

Mom Too Soon: Educational Experiences and Challenges of Teenage Mothers

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Abstract - Teenage pregnancy remains a pressing global concern, with over 21 million pregnancies occurring annually—nearly half of which are unplanned. In the Philippines, 5.4% of women aged 15 to 19 experienced pregnancy in 2022. Despite the prevalence of teenage motherhood, the educational experiences of this marginalized group remain underexplored, particularly among those who pursue higher education. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of college students aged 18 to 21 who became mothers during their teenage years, aiming to uncover the shared aspects of their academic journeys while managing early parenthood. The study addresses two central questions: (1) What are the lived experiences of college students who became parents during adolescence? and (2) What are the contexts shaping these experiences? Through in-depth interviews, five major themes emerged: (1) Confronting the Challenge, (2) Journey into Motherhood, (3) Recognizing the Worth of Education, (4) Rising with Resilience, and (5) Visualizing Family Aspirations. Findings reveal that participants face emotional, social, and financial challenges but show notable determination to continue their education. Using Parson's AGIL model (1970), the analysis provides a framework for understanding how these young women adapt to the demands of their dual roles. The model highlights their ability to function within and across systems—family, school, and society—while pursuing academic goals. This study underscores the need for inclusive educational policies and supportive interventions to empower teenage mothers in achieving both their personal and academic aspirations.

Keywords: teenage mothers, educational challenges, educational persistence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Annually, over 21 million pregnancies transpire worldwide, with nearly 50% being unplanned. Countries in South Asia, such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and India, have elevated rates of teenage pregnancy (World Health Organization, 2014). In the Philippines, 5.4% of women aged 15 to 19 experienced pregnancies in 2022, with the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) exhibiting a notably elevated rate. Teenage pregnancy is a global issue with considerable societal consequences (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2018).

Furthermore, approximately 10% or 1 of every 10 Filipino teenagers experience pregnancy (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2018), rendering the country the sole Asia Pacific nation with a notable increase in teenage pregnancy (Gatbonton, 2021). Poverty is intrinsically

connected to teenage childbirth as it impedes young mothers' capacity to pursue education and secure favorable employment chances (Jimenez, 2023).

In the Philippines, Al (2021) indicates that various measures have been implemented to guarantee equal access to quality education for women, particularly through the establishment of laws that mitigate the oppression of women, including the Magna Carta of Women, the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012, and the Gender Streamlining of Higher Education (Laro, 2022).

Research conducted in the Philippines indicates that the reasons of teenage pregnancy are influenced by a multitude of interrelated factors. Family, peer, community, and societal influences are significant factors contributing to the early pregnancies of teenage girls (Adviento et al., 2024; Cordero, 2024; Abugho et al., 2023; Calara et al., 2023; Laro, 2022; Naria-Maritana & Torres-Ticzon, 2022; Tabei et al., 2021).

The predominant research referenced was quantitative and did not comprehensively elucidate the entirety of the teenage pregnancy phenomena. The interaction of various elements and narratives contributing to young motherhood was not sufficiently and precisely documented (Gatbonton, 2021). The significance of the teenage pregnancy experience was diminished in depth due to its quantitative interpretation Gatbonton (2021). Furthermore, the study of Maemeko et al (2018) and Dowden et al (2018) that was mentioned in the study of Gatbonton (2021) mentioned that the educational experiences of this disadvantaged population remain largely unexamined.

Therefore, a more detailed examination of this topic is necessary moving ahead. This study aims to provide a comprehensive examination of teenage pregnancy, emphasizing its human aspect. This study addresses the highlighted research gap by investigating the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of the college students who became parents during their teenage years?
2. What are the contexts of the lived experiences of the college students who became mothers during their teenage years?

The study focuses on a specific group of college students who became mothers during adolescence. This limited sample size may restrict the generalizability of findings to a broader population or to individuals with different life circumstances.

Moreover, the qualitative nature of the present study relies on participants' self-reported experiences, which are inherently subjective. Participants may recall or interpret events differently based on their current emotional or psychological state, potentially influencing the data.

Finally, the study captures a snapshot of participants' lived experiences during their college years. However, it may not fully reflect the evolution of their experiences over time or the long-term impact of teenage motherhood on their education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEWE

Education serves as a mechanism for social advancement, addressing global concerns by providing individuals with access to science and technology (Bhaskar & Kumar, 2024), acquainting them with societal standards, and cultivating moral sensibility (Faruq & Bakar, 2025), while also promoting innovative work attitudes (Júnior, 2023). Moreover, educating

individuals enhances both personal (Ali, 2024) and professional outcomes (Yanuarto et al., 2024) that surpass national boundaries and contribute to sustainable development (Chen & Shih, 2025).

Education propels the evolution of social conditions in contemporary times, provided it is executed inclusively (Baria, 2023) and does not lead to the collective demise of nations and communities (Baiti et al., 2024). Education must be made universally accessible, irrespective of gender and vulnerability (Kuteesa et al., 2024). This inclusivity can be achieved by optimizing curricula and incorporating inclusive educational policies for female students (Chakraborty, 2023).

Research indicates that the reasons of adolescent pregnancy are influenced by a multitude of circumstances. Specifically, familial, peer, community, and societal influences are significant factors contributing to early pregnancy among adolescent girls (Machange & Temba, 2024; Kabwigu, 2022; Poudel et al., 2022; Rowlands et al., 2021). Economic and situational factors deter young women from early pregnancy due to the anticipated repercussions of motherhood (Gomez et al., 2021). Additional predictors of early parenting encompass the existence or absence of formal education (Marphatia et al., 2021; Taussig & Roberts, 2022), violent conduct and substance misuse (Thomson et al., 2021), and awareness of oral contraceptives (Ngcobo & Shumba, 2023).

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. **Research Design:** This study will employ descriptive phenomenology, a qualitative research approach based on the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. Edmund Husserl's descriptive phenomenology seeks to deliver eidetic descriptions of subjective experiences via phenomenological reduction. This paradigm entails reflective descriptions that highlight the subjective aspects of experience to establish descriptive eidetic laws (Sowa, 2021). This methodology aims to reveal fundamental patterns of consciousness by reverting "to the things themselves" (Sodeika, 2024), hence elucidating the focus of the current investigation. Husserl's phenomenology includes themes like as intentionality, meaning, and the differentiation between perceptual and eidetic intuition (Edie, 2021).
2. **Participants/Data Sources:** The study was taken place within the framework of Philippine higher education, with people residing and studying in one of the rural areas in Quezon province in the Philippines. Five (5) participants aged 18-21, representing late adolescence or young adulthood, were recruited via purposive sampling. The subsequent profiles were evaluated: experience of teenage pregnancy during college, current age, and living circumstances. The sole exclusion criterion is teenage pregnancy occurring outside of educational institutions.
3. **Tools and Instruments:** The participants underwent in-depth, unstructured interviews to ascertain the answer the research questions: (1) What are the lived experiences of the college students who became parents during their teenage years? and (2) What are the are contexts of the lived experiences of the college students who became mothers during their teenage years? To address these research questions, subsequent inquiries will include.

Interview questions for research question 1: (1) Can you describe the circumstances that led to you becoming a parent during your teenage years? (Follow-up: What was your

initial reaction to the pregnancy? How did you feel emotionally at that time?); (2) How did your life change after you became a parent? What were some of the biggest challenges you faced? (Follow-up: How did these challenges affect your daily routine, your schooling, and your social life?); (3) Can you describe any struggles you've had balancing your role as a parent with being a college student? (Follow-up: Were there specific situations where you

felt the weight of these dual roles more heavily?) and (4) Looking back on the time when you first became a parent, is there anything you wish you had known or done differently as you balanced parenting and education?

Interview questions for research question 2: (1) Could you describe the circumstances in which you became a mother during your teenage years? How did your life change when you found out you were pregnant? (Follow-up: How did your family, friends, and school community react to your pregnancy?); (2) How did your social circles—such as friends, classmates, or peers—respond to your pregnancy? Did you feel support or stigma from them? (Follow-up: How did these reactions affect your emotional well-being and academic pursuits?); (3) How did your educational institution (e.g., faculty, administration, or peers) respond to you becoming a mother while pursuing your college degree? Were there any specific supports or barriers you encountered within the academic environment? and (4) How did becoming a mother at a young age affect your emotional or psychological well-being as a college student? (Follow-up: Were there particular moments when you felt overwhelmed or empowered by your dual roles?)

- 4. Procedures:** First, ethics permission for this project was obtained from the University Ethics Review Committee of Adventist University of the Philippines. The participants were asked about their willingness to engage in the study. The procedures, risks, and advantages of this research were completely elucidated to the participants, and their signed consent was secured. Pseudonyms were assigned to maintain anonymity, and the interviews were done confidentially. The interview transcripts had remained confidential, audio recordings were erased post-transcription, and personal information was not revealed to any party.

Moreover, the researcher maintained a reflective journal to document her emotions and preconceived notions on the event during data collecting. Thus, judgmental attitudes were restrained and not communicated to the participants. Certain teenage mothers were chosen based on the researcher's awareness of their compliance with the specified criteria. Additional candidates were chosen based on recommendations from former participants. Interviews were held privately, prioritizing the participants' convenience and comfort. The researcher was attentively listening to the participants without providing advice or sharing personal experiences. A school counselor was available to offer psychological help as needed. Participants were permitted to have a support individual present during the interview

- 5. Analysis Techniques:** This study will employ Colaizzi's Method, a descriptive phenomenological data analysis technique (Gumarang & Gumarang, 2021). The technique entails a systematic seven-step methodology for processing qualitative data to investigate and articulate individuals' lived experiences (Allman et al., 2023). Colaizzi's seven-step methodology encompasses (1) data familiarization, (2) extraction of significant statements, (3) formulation of meanings, (4) thematic clustering, (5) development of comprehensive descriptions, (6) identification of fundamental structures, and (7) validation of findings with participants (Mwita & Mwilongo, 2025; Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021). Colaizzi's method has demonstrated efficacy in elucidating participants' experiences and constructing thematic maps across many study contexts (Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021).

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Thoughts and rationalizations on the circumstances, complexities, struggles, challenges, and meaning of life of a young mother enrolled in college were shared by the participants. They are 18-19 years at the time of the first pregnancy and are college students who are currently enrolled.

There are five significant themes from the data that the interview revealed. The themes are (1) Confronting the Challenge, (2) Journey into Motherhood, (3) Recognizing the Worth of Education, (4) Rising with Resilience, and (5) Visualizing Family Aspirations. To capture the full meaning of the phenomenon, 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).

Theme 1: Confronting the Challenge

Confronting the Challenge describe the college students' incredibly challenging yet also transformative experiences. They narrated the complex circumstances of teenage pregnancy which include emotional challenges, fear of what will happen, uncertainly with the future, anger and disappointment to oneself, denial, social stigma, prejudice from friends and family, financial struggles and discontinued education.

This theme is best described by Monique's statement:

I was truly disappointed with myself, and I fear for my child's future. My parents' initial option when they learned that I was pregnant was to give the baby for adoption to close relative. I have no communication with my boyfriend during the first two months of my pregnancy for he went to Visayas. I decided to leave home and reside with relatives in the other province for I want to keep my baby.

Racquel also aired similar concern:

I learned of my pregnancy during the last month of my school year in high school. I was really petrified and confused of my situation. I kept it from my family because everything was planned for my college study. I even took the entrance exam and passed at La Consolation Colleges in Manila. I took up nursing.

During my 5th month in pregnancy, I told my family about it. My eldest brother who was supporting my studies cancelled and withdrew his financial support and didn't communicate with me for three years. I was devastated as I dropped out of college. It was my biggest dream to study in the city.

Joy shared similar experience:

I was so sad during those times. I was rejected by my immediate family for the "shame and disgrace" I brought them. They cut their support for my studies. I have no choice but to live with my boyfriend and his family. I stopped for two years before I pursue my college education. Up to this day, some of my siblings still ignore me.

Theme II: Journey into Motherhood

Journey into motherhood explains the internal and external battles of the young mothers during childbearing and after giving birth. The participants described the health issues (their own and their child's), socioeconomic sacrifices, educational struggles with the demands of motherhood and the difficulties they often face to fulfill this role. It also embodies the lived experiences by the participants after pregnancy.

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

Before, I always have to enough time for my social life. Now, I could hardly meet with my friends. From school I go directly at home to take care of my baby. I struggle with childcare, parental duties and loads of class requirements. I cannot possibly do my homework when the baby is awake.

Geli shared her experience with health issues:

I became sickly and irritable when I became a parent. The happy person was gone. I cry a lot. I long to have long sleep but I can't, for I have a baby to take care, who happens to be always sick. I miss going to the parties. I miss socialization through dancing. Now, I am always feeling tired and suffers from headaches due to my school requirements.

Alexa discloses on her financial struggles:

Before I got pregnant, I am an easy go lucky person who never worries about the things I need for I rely on my parents. Now that I have my own family, I rarely ask them for help. I depend on the meager allowance which my partner (who works in Zamboanga) sends us. My priorities are the needs of our kids like vitamins, diaper, milk and food. School projects and requirements add up to our expenses. I feel so stressed as I face financial struggle.

Theme III: Recognizing the Worth of Education

Recognizing the worth of education explains how the young mothers appreciate their college education after their pregnancy. It discusses about how they view their self-worth and the significance of finishing their college education for the family's better and brighter future.

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

I am really glad that I have come this far. Hopefully I will be graduating this coming semester. My children are my inspiration, I want to have a stable job and finishing this course can be a great tool for me to have a job.

Monique's statement also supports this theme:

I applied for the LGU scholarship because I want to graduate. I want my child to have a better future someday.

Theme IV: Rising with Resilience

Rising with Resilience reveals the mother's resolve to carry on for the benefit of their child. This tackles about the support systems that helped them better understand and embrace this unexpected and difficult period.

Geli considers this life event as transformative, noting:

My life was changed when I got pregnant. Before, I used to decide impulsively and without fear. Honestly, I tried abortion twice. I drank medicinal juices which known as effective for abortion. But thanks God I came to my senses. My Tatay helped me navigate in this sad part of my life. He shouldered all my hospital bills during my CS delivery. The father of my child abandoned us, but I am now a stronger version of myself.

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

It's my boyfriend. He supported me and encouraged me to go on with studies even if my immediate family rejected me. He worked hard to support my study. I am thankful that I have him who pushes me forward when I feel like giving up in my educational journey.

Theme V: Visualizing Family Aspirations

Visualizing family aspirations encapsulates the resolve of the young mothers to carry on for the benefit of their child and family. It is a glimpse at their vision of their family's bright future and the reconciliation of all conflicts and grief during the pregnancy.

As Geli shared:

I continued with my studies because I want my boyfriend to see that all his efforts of providing for me are paying off. I dream that my child will be provided with all his needs when I became a teacher. Also, I am continuing with my studies for hope that when I finish studies my family will be proud of me, embrace me back to their arms and finally we could have a complete family picture to be displayed in our home. That is my ultimate dream, a picture with my immediate family.

Alexa's goals are revealed as:

Despite the struggles, I continue to study because I want to have a happy family, living comfortably, because I have a job. My goal is to be a teacher whom my kids will be proud of. I want to provide for them.

Table 1
Summary of emerging themes, categories and subcategories

Theme I:	Category	Subcategory
Confronting the Challenge	Emotional Struggles	Initial denial Anxiety about the future Personal regret Ambiguity about what lies ahead

	Consequences of Decisions	Social stigma from the community Judgment from family and peers Strained familial relationships Interrupted academic pursuits
Theme II: Journey into Motherhood	Health-Related Concerns	Carrying the pregnancy to full term Impact on overall physical and mental health
	Financial and Lifestyle Trade-offs	Finding means to support the child Reduced social engagement
	Educational Challenges	Difficulty in academic performance Discontinued schooling Struggles with managing time Economic burden related to education
	Shifts in Family Dynamics	Adapting to motherhood Lack of support from partner Alienation from immediate family
Theme III: Recognizing the Worth of Education	Pathway to Advancement	Aspiration to move forward Desire for improved quality of life
	Route to Self-Sufficiency	Liberation from present hardships Ability to shape the child's future
Theme IV: Rising with Resilience	Support from Loved Ones	Academic assistance Emotional encouragement Monetary aid Help with childcare
	Insights and Growth	Acceptance of reality Increased emotional maturity Taking responsibility for the child Drive for personal development
Theme V: Visualizing Family Aspirations	Future Orientation	For the betterment of the family For personal growth and fulfillment
	Healing and Reconnection	Mending familial relationships Restoring unity

DISCUSSION

Theme I: Confronting the Challenge

Due to the seemingly insurmountable hurdles encountered by young women during pregnancy, they confront emotional challenges such as anxiety of potential outcomes, uncertainty over the future, self-directed rage, and denial (Koiwa et al., 2024).

Adolescent mothers perceive emotional strain stemming from the prospect of disclosing their circumstances to their parents (Seno et al., 2024; Palomeno et al., 2024). As a result, young moms experience the stages of grief, which include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance of loss (Ventanilla & Villaruel, 2022).

Young moms experience anxiety, uncertainty, anger, and denial while contemplating the loss of academic prospects due to early pregnancy, reflecting the five stages of grieving. The repercussions of adolescent pregnancy encompass societal stigma, familial and peer discrimination, and interrupted schooling (Seno et al., 2024).

Premarital pregnancy engenders societal stigma (Adviento, 2024). In a primarily Christian nation influenced by Catholic ideas, a significant societal stigma exists (Abucejo et al., 2021).

Adolescents are anticipated to acquire identity-related knowledge. During adolescence, individuals are preoccupied with their identity and the perceptions of others (Kerobo, 2022). The interviews revealed subgroups of community stigma and familial and social discrimination.

Theme II: Journey into Motherhood

Carrying their child to term and their own well-being are the concerns of adolescent mothers. According to many research studies, there is an increased risk of maternal complications such as anemia, preeclampsia, depressive episodes and other severe health conditions (Asiyah et al., 2021). Accordingly, one of the predictors of poor economic outcomes is adolescent pregnancy and motherhood as the young mother would need to find means to support childbearing and childbearing expenses. (Temba, 2024).

Difficulty studying, inability to continue schooling and frequent absenteeism are some of educational struggles experienced by adolescent mothers. The attention of college students is divided due to the demands of motherhood (Strom et al., 2023) and there is an impact on the adolescent mothers' immediate and future families if a college degree is not attained (Tao, 2023). Even as it can be remedied by education, a vicious cycle is inevitably created (Trinh, 2023).

The subcategories of isolation from their partner, co-parenting, violence and neglect /and/or transition to parenthood is included in the family adjustments. During adolescent pregnancy, several changes in family dynamics occur. Firstly, some adolescent men neglect their responsibilities, abuse their partners or isolate themselves from their partners because they do not accept the challenges of growing into teen fatherhood (Sirikhun & Virasiri, 2022) because these are stressful life events, that force adolescent mothers to learn practical life skills and wisdom (Shibeshi et al., 2024; Moradinazar et al., 2020) this unfortunate plight is to be expected (Tung et al., 2021).

Theme III: Recognizing the Worth of Education

One of the main reasons many adolescent mothers are determined to continue the education is it is a key to progress. The support and encouragement they receive from their significant others also help a lot (Tung et al., 2021). Adolescent mothers who come from troubled households desire to achieve independence to break free from stressful situations they are living in (Hysa & Jakupaj, 2024). Adolescent mothers are motivated to complete one's education believing that they can better adopt to life's challenges with college education (Öztürk et al., 2022).

Theme IV: Rising with Resilience

Educational, affective, financial and caregiving are some of the supports the partner and family extends to the adolescent mother. The power of support systems in enabling adolescent mothers to overcome difficult situations is demonstrated in this category (Tung et al., 2021). The subcategories of accepting things that will not change, maturity in one's look, and motivation for self-improvement are included in the lessons learned by the adolescent mothers. (Derlan et al., 2018). A more positive outlook can serve as springboard for self-improvement as influenced by the meaningful life experiences of adolescent parents (Kuteesa et al., 2024; AyдемиR et al., 2022). Adolescent mothers appreciate education's value to improve their current state. 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 facing (Marmani, 2022).

Theme V: Visualizing Family Aspirations

Family development is one of the goals that adolescent mothers yearn to realize. The experiences of the participants molded them to anticipate challenges in the future, and act in a socially acceptable manner (Orr & Oyefuga, 2023; Reshi et al., 2022). The reconciling experiences they experienced during the course of their pregnancy is reflected on resolution of conflicts. A common attitude among adolescent parents is the ideation of united family, as it is viewed as an important element in correct social functioning (Derlan et al., 2018). After overcoming hardships, adolescent mothers learned to view such things (Jimenez, 2023; Gutierrez et al., 2022).

V. CONCLUSION

The experiences of pregnant teenagers in college align with the elements identified in the examined literature and social theory, indicating that these young moms have developed into resilient and responsible adults. The lived experiences of teenage moms and their developmental stages exemplify Parson's AGIL paradigm. Participants regarded ordeals, obstacles, and sufferings as circumstances to which they must "adapt." The teenage mothers, shaped by their life experiences, recognized the significance of education and established their objectives and ambitions. They recognized that their lives are no longer focused on themselves, but rather on the well-being of their children. The teenage mothers acclimate to their new roles by asserting themselves and demonstrating resilience for their families. With unwavering determination, they envisioned a sustainable and enduring future for their partners. These activities have facilitated the integration of teenage moms into societal standards of responsible adulthood.

Recommendations

This phenomenological study confirms the numerous challenges encountered by young moms throughout this pivotal life event and its beneficial effects. Educational administrators might derive insights from these young mothers to develop inclusive and pluralistic school policies. The subsequent recommendations are provided, considering the lived experiences of teenage mothers:

1. Establish a sustained program addressing teenage pregnancy for college students who had teenage pregnancy by identifying a core demographic.
2. Develop a resource for information and aid in parenting teenagers via a network of support systems.
3. Facilitate pathways for ongoing education and employment to compensate for the educational and economic opportunities lost due to teenage pregnancy.
4. Develop a system to track and report occurrences of teenage pregnancy within educational institutions and the community.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 2 as the research adviser, provided overall supervision of the study and assisted in developing the research design. Author 1, conceptualized the study, conducted the interviews, data analysis and interpretation, contributed to thematic analysis, and was primarily responsible for writing and revising the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and take full responsibility for its content.

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