

## Teenage mothers' transitional living experiences and coping mechanisms: A phenomenological study

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### Abstract

Due to the proliferation of the COVID-19 virus, a health protocol encouraging social isolation was implemented. However, teens continued to violate this rule, resulting in premarital sex, and young women became pregnant due to unsafe sexual activity. The study aimed to explore the transitional lived experiences of teenage mothers from being students to teen moms in the context of the new normal educational setting. The study utilized a transcendental phenomenological research approach to investigate and analyze the individual activities and behaviors of young moms. For qualitative data collection and triangulation-based data analysis, the researcher employed the live interview and participants' observations that were then recorded via audio and video. The study consisted of five research participants selected using the method of purposive sampling with the inclusion criteria of one teenage mother who were presently enrolled in school and two teenage mothers who had a child or were pregnant during the study's conduct. Using thematic analysis and data triangulation, the study's findings revealed three major themes.

Keywords: Coping mechanisms, resilience, teenage mothers, transitional living experiences;

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## 1. Introduction

Most people suffer burnout in different areas of their lives since the COVID-19 virus caused long-term isolation and lockdowns (Buheji et al., 2020). As World Health Organization characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic in March 2020, the challenges of the education sectors escalated unexpectedly and significantly affected the quality of learning materials, students' learning capabilities, and, most significantly, the usual course of life and livelihood. Like the rest of the world, schools in the Philippines continue to face challenges in different aspects of learning structures and approaches within the learning rounds (Manire, 2021). With the sudden shift in learning delivery modality, face-to-face classes made uneasy adjustments to distance learning, and it was challenging to answer modules and study lessons without a teacher's guidance.

On a worldwide dimension, UNICEF (2020) claimed that school and university closures had impacted more than 1.5 billion learners of all ages. Shutdowns have disproportionately impacted youngsters. With the utmost consideration for providing education as a fundamental human right, educational systems worldwide were once again challenged to produce different measures to sustain education efforts immediately, but this does not take into account solutions to the problems of each student. The education system is generally unprepared and may have unanticipated implications during and after the crisis (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Salmi et al., 2023).

In the Philippine context, a digital gap among Filipino students may be seen in distance learning (Santos, 2020). Rather than alleviating existing disparities, the current state of distance education might instead serve to worsen them by creating new hurdles. When it comes to adapting to new learning methods and having a dependable internet connection, 32% of Filipino students were surveyed in cross-sectional research, while 22% were assessed similarly have experienced the struggle to learn in new ways and lack access to a computer with an internet connection that works (Baticulon et al., 2020). Some students may find it difficult to afford a gadget that makes it easier to access online courses and submit homework right away (Santos, 2020). As a result, Filipino students face various challenges when pursuing their studies through distance education.

Aside from the challenges learners encounter in distance learning, teenage pregnancy is highlighted as a vulnerability known to be worsened by school closures during times of crisis. It threatens the continuing education of vulnerable youngsters. Girls can spend more time with men and boys than they would if they were not in school, increasing their chance of engaging in hazardous sexual conduct and their vulnerability to sexual abuse and exploitation. A lack of sexual and reproductive health education and services, child marriage, health, and well-being hazards, and greater poverty and insecurity are all associated with teen pregnancy. Globally, adolescent pregnancy and delivery complications are the top cause of mortality for females aged 15–19 (Tarver & Arrogante, 2020).

Teenage pregnancy continues to be a longstanding national concern in the Philippines, with yearly increases in adolescent pregnancy rates. Despite the implementation of health and safety standards throughout the nation during the COVID-19 pandemic, teenage pregnancy rates in the Philippines skyrocketed. Teenage pregnancy, or pregnancy among teenagers, is a recognized phenomenon with substantial physical, emotional, and psychological consequences that expose adolescents to various risk factors and health difficulties (Natividad, 2014). On the other hand, teenage mothers are more likely to have abortions that are illegal and risky, which might result in sickness or death (Hussain & Finer, 2013; Melgar et al., 2018).

Similarly, compared to older mothers, mothers of this age group are more likely to experience several health problems, such as eclampsia, puerperal endometritis, and systemic infections: children born to these teenage mothers were also more likely to have low birth weight, preterm birth, and severe

neonatal problems (Ganchimeg et al., 2014). In addition to social shame and rejection from their respective families and friends (Cook & Cameron, 2020), the social implications of having a child before age of 18 include an increased likelihood of suffering domestic violence with their spouse or partner. Due to their pregnancies, most young women are compelled to drop out of school, limiting their professional prospects (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021; Raj & Boehmer, 2013).

During the retrieval and distribution of modules in the school setting, it was a surprise to the researchers that some students got pregnant and others had children. In the back of their thoughts, they had wondered, 'How will they be able to manage their child's care with their education?' Furthermore, the Malay National High guidance office statistics revealed a rising number of students getting pregnant each school year, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of what they discovered, the researchers were intrigued and encouraged to explore these phenomena of teenage mothers' transitional lived experiences and coping mechanisms in terms of their studies and to be young mothers in this time of adversities. Consequently, the high school students, parents, instructors, and Local Government Units benefited from the study by having programs to emphasize or reinforce reproductive health education and increase reproductive health awareness among the youth.

### *1.1. Theoretical framework*

The study was anchored and grounded in *Transition Theory*. This theory states that 'individuals undergo a complex transition in which they redefine their sense of self and regenerate their self-determination.' Like with the teenage mothers' phenomenon, the transition from being students to young mothers was evident; despite their challenging circumstances as students, they should take care of their children since they had been transformed into young mothers. The transition to motherhood is a significant stage in a woman's growth. The shift starts throughout pregnancy and continues until postpartum. The settling-in process started when moms developed a sense of competence and confidence with their newborns. Typically, settling in occurs approximately 4 months after delivery (Meleis et al., 2000). Compared to new moms of more mature age, adolescent women face several problems throughout the transition to parenthood. These females must simultaneously navigate the transition to maturity, the possibility of marriage, pregnancy, and parenting.

When making the journey to parenthood, a woman feels heightened sensitivity and confronts formidable obstacles (Mercer, 2006). This is worsened for adolescent mothers, who, according to research, suffer a heavier duty load throughout the transition to parenthood (Mangeli et al., 2017; Sheeran et al., 2016). Frequently, adolescents become mothers without the requisite knowledge, skills, and resources to manage early motherhood, which exacerbates their already compromised developmental level. For effective teenage motherhood transition assistance, it is necessary to examine the experiences of adolescent motherhood throughout pregnancy and delivery and the variables linked with a successful transition to teenage motherhood (Macleod, 2015; Skitka et al., 2021).

### *1.2. Purpose of study*

The study aimed to explore the phenomenon of high school students transitioning from being a student to being a mother at a time of adversity, particularly on the difficulties and challenges they experienced from being students to becoming young mothers.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions.

1. What are the transitional lived experiences of teenage mothers?
2. What challenges do teenage mothers face during the transition from being students to becoming mothers?

3. What are their coping mechanisms for these transitions?

**2. Materials and Method**

In this study, the researchers used the *phenomenological research design* under the constructionist-interpretivism philosophy (Crotty, 2003), where the role of the researchers was to interpret what was provided to them directly via experienced or observed behaviors without being obstructed by preconceived beliefs and theoretical concepts. However, Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology (TPh) was the proper philosophical approach to qualitative research technique that sought to comprehend human experience (Moustakas, 1994). Pure TPh was based on the concept and condition of discarding all preconceived notions (epoche) to see phenomena through unclouded glasses, letting the genuine meaning of events emerge organically and within their individuality (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) elaborates on Husserl's philosophical foundations for TPh.

In addition, according to Langdridge (2007), in contrast to a quantitative positivist natural science viewpoint, a phenomenological approach to psychology research comprises the following, which it shares with many other qualitative perspectives: (1) a focus on the human experience as a topic in and of itself; (2) a concern with meaning and how meaning emerges in experience; (3) a focus on description and relationships rather than interpretation and causation; (4) recognition of the researcher's role in the co-construction of the topic under investigation and an understanding of how all experience must be understood in context.

*2.1. Participants*

The researchers used the method of purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria for research participants included the Malay National High School, Motag, Malay, and Aklan students who were pregnant or had a child during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's participants were five teenage mothers who voluntarily gave their approval to the researchers by signing the consent form and accepting the terms and conditions as written in the consent form. Table 1 indicates the inclusion criteria of each participant.

**Table 1**

*Research Participants' Inclusion Criteria*

No	Current age	Age at pregnancy	Education level	Current education status	Current status
1	18	17	SHS grade 12 student	In School, Malay NHS	Schooling while nursing the baby
2	18	18	SHS grade 12 student	In School, Malay NHS	Schooling while pregnant
3	17	17	SHS grade 11 student	In School, Malay NHS	Schooling while pregnant
4	19	17	SHS grade 12 student	In School, Malay NHS	Schooling while nursing the baby

5	18	17	SHS grade 12 student	In School, Malay NHS	Schooling while nursing the baby
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## 2.2. Data collection tools

The researchers employed semi-structured guide questions during the live interview with the study participants. The researchers' checklist and journal/diary were then used throughout the participant's observation. Finally, these actions were videotaped and audiotaped for qualitative data transcription and interpretation. Table 2 shows the indicated research instruments or tools used in every event.

**Table 2**

*The Study Employed Research Instruments in Every Event*

Research instruments/tools	Events	
	Lived interview	Participant's observation
1. Guide questions	√	X
2. Checklist	X	√
3. Journal	X	√
4. Diary	X	√
5. Videotaped	√	√
6. Audiotaped	√	√

## 2.3. Data collection method

The following methods were used by the researchers throughout the data-gathering procedure. First, the researcher provided research participants with an orientation on the study's goal, the terms and conditions, and any other information they need. Next, the consent form was discussed and presented to them for clarification and alteration of specific conditions, which were always to their greatest advantage. After the study participants consented to and signed the consent form, the in-depth and unstructured interviews were conducted and tape-recorded. The researcher then emerged with their participants on occasion to watch their participants' practices and behaviors, notably in terms of their studies and being young moms for their children. Finally, two broad, generic questions were asked to research participants (Moustakas, 1994): What have you noticed about the phenomenon? What settings or conditions inspired or altered your perceptions of the phenomenon?

## 2.4. Data analysis

The researchers first used 'Bracketing' (Moustakas, 1994). It is the first phase of the philosophical movement of phenomenology, which explains the process of suspending judgment about the natural world to focus on understanding experience. In this research, bracketing was implemented by 'Triangulation,' which involves comparing the findings of many related studies to the study's emergent themes without using personal judgment. Next, after the interview was conducted and recorded. The researchers transcribed the responses of the participants by listening to the recorded interviews. The researchers then used initial coding to code or transcribe the emergent themes or noteworthy remarks,

which were derived from the replies of the five study participants. In addition, the researchers organize the codes into themes, with subthemes and minor themes. Finally, the researchers might then, based on the subthemes, produce the major themes that could provide answers to the study's research questions. Hence, the researchers used 'Thematic Analysis' since it was a suitable approach to research if you're seeking to learn anything about people's perspectives, opinions, knowledge, experiences, or values from a collection of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

### 2.5. Ethical consideration

The consent of the participants was sought orally, before the interview. The identities of the participants were hidden, and they are not revealed at any stage of this research.

### 3. Results

The study's results and discussions were found in this part. The provided tables were composed of the emerging themes and significant statements from participants, along with the minor themes, and the major themes from qualitative data collection. Below are the tables and discussions in response to the research question. Table 3 shows the transitional lived experiences of teenage mothers from students to young mothers.

**Table 3**

*Transitional Lived Experiences of Teenage Mothers from Students to Young Mothers*

Participant's significant statement	Sub-themes	Major-theme
<i>'Before I was free to walk outdoors in our home without worry something. But when I got pregnant, going outside was quite unusual.'</i>	Social transition	
<i>'Previously, I was able to remember our lesson in a short period. However, my retention skills have declined after giving birth to my first child.'</i>	Educational transition	Transitional adjustments
<i>'My body shape was changing. I am slimmer compared to my size today after I gave birth to my first child.'</i>	Physical transition	

Teenage mothers get more responsibilities, public acceptance, and a sense of purpose as a result of motherhood. Despite the positive advantages of motherhood, the participants experienced life-altering transitional adjustments such as; (1) social transition, (2) educational transition, and (3) physical transition. Managing the overlapping demands of education, and caring for a newborn in a new normal setting were the most common obstacles. Teenage mothers reported receiving support from their mothers, siblings, schools, and close friends, but seldom from the child's father and the larger community. Participants said that their transitional adjustments were led by the larger groups of people who frowned upon teenage mothers, leaving them with emotions of shame and humiliation despite the apparent personal advantages of motherhood (Caldwell et al., 1998). Table 4 displays the transitional challenges of teenage mothers from students to young mothers.

**Table 4**

*The Transitional Challenges of Teenage Mothers from Students to Young Mothers*

Participant's significant statement	Sub-themes	Major-theme
<i>'When I get pregnant at an early age, I am timid and hesitant to exercise outside our home. I feared certain individuals would defame and shame me because of my condition.'</i>	Pregnancy discomfort	
<i>'I had difficulties completing the modules while also taking care of my baby. Therefore, time management for the combined roles of student and mother is crucial.'</i>	Educational challenges	Encountered challenges
<i>'I realized that having a baby isn't always simple and joyful, particularly when my baby becomes ill and doesn't have milk to feed.' That is why, in my current situation, it is challenging to get employment since no one would employ me because I have not completed secondary school.</i>	Financial issues	

Whether a woman is a teenager or an adult, motherhood may be very difficult and stressful. Despite the high incidence of adolescent mothers, the study indicated that the transitions from students to teenage mothers were laden with the following challenges. The challenges associated with teenage motherhood were (1) pregnancy discomfort, (2) educational challenges, and (3) financial issues. This claim was supported by Adangabe et al. (2021), who found that teenage mothers enrolled in a new normal setting of education with different learning modalities during the pandemic faced several challenges, including a lack of financial support, poor time management, low self-esteem, and emotional instability. Table 5 displays the coping mechanisms of teenage mothers for this transition.

**Table 5**

*The Coping Mechanisms of Teenage Mothers for this Transition*

Participant's significant statement	Sub-themes	Major-theme
<i>'I never doubted having an abortion when I knew I was pregnant. I accepted the responsibility to my child and myself to keep moving for me to have a better future and my baby's future.'</i>	Self-acceptance	

*'I was wrong when I first doubted my parents, relatives, and society about my pregnancy. However, once I gave birth to my kid, I received a variety of assistance that has continued to this day. They helped provide me with advice on how to take care of myself and my baby. Financial support was also offered sometimes.'*

Family and society acceptance

Positive resiliency

*'I was so fortunate that the school, particularly my subject teachers, were considerate when I was unable to complete my assigned tasks on time. My classmates were also supportive. They keep on reminding me of the tasks which need to be submitted online or in hard copy.'*

School and peer support

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Life for adversity-stricken teenage mothers who became students may indeed be demanding and challenging. However, with perseverance, a lot of support, and the appropriate motivation, these teenage mothers will be able to manage the challenges they are currently facing effectively. In this study, positive resiliency was the major theme of the study where the teenage mothers had these strong support systems such as; (1) self-acceptance, (2) family and society acceptance, and (3) school and peer support were the identified coping mechanisms of teenage mothers when they experience challenges. Even though teenage mothers faced numerous challenges related to their education and child care support (Chiyota & Marishane, 2020), family, school, and peer support systems could encourage teenage mothers to demonstrate positive resilience, self-fulfillment, resources of strength, agency, motivation, and mobilization to be active parents and at the same responsible students (Odrowąż-Coates & Kostrzevska, 2021; Sprecher et al., 2022). The findings of this study were supported by Dr. Nelson and Mari Juni Paulette Gonzales (2020), in which in their study, 18 participants are usually delighted with their new responsibilities as young moms and largely depended on their families and friends for financial and emotional support.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The following conclusions were made from the phenomenological study, in which the researchers sought to explore teen mothers' transitional experiences from being students to young mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Young mothers were not hampered because of the love and acceptance of the family and society in terms of schooling and being young moms.
- Student Mothers withstood the negative psychological effects during the transition period with the help of coping mechanisms they adopted.



- The new learning model adopted due to the COVID-19 pandemic was convenient for young mothers as they could nurse their babies while attending to their education needs.

It is also worth mentioning that none of them had considered getting an abortion and committing suicide. Thus, even though they had unwanted births, most considered their offspring as blessings and inspiration despite their condition.

This study may indicate that service providers and policymakers increase the involvement of teenage mothers' family members, such as their moms, sisters, grandparents, and aunts, following early motherhood, since this might have an impact on younger female siblings. Consequently, this study contributes to a deeper comprehension of the topic of 'who influences what' inside the family. Among younger sisters whose older sisters have had adolescent pregnancies, the chance of teenage pregnancy seems to be influenced by their relationship with the older sister and her child; the siblings' home surroundings are comparable. Therefore, it is suggested that the following programs should be implemented:

1. Inform younger peers about healthy romantic relationships. Offer to give a lecture about abstinence or good relationships at the youth group meeting of your church. Teenagers will enjoy receiving this advice from someone their age or younger.
2. Invite a sex education speaker to speak about abstinence and healthy relationships to your local youth group.
3. Promote pregnancy resources for adolescents, such as pregnancy resource centers and teen maternity homes. This may be accomplished online, through research presentations, or by making and posting fliers across your town.
4. Raise awareness using social media. Employ a combination of witty and informative postings on your Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages to promote awareness of early pregnancy and young mothers.

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