partner, co-parenting, violence, and neglect and/or transition to parenthood. Several changes in family dynamics occur during adolescent pregnancy. Firstly, some adolescent men may opt not to accept the challenge of growing into teen fatherhood; hence, they neglect their responsibilities, abuse their partner, or isolate themselves from their partners (Derlan et al., 2018; Lohan et al., 2013; Uengwongsapat et al., 2018). This unfortunate plight is to be expected because these are stressful life events (Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) that force adolescent mothers to learn practical life skills and wisdom (Goodman, 1995).

Theme III: Embracing the Value of Education

Education as a key to progress is viewed as one of the main reasons many adolescent mothers are determined to continue their education. It also helps that they receive support and encouragement from their significant others (Copeland, 2017; Krugu et al., 2016; Sycharueng et al., 2018; Uengwongsapat et al., 2018; Yakubu & Salisu, 2018). Achieving independence is

important to adolescent mothers who come from troubled households, and it may be explained by their desire to break free from the stressful situation they are living in (Campero et al., 2014; Dalton, 2015; Hindin, 2014). Completing one's education is the motivation of adolescent mothers, as they are likely aware of how a college education can help them better adapt to life's challenges (Lewin, 1947; Roy, 1980).

Theme IV: Standing up and Being Strong

Support from their partner and family includes but is not limited to educational, affective, financial, and caregiving. This category demonstrates the power of support systems in enabling adolescent mothers to overcome difficult situations (Bell et al., 2013; Challa et al., 2017; Derlan et al., 2018; Loke & Lam, 2014; Mann et al., 2015; Morón-Duarte et al., 2014; Shahabuddin et al., 2017). Lessons learned include the subcategories of accepting things that will not change, maturity in one's outlook, and motivation for self-improvement. The meaningful life experiences of adolescent mothers influence them to have a more positive outlook that can serve as springboard for self-improvement (Gama Ibiapina et al., 2016).

The appreciation of education's value helps adolescent mothers actualize life lessons to improve their current state. With the difficulties they have faced, the young mothers have realized their responsibilities to ensure the welfare of the child and then develop an educational resilience despite the emotional, social, psychological, economic, and educational challenges they have faced and are likely still facing (Duckworth & Gross, 2016).

Theme V: Envisioning the Family

Adolescent mothers yearn to realize their full potential towards family development. The participants' experiences molded them to anticipate challenges in the future, and act in a socially acceptable manner (Challa et al., 2017; Gomez-Scott & Cooney, 2014; Tang et al., 2016). Resolution of conflicts reflects the reconciling experiences they experienced during the course of their pregnancy. The ideation of a united family is a common attitude among adolescent parents, as it is viewed as an important element in correct social functioning (Derlan et al., 2018; Lohan et al., 2013). These views are manifestations of what the adolescent mothers have learned after overcoming hardships (Dweck, 2000; Mezirow, 2009).

Validating the Phenomenon

The lived experiences of adolescent mothers and the stages they went through reflects Parson's AGIL paradigm. Ordeals, challenges, and hardships were perceived by the participants as circumstances they must "adapt" to. These mothers endured emotional setbacks, social disapprovals, educational struggles, economic sacrifices, domestic violence, abuse, and neglect that strengthened their worldview of education. With the life episodes they had, the adolescent mothers embraced the value of education and built their "goals and aspirations." They realized that their life is no longer centered around them, but on the welfare of their children. Adjusting to their new role, the adolescent mothers "integrate" themselves to society by standing up and being strong for their families. Having a firm resolve, they envisioned a sustainable and maintained future for their significant others. These actions have enabled the adolescent mothers to assimilate to society's expectations of responsible adulthood.

Conclusion

Consistent with the literature reviewed and social theories mentioned, it can be concluded that the lived experiences of being a pregnant adolescent while in college can be ascribed into themes, and that the adolescent mothers have evolved to become enduring and responsible

adults. They have realized the importance of continuing their college education as a key to progress, independence, and improved life quality. This qualitative research shows that adolescent mothers are vulnerable in the education setting and need proper guidance to achieve their full potential.

Recommendations

This phenomenological research affirms the many struggles young mothers faced during this significant life event and its positive impact. Educational administrators can learn from these young mothers in formulating inclusive and pluralistic school policies. The following recommendations are presented, considering the adolescent mothers' lived experiences:

1. Establish a sustainable teenage pregnancy program for college students who had adolescent pregnancy by identifying a core group.
2. Develop a network of support systems that can serve as an information and assistance resource for childrearing adolescents.
3. Create avenues for continued training and livelihood to augment for lost educational and economic opportunities brought by adolescent pregnancy.
4. Assimilate the educational circumstances of teenage motherhood into school policies and curriculum.
5. Design mechanisms to monitor and refer incidences of adolescent pregnancy in school and in the community.

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