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Research Article

“If I Stop Now What Will Happen Later?”: The Lived Experiences of Teenage Moms as Students and Mothers in Cebu City during the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study was conducted to give a platform and to amplify the voices of teenage mothers who were at the same time studying during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was conducted in Cebu City, Philippines in 2022 having teen mothers as the participants of the study employing non-probability sampling. Using Colaizzi's descriptive analysis method to evaluate transcripts of online interviews with five selected participants, the researchers identified five major themes that accurately portrayed the highlights, challenges, coping mechanisms, and overall meanings of participants' experiences. The five major themes were: (1) “Choose The Right Partner!”: Having Company; (2) “The One That Changes Me”: The Effect of Motherhood; (3) “Student/Mother/Father/Daughter”: Conflict in a Routine; (4) “If I Stop Now, What Will Happen Later?”: The Value of Education; (5) “Survival of the Fittest”: Me and My Future. The researchers discovered that teenage mothers in this situation benefit greatly from supportive relationships, form strong attachments to their children, face numerous conflicts in different aspects of their lives, value education highly, and have optimistic views of their futures and of themselves. With these results in mind, the researchers strongly recommend more programs to be implemented and policies to be developed to encourage teenage mothers to re-engage with education, especially knowing the factors that may contribute to a more positive experience.

Keywords: COVID-19, Phenomenology, Teenage pregnancy, Teenage student mothers

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Introduction

Motherhood is synonymous with responsibility. When a woman becomes a mother, almost every aspect of her life changes. When this transition comes at a time when a woman is not sufficiently equipped to handle the irrevocable changes, it will likely be a tumultuous experience for not only her but her child as well. Marteleteo and Villanueva (2018) state that teenage pregnancy coincides with the period of a young woman's life when it is not likely that she has completed her education and has had a chance to build a proper foundation for her career. Without the educational requirements required to jump-start her career, it is even more difficult to find means to provide for her child. The researchers recognize this phenomenon to be rampant and significant and thus, worthy of deeper exploration.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a more recent factor that has also caused a major transition in the lives of students nationwide. A majority of schools in the country decided to shift to distance learning to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among their students and on their campuses. Having already undergone two prominent transitions in two years, these teen mothers experienced a phenomenon that is uniquely interesting to the researchers.

DepEd 7 Director Salustiano Jimenez reported that 377 public and private schools in Central Visayas have already progressively implemented limited face-to-face classes since January 2022 (Gom-os, 2022). Therefore, yet another transition is imminent for the Filipino youth, including teenage mothers. These local circumstances highlight the researcher's increasing interest in obtaining knowledge about the experiences of these teen mothers. Teenage mothers' insights on coping with a global crisis, their parenting and pregnancy narratives shaped by their young age and their particular quarantine circumstances, and their willingness to continue their pursuit of education despite all these deserve to be given a platform. The wisdom these young women gained throughout these unprecedented transitions may be beneficial to a variety of people. The researchers, by giving them a chance to tell their stories and be sincerely listened to, aim to contribute to the spread of this wisdom.

Similar research has been conducted about teenage mothers during the pandemic, such as an Iranian study by Mortazavi and Ghardasi (2021), a study on Filipino teen couples who got pregnant during the pandemic by Holgado et al. (2022), and a study about single moms in Cebu during the pandemic (Garcia et al., 2021). However, no study has specifically focused on the educational experiences of teenage mothers in Cebu City during the pandemic. The previously mentioned factors are likely to have led to massively different circumstances that differ vastly from previous teen pregnancy studies. This paper addresses this gap by highlighting these young women's experiences while tackling their academics, motherhood, and a global crisis hoping to share to the public the results of the study and to improve the quality of life by providing additional knowledge and information.

Hence, the main aim of this study is to understand the lived experiences of teenage moms as students living in Cebu City during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study aimed to determine the highlights of their experiences, challenges, struggles, coping mechanisms, and the meaning of these experiences for them. This study gives a unique lens to specific experiences that will provide a deeper understanding of the factors affecting their lives. The information through the themes and statements from the participants can be crucial to the policymakers, educators, and support organizations to tailor interventions and support programs that will address their needs.

Methods

This study is qualitative focusing on Husserl's (1859-1938) descriptive phenomenology. This study also makes use of a naturalistic paradigm whose objective is to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of teen moms in Cebu City. In descriptive phenomenology, researchers set aside all personal biases, beliefs, assumptions, and presumptions to separate these subjective factors from the description of phenomena given by participants. This is also known as bracketing. This process ensures the validity of the data by rendering it objective and unbiased (Shosha, 2012). This study makes

use of a non-probability sampling such as purposive and snowball since not every teenage mother was given the chance to be selected. The participants were also purposively selected using the following criteria: (a) partici-

pants are between 18-22 years old; (b) participants are women who gave birth between the ages of 15 – 19; (c) participants are currently living in Cebu City and during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Table 1. Participants of the Study

Participants	Code Name	Age	Academic Level
1	Clock	22	College
2	Lion	22	College
3	Dog	22	College
4	Bird	20	Senior High
5	Tiger	21	College

Data Gathering Procedures

Letters of approval were acquired first from the Research Coordinator and the Principal before the researchers wrote another letter addressed to the young mothers asking them for their permission and consent. The researchers had properly informed the participants regarding the purpose and overview of the study. The identity and personal information of the participants were kept strictly confidential. Ethical considerations such as conflict of interest, privacy and confidentiality, informed consent process, vulnerability, recruitment, risks and benefits, and incentives were also considered. Only after gaining consent from the participants were the interviews conducted. Data were gathered through one-hour individual interviews with each participant via online conference tools such as Google Meet and Messenger. The video and audio portions of the online conference were recorded and saved securely. The recorded video and audio from the online conference were used as a basis for encoding the participant's answers so that the transcribed data were as accurate and unbiased as possible. These transcriptions were then used to aid the researchers in analyzing the data.

Data Analysis

To better understand the experiences of young mothers in Cebu City, data were transcribed and analyzed using subthemes, emer-

gent and final themes. These themes were extracted from the transcripts using a reduction method (Depakakibo et.al., n.d & Rabuya et. al., 2023). During the process of analyzing the data, the researchers applied bracketing by setting aside one's beliefs, experiences, and assumptions to avoid data contamination and invalidating the intended meaning, perception, or experience of the participants. Investigator, method, and data triangulation were also applied by presenting the study to external cross-examiners, applying multiple methods such as observation and interview to attain credibility and confirmability of the results.

Findings

Utilizing Colaizzi's interpretative analysis method, the researchers discovered five major themes that were prevalent in the transcriptions. These major themes characterized the academic and parental experiences of young mothers as explained by the mothers themselves. Each major theme is labeled with an adapted statement coming from the five participants. These statements were chosen to be used as labels because they more accurately encapsulate these experiences using the language of the participants themselves. These themes do not stand independently from one another and, hence, should be interpreted as interrelated aspects of a single collective whole. The five major themes were as follows:

Table 2. Summary of Themes

No	Theme
1	"Choose the Right Partner!": Having the Right Company
2	"The One That Changes Me": The Effects of Motherhood
3	"Student/Mother/Father/Daughter": Conflict in a Routine
4	"If I Stop Now, What Will Happen Later?": The Value of Education
5	"Survival of the Fittest": Me and My Future

Theme 1. "Choose The Right Partner!": Having Company

All five participants live with close companions, either their parents and siblings or their romantic partners. Two participants explained their living situations in these ways:

"Including the children of our sisters and brothers, there are 13 of us in one house." (T1, P1, L60-61)

"Yes. It's just the three of us, my partner, our child, and me." (T3, P3, L1269-1270)

The participants all expressed a strong dependence on their families or their partners, whether this be emotionally or financially. They highly valued the presence of these figures in their lives. One participant expressed this emotional connection as follows:

"My family is my number one source of happiness at first and then when my baby arrived my happiness was split into two -- a part for my family and a part for my baby." (T2, P2, L845-849)

Teenage mothers who are also students tend to seek out and thrive with positive companionship, whether it be in the form of family, romantic relationships, or spiritual beliefs. Letourneau et al. (2004) also reported this and noted that social support can benefit both teenage mothers and their children.

Some participants also experienced financial dependence on their parents, siblings, or partners, as seen in the following statements:

"Ah, our real breadwinner is our eldest sister." (T1, P1 L73-74)

"So my partner and his family own a pharmacy in the province. Both of us are left in charge of handling the store. Other than that, my partner and I have other three small side businesses or investments

where we also get our income ." (T5, P5, L2127-2133)

The companions of the participants' lives played active roles in caring for the children of these young mothers. One participant shared that her little siblings had a schedule to watch her child while she was busy with schoolwork:

"When I balance my time in the morning, my youngest siblings usually help me in taking care of my baby." (T2, P2, L943-945)

These relationships benefitted these young women by serving as a support system both financially and emotionally, especially during the pandemic. Previous studies have found a similar positive correlation between supportive relations and economic or emotional success for teenage mothers. From an economic perspective of this situation, there are fewer negative effects on the earnings of teenage mothers who have a more open relationship with their parents, according to a study by Diaz and Fiel (2016). Similarly, the 2013 study by Leerlooijer et al (2013) found that parental support was the most important determining factor in teenage mothers' continued pursuit of education.

Participant 5 emphasized that choosing the right companion in this journey was important to her. Having a partner with the right character was valuable to her, as she expressed here:

"Choosing the right partner is not only beneficial to you but for your kids as well." (T5, P5, L2301-2303)

"I'm proud and grateful for the kind of partner that I have." (T5, P5, L2298-2299)

Watts et al. (2015) found that support from significant females, such as aunts, grandmothers, sisters, and mothers, helped facilitate

teenage mothers' re-engagement with education. This is likely because these female figures similarly grew up with the notion of pregnancy and motherhood as an important female role and responsibility.

Generally, young mothers tend to refuse isolation by actively seeking out companionship. One participant expressed this desire in these words:

"But usually, I can call my friends since they are the ones that I can approach easily." (T2, P2, L1011-1012)

When physical companionship was unavailable, some participants stated they turned to spiritual connections for guidance through prayer. One participant narrated:

"The first thing I did was to ask and pray to God that He may help us survive the struggles we are facing." (T3, P3, L1398-1400)

These findings point toward a need for companionship among young mothers. Having these companions can be beneficial in many ways for these young women. They may serve as caretakers, breadwinners, or simply emotional supporters in teenage mothers' lives. Teenage mothers have a desire to actively seek out supportive companionship and stand to benefit greatly from it.

Theme 2. "The One That Changes Me": The Effect of Motherhood

This theme phrase is quite recognizable to everyone, especially new moms. It is throughout their adolescence that they begin to function like an adult for their child. A participant stated:

"The happiest thing that I have experienced was when my baby was born." (T2, P2, L915-917)

The maternal love that the participants experienced pushed them to continue to strive and persevere to create a future for both their child and themselves and in turn, by doing this they can create a greater connection to their child, thus a participant said this line:

"Yes, I will make my child feel the love of a mother, I don't want my child to experience my past." (T4, P4, L1842-1844)

As mothers, they also had to provide for both themselves and their children so that they may be able to help their children flourish and have a greater future. This sole reason held the participants accountable for pursuing their education and getting a decent job so that they would be able to provide for their families:

"My child is the one that changes me ever since they came." (T4, P4, L1828 - 1829)

According to the said experiences of the participants, one must attain the right motivation to accomplish any task, may it be as a mother or as a student especially when one has to balance both worlds since the experiences could be a lot to handle for someone who bears two responsibilities at the same time. As said by one of the participants:

"My happy experience is when I bond with my child while I study online. Laban!" (T3, P3, L1320-1321)

Despite facing the responsibilities of being a student and a mother, what mattered most to the participants was how they found happiness in being a mother:

"And when my child falls asleep, that's the best. When she sleeps and when she wakes up, she smiles at me and wakes me up too." (T1, P1, L188-190)

Regardless of how difficult the participants' lives had been, a smile from their child brightened their hearts and minds. Every time their child smiled, kissed, and played with them, participants voiced their delight. They understood that having a child was difficult and required many sacrifices, yet they remained optimistic about these experiences which gave them reasons to push further and switch to a more mature mindset.

Despite the many challenges that diverse conditions provide, the participants were able to find happiness while carrying out their obligations as a student and a mother. These expe-

riences also molded how the participants responded to life itself now that they had bigger responsibilities to attend to.

Theme 3. "Student/Mother/Father/Daughter": Conflict in Routine

Conflict is a constant theme in a teenage mother's life. Functioning as both students and mothers, some participants felt they had to divide their attention between their responsibilities. One participant put it this way:

"My attention is divided since I already have a kid and I have to balance my time." (T2, P2, L876-878)

Sometimes, young mothers are pushed to unhealthy limits to accomplish what is being asked of them. Particularly, participants noted the heavy workload of schoolwork as a cause of this. A participant recounted her experience this way:

"I was confused on how I would solve these. So I experienced sleeping at dawn. I experienced going home at dawn. So I have my time to do my activities." (T1, P1, L185-188)

Young mothers generally struggle with finances. There is a conflict over where their budgeted money is meant to go first amidst the several demands yet limited sources of income. One participant said:

"It's hard to budget since only a few of us are working and there have been a lot of demands lately." (T2, P2, L812-814)

Teenage mothers are more likely to be financially disadvantaged due to unemployment and depend on social welfare resources, as emerged in a quantitative study by Assini-Meytin and Green (2015).

The financial conflict is usually due to three common factors: daily meals, a child's needs, and educational fees. The following statements convey these sentiments:

"Maybe the food we eat every day. Because it usually runs out. The kids have big appetites, dong." (T1, P1, L95-97)

"Mostly milk and rice since I'm getting my kid used to these. Having a child is

costly and we also have to provide vitamins since the baby needs it." (T3, P3, L1293-1295)

"The biggest deduction in our budget is our school fees." (T2, P2, L768-769)

Aside from financial conflicts, teenage mothers faced emotional conflicts as well. They expressed feelings of loneliness and being overwhelmed by their new parental role in statements such as these:

"Way back in my hometown, I don't have someone to support and comfort me." (T4, P4, L1809-1810)

"(Because) being a new young mom is overwhelming." (T5, P5, L2155-2156)

Teenage mothers also struggled with their social reputation. One participant shared that she experienced receiving negative comments about her because she got pregnant at an early age:

"I did, but I observed that most people are bringing me down and belittling me for not being able to finish my studies and for giving birth at such an early age. They have been assuming that I won't be able to finish but I will prove them wrong because I am claiming that I will finish my studies and graduate." (T3, P3, L1420-1426)

Watts et al. (2015) found that teenage mothers were perceived as bad role models and teenage motherhood was associated with feelings of shame or embarrassment in their general communities. Some teenage mothers are also single mothers. Because there is no one else to fill the role, these teenage mothers feel they have to fulfill the role of a father too. A participant expressed this role conflict as follows:

"I'm a single mom so I have to work two roles as a mother and a father to my child." (T2, P2, L917-918)

The COVID-19 pandemic also brought about new conflicts in teenage mothers' lives. Most participants were able to identify distinctly different challenges, comparing before and during the pandemic and its lockdowns.

The following statements narrate their struggles pre-pandemic:

"Not really, dong. It was different. But, like when I go to school, and at that time, my baby wasn't breastfeeding anymore. So, that was also difficult." (T1, P1, L235-238)

"First and foremost, I faced financial problems due to the pandemic. My partner lost his job for a while. My child is used to drinking milk alone and was not being breastfed anymore because I live far and because of the classes I have to take since my baby was born during pre-pandemic." (T3, P3, L1362-1368)

"During face-to-face, I was already pregnant...But, I did not disclose that I was pregnant. Because I had 1 semester left so that I could graduate. And maybe if I spoke up, then my graduation would be delayed. Like I'd be forced to stop." (T5, P5, L2146-2152)

The following statements narrate the conflicts they faced throughout the pandemic. Boath et al. (2013) discovered that teenage mothers are three times more likely to experience postpartum depression than older mothers. One participant noted her experience dealing with postpartum depression along with uncertainty about the pandemic:

"Yes, because if classes happen face to face, you wouldn't be able to bond with your child as much." (T3, P3, L1328-1329)

"And you still have to battle with your mental health because, again, you're dealing with postpartum and you're still thinking about when the pandemic will end." (T5, P5, L2214-2217)

The weight of numerous conflicts was indeed difficult for teenage mothers to keep up with, but some participants expressed that this consistent pressure has led them to form a routine to face these conflicts daily:

"I don't have any other struggles because it's repetitive. Everything is routine when you're a mom." (T5, P5, L2232-2234)

Similarly, all participants insisted that time management was a must in facing these conflicts. Teenage mothers saw it as a necessity to balance out the conflicts in their lives. They also saw the development of it to be key to their adaptation to their multiple simultaneous roles.

"I eventually learned to balance my time because not always or all the time that I have to think for myself." (T2, P2, L848-850)

"I learned that I wasted a lot of time in the past. Saying things like 'I'll just do this later! It's tiring.' - I had a lot of reasons. So the lesson I learned is if there are things to do, it's best to do them now. Find motivation." (T1, P1, L447-451)

These findings highlight the recurring conflicts that are present in teenage mothers' lives. Conflict, in the form of financial insufficiencies, social stigma, postpartum depression, and role confusion, were also major themes in the studies by Assini-Meytin & Green (2015), Watts et al. (2015), Boath et al. (2013), and Mangeli et al. (2017). Of the six main categories in the 2017 findings of Mangeli et al., one was role conflict. This theme of conflict between maternal, adolescent, and student roles was common in both the current and the previous study. These can be financial conflicts, emotional conflicts, social conflicts, role confusion, or conflicts due to the pandemic. Teenage mothers often have to face things that they might have not had time to prepare for before.

However, because of the pressure of having another person to provide for them, they are forced to learn strategies for managing these conflicts.

Theme 4. "If I Stop Now, What Will Happen Later?": Valuing Education

The fourth major theme emphasizes the importance of education for teenage mothers. Despite having second thoughts and uncertainties about giving up their studies, and despite the difficulties, they persisted and continued their education in the hopes of a brighter future. Participants' top priority is finishing school regardless of what problems come their way, as one of the participants said:

"If you're given a chance to finish your studies, finish them." (T5, P5, L2290-2291)

Education is one of the significant tools to improve and achieve success in one's life. It enables people to learn new things, find good occupations, and live a respectable life in society. All five participants decided to continue their education despite being pregnant, to aid their family and child's needs in the future. One of the participants said:

"Yes, there was a time I thought of that but I thought that it's better if I do both since I am also doing this for my family's future. That's why I have to go on no matter how hard it is because hardships are always present and are inevitable." (T3, P3, L1407-1411)

Yet, the most important reason for teenage moms to finish their education is for their future and the future of their children. However, only four out of five participants believe that taking classes online has been beneficial for them. Even though they are attending lessons online, they can still keep an eye on their child.

"Yes, because if classes happen face to face, you wouldn't be able to bond with your child as much." (T3, P3, L1328-1329)

Even though having classes online was beneficial for them, participants were still hesitant about completing their education because of the responsibilities that come with being both a student and a mother at the same time. But then they had the realization that if they stopped, their child would have no idea what kind of future awaits them.

But if I stop now, what will happen later? How will I be able to provide for my child? How will I be able to feed them?" (T2, P2, L970-972)

In the research study conducted by Evans and Slowley (2010), it was found that teenage mothers between the ages of 16 and 18 were having difficulty in school and encountered a variety of difficulties, causing them to stop their education. Hence the reason why for this theme, education is one of the main priorities of the participants, as education can lead to a better life and a more promising future that

they will be able to provide for their child and family.

These findings prove that the participants value their education regardless of their situation. It shows how education is a valuable tool to achieve success in life, especially in aiding the needs of their families and children in the future. Hardships may come in their life but they would not hinder them from achieving success

Theme 5. "Survival of the Fittest": Me and My Future

Participants cared about their future and what they would be in the future. They worked hard for their dreams of their future to come true. One participant said that:

"Yes, in day, if you have goals, you have to strive to see progress. You will be successful someday, really." (T1, P1, L279-281)

The participants had set their own goals and were optimistic that they would be successful someday. Other participants used their motivation to keep going and keep doing better as their coping mechanism to make their future better than it is now.

"Motivation, in day - motivation for my family, my baby, and everyone that supported me - since day one." (T1, P1, L340-343)

In a way almost every participant was striving for their future so the participants can have a better life for themselves and their child. A participant said:

"There will come a time where I can raise my child, and can feed him, provide for him, and help him in his studies in the future." (T2, P2, L913-915)

The findings of this theme reveal that despite the challenges along the way, the participants have longings and aspirations they desire to embrace. They are moving forward through determination and hard work.

The last major theme encompasses the participants' grit and longing to achieve the successes they wish to attain. They too have dreams they want to pursue despite it all.

Watson and Vogel (2017) examined six parenting teen mothers from three distinct educational settings to see what characteristics aided their educational resiliency and helped them graduate from high school. The researchers found that four of the adolescent moms in this research indicated "responsibility" when asked if they thought education was a right or a responsibility. The other two teen moms said "Right," but then swiftly went on to emphasize their responsibility to pursue an education. They believe that education is a responsibility, so they have no right to complain about the special obstacles that they experience as teen mothers. This study supports the results of the fifth theme by giving evidence of teen mothers' efforts to achieve success.

Conclusion

After careful analysis of data, the researchers conclude that teenage mothers who are students during the COVID-19 pandemic were able to cope and survive their everyday struggles through having the right company around them. Social support coming from family members, friends, romantic partners, and other social networks contributed largely in their well-being and resiliency in facing the hurdles in life. As mothers, their child brings them great joy and encourages them to change their behavior to fulfill their responsibilities. Their child is a motivating force in their lives. Teenage mothers and students are facing conflicts whether these be financial, emotional, or social. Living in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic produces new and unexpected challenges in their lives. Nevertheless, they value education highly and see it as a bridge to a better life. The overall meaning of their experiences leads teenage mothers and students to optimism. They are generally optimistic about their future and have great confidence in their capabilities. They generally see that they are actively working towards a better future for themselves and their children.

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