

Original Article

Turning Point: Transitional Stage of Adolescent Mothers Returning to Education

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Abstract

This descriptive qualitative study aimed to explore the turning point of first-time Thai adolescent mothers who returned to education after motherhood. The participants were 20 adolescent mothers with a healthy baby aged no more than two years. Each of them had undergone the experience of childrearing after giving birth and studying in non-formal education simultaneously. In-depth interviews were used for data collection. The data were analyzed using content analysis method.

“Fulfilling personal life-goals” and “fulfilling parents’ wishes” were the findings of this study. The adolescent mothers decided to return to education during childrearing in order to achieve life-long success for themselves. The results can be used as evidence for nurses to inform, advise, and support pregnant adolescents and adolescent mothers to continue their education. Also, it can be used to guide social policy to promote all educational systems to enable these groups to gain long-term success in the future.

Keywords: adolescent mothers; non-formal education; transitional stage; turning point

Background

Adolescent mothers and pregnant adolescents have become a great matter for concern worldwide, including Thailand. While the birth rate in Thailand has declined over the past years, the birth rate has continued at a high level in adolescent mothers, 14.2 percent of these births occur in adolescent girls 10–19 years.¹ The proportion of adolescent mothers who gave birth in 2012 was 53.8 births per 1,000 women aged 15 to 19 which is the highest in the Asia region.² Consequently, there are two main impacts on teenage pregnancy and adolescent mothers; health outcomes and socio-economics.^{1,3}

Teenage pregnancy leads to unsafe abortion and preterm labor.³ In addition, teenage pregnancy and adolescent mothers have been shown to suffer from social disadvantages such as being less likely to complete their education and end up dropping out of high school, and be unemployed and experience an ongoing cycle of poverty.⁴ Pregnancy of unmarried adolescents attracts disapproval from Thai society,⁵ their families and society in general who consider them to be at fault especially those who fell pregnant unintentionally.⁶ Therefore, pregnant adolescents usually hide their condition from society, for instance by discontinuing their education, or they

may seek to induce an abortion.⁷

Regarding education, young mothers who still studied were usually forced to leave school after becoming pregnant due to the dilemma arising from their physical changes and the negative attitudes of school staff,⁸ so most parents asked them to leave school during pregnancy.⁹ These factors place adolescent mothers at a long term disadvantage since they are less likely to finish high school, and therefore become less successful in the job market, and consequently have a lower income. These impacts are negative and have long-term effects on adolescent mothers, their families and the community. Even though the Act for Prevention and Solution of the Adolescent Pregnancy Problem 2016 was implemented by Ministry of Public Health to allow pregnant students to continue school and to return to classes after giving birth, the majority of them leave formal education and switch to non-formal education instead.⁸ A previous study has shown that the majority of Thai pregnant adolescents skipped school temporarily because they felt ashamed, but later returned to non-formal education (NFE).⁸ They stated that NFE suited their needs and was available to those mothers who had to raise a child.

Getting back to education is an important which affects the future of adolescent mothers. This moment happens when they have inspirations to return to study after giving birth. Studies from many countries revealed that adolescent mothers continue their education to fulfill their educational and career goals to improve their future success.¹⁰⁻¹³ There have been several studies in adolescent mothers who were studying at the same time. School status prior to pregnancy and the anticipation of motherhood inspired adolescent mothers to return to education in order to graduate and increase future work prospects.^{11,13} In addition, the experience of Thai adolescent mothers with

childrearing and studying simultaneously included “feeling tired but being happy”.¹⁴ The mothers revealed they returned to education after child birth because they wanted to pursue their life goals in both education and career. As in prior studies, the results showed the advantages of continuing education and life goals to get a better life in the future. However, there has been no study focused on the motive to get back to education after becoming an adolescent mother. Accordingly, the researcher was interested to study the turning point to return to education of these mothers.

Nurses and healthcare providers can apply the findings of this study for adolescent mothers and pregnant adolescents in order to inform and promote them to continue their education or return to education after giving birth. Moreover, the findings can be used to guide and promote policy in all educational systems to enable these groups to increase their prospects in the future.

Aim

This study aimed to explore the turning point of first-time Thai adolescent mothers who return to education during childrearing.

Methods

A qualitative descriptive study was undertaken to investigate the turning point in the transitional stage of first-time Thai adolescent mothers who returned to education while engaged in childrearing. Semi-structured questions and in-depth interviews were carried out with participants.

Participants

A total of 20 adolescent mothers who had experience being a mother and a student simultaneously were involved in this study. Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants from those who met the inclusion criteria. All of them were less than 20 years of age and first-time mothers who were

invited to share their experiences about the turning point of returning to education during childrearing.

Three inclusion criteria were set for selecting adolescent mothers who: 1) had a healthy baby and their child was 2 months - 2 years old, 2) had returned to school more than 2 months, and 3) had been the primary caregiver for her baby.

Setting

The recruitment of participants was conducted at non-formal schools in Hatyai, Songkhla Province, Thailand.

Ethical Consideration

The research proposal, data collection instruments, and informed-consent form were approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Nursing, Prince of Songkla University. The ethical approval no. was ศส 0521.1.05/1620 issued on June 4, 2015. Then the researcher obtained a letter from the Dean of the Faculty of Nursing, Prince of Songkla University asking for permission from the study settings for the research to begin. The participants were assured that their personal data would be kept confidential and their anonymity strictly protected. They had the right to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty.

Data Collection (Instrument)

Data collection started when approval from the school principal authorities were obtained. The participants were informed by the teacher of the voluntary nature of their participation and what was expected of them in this study. Data were collected using a demographic data form including obstetric history and child data, and semi-structured interview. In-depth interview was carried out by the major researcher to explore the perspectives on idea and situation of the turning point to return to education during childrearing. Interview guides began with open ended questions. For example, why did you decide to return to education after childbirth? Tell

me about your feeling of being a mother and a student at the same time? Most participants were interviewed at their home, and several at the non-formal schools. The interviews were recorded using digital audiotape after obtaining the participant's permission. The first interview was 45-60 minutes in duration. After finishing the interview, the tape record was transcribed verbatim in Thai and then translated to English. The interviews were conducted 2-3 times to clarify and validate some points from the previous interview data and then the data was transcribed and added to the first transcription. The second and third interviews were about 30 minutes in duration. Time duration of the interviews was from September 2015 to March 2016. Data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously. Interviews continued until data saturation was achieved.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was derived in that codes were generated from the data in the course of the study. It generally was characterized by simultaneous data collection and analysis. Data were collected from open-ended questions, read word by word, and then coded. Notes were made and codes categorized. Initial codes were created from research and applied to data and unlabeled portions of text were given new codes. Steps in data analysis: ^{15,16}

1. Initiating data analysis, a coding manual, themes which were conceptually similar were grouped together. A domain analysis contains a series of themes, a semantic relationship. The coding manual was tested against data gathered in a preliminary study and revised as codes found to overlap or be missing entirely. Revisions were continually made during the study as data collection and analysis proceeded and then used to recode previously coded data

2. The researcher applied codes and generate marginal remarks by hand in each transcribed document. She formed ideas and recorded reactions

to the meaning of what was found in the data.

3. The researcher took sentences or paragraphs in the transcripts and divided them into meaning units, which are segments of text that contain a single idea.

4. Conceptually similar codes were organized into categories.

5. Pattern codes were revised and redefined in the coding manual and exemplars were used to clarify the understanding of each code.

6. Memoing was conducted throughout the analysis, beginning with data collection and continuing to the dissertation findings and chapter write-up.

7. Data displayed containing concepts or variables helped the investigator draw conclusions through an iterative process, thereby reducing data and conducting further analysis. Data displays were used extensively to categorize, organize, and analyze data.

8. Lastly, data were re-presented in creative and rigorous manner that were judged to best fit the findings.

Trustworthiness

The researcher and experts engaged in an ongoing discussion throughout the research process. Two peer-debriefers assisted the researcher in offering different views to collect and analyze the data. The verbatim transcriptions of the audiotape recordings and memos were kept as a record to provide an audit trail. The researcher clarified unclear data and summarized emerging categories with each participant.

Results

A total of 20 participants, who had given birth within the last two years and were studying at non-formal schools, participated in this study. The details of demographic data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic data of the participants (N=20)

Demographic data of the participants	Frequency
Age (years)	
16	3
17	4
18	7
19	6
Religion	
Buddhism	19
Islam	1
Marital status	
Married	15
Living together (not married)	3
Separated	2
Residence and family member	
Stay with own parents	9
Stay with a father of a child's family	7
Single family (the participant with a father of a child and a child)	4
Educational level at the time of participation	
Lower secondary education	5
Upper secondary education	15

Table 1 (continued)

Demographic data of the participants	Frequency
Work status	
Yes	6
No	14
Family income/ month (Baht)	
5,001-10,000	2
10,001-20,000	6
20,000-30,000	10
30,001-40,000	1
> 40,000	1

Nineteen of the pregnancies were the first time. One participant, who fell pregnant the second time, had had an illegal abortion to terminate her first pregnancy at a clinic. The children's ages

ranged from 2 to 20 months, including eight boys and twelve girls. The obstetric history and children data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Obstetric history and child data (N=20)

Obstetric history and children data	Frequency
Number of pregnancies and abortion	
1	19
2	1
Abortion (clinic)	1
Gender of children	
Male	8
Female	12
Age of children (months)	
2-3	1
> 6-12	6
> 12-24	13

All school-aged adolescents had an unintended pregnancy, and most of them were still studying at an upper secondary level in formal schools. The participants viewed the pregnancy as a barrier to study in schools. They felt embarrassed to remain in formal schools from during pregnancy until they gave birth. Hence, all of them decided to switch education to non-formal schools either during pregnancy or after giving birth. The motives to return to education were disclosed. They also revealed the meaning of

a good job, and the advantages and disadvantages of non-formal education that are further described.

Adolescent mothers discovered their turning points to return to education as being a wish to fulfill personal life-goals and fulfilling parents' wishes. The turning point to return to education was described as making a life-long meaningful decision for their future. Several motives for this point were identified and described as follows:

Fulfilling personal life-goals

Personally, the participants wanted to gain more knowledge to be a good role-model for their children. When they compared themselves with others such as friends and their cousins, they expressed their wishes to be like them. Some participants stated that they wanted to pursue their dream and enter a career. For example, one participant wanted to be a teacher after graduating from university. Most of them wanted to have a bachelor's degree or diploma in the future to get a good job. All of them realized the importance of education for long term success. The following quotes are examples of the participants' expression:

"I wanted to get a higher education because I dreamed of being a teacher. I wanted to get a job as I studied; after that, my life would not be difficult like this." (I7)

"I thought the majority of pregnant adolescents still wanted to continue studying. I saw our friends wearing student uniforms, so I wished to return to school to be like them. I wanted to enjoy our time with friends, but I had to nurture our children as well. Although I returned to school, I needed the time for our children." (I4)

Fulfilling parents' wishes

In some cases, participants continued their studies in order to satisfy their parents. The parents wanted the participants to graduate and to have a better future. Most participants stated that they felt guilty disappointing their parents for getting pregnant during study. Therefore, they returned to education to compensate for what they did wrong. Their quotes are presented below:

"My mom was aggrieved when she knew I was pregnant. She hoped I would graduate to live well in the future. So I intended to return school after childbirth to satisfy my mom's wish and to compensate for my fault" (I5)

"My parents wanted me to continue school, so I did not dropout. This was the point that made me continue the study even if I had an unintended pregnancy. Afterwards, I proved to myself that I could study during childrearing and got GPA 3+." (I15)

The participants also defined the meaning of a good job, as being a career with good security and a high-salary. They also realized that a higher education gave them opportunity for better employment. Therefore, they could have income to nurture their child and their life would be better in the future. They stated that if they just completed only lower or upper secondary education, they might get only a part-time job or manual labor with low salary. Their expressions are shown in the following statements:

"The importance of an education was that I would gain more knowledge and could finally find a good job. I would have money to raise my child and my life would be better. So I thought I should return to study." (I6)

"If I got only a lower secondary education, I would get only a part-time job. But if I got a higher education, I could choose a better job. In addition, if I got high salary job, I could support my child to get a higher education in the future as well." (I1)

In addition, all participants described the advantages of non-formal education that suited student mothers, as being its flexibility. They thought that it was suitable for pregnant students and adolescent mothers because they did not have to hide their maternal status. They expressed that studying in non-formal school was flexible. They could enroll in these schools in any semester, and there was no tuition fee. Classes were scheduled only one to two days a week and students could select the day to study based on their availability. Most of them chose weekends. The class took around 3 hours, from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. The participants felt no stress when they studied in non-formal schools. Students were of various ages and marital statuses. They could talk about everything and could consult friends if they had any problems, especially family problems. They felt accepted in non-formal schools, as is shown in the following statements:

“I needed to change to non-formal school because they gave me an opportunity to study. I saw three students who were pregnant on orientation day. I was thinking that pregnant students could study in NFE.” (I9)

“There were some friends who were like me at my non-formal school. They were pregnant adolescents, so I think we were in the same situation. However, studying at the old school was better because classes were from Monday to Friday we could get more knowledge there, but we would not have time to take care of our child. Therefore, non-formal school would be suitable for us because I would have time for my child and time to work from Monday to Friday... When I felt uneasy, I could talk with friends about everything here because we were of the same status. We were also about the same age, and we helped each other do the assignments.”(I1)

“I chose to study on Saturday or Sunday. It depended on each subject, and it had no class some weeks. I had a chance for self-study when there was no class. Sometimes, we had online study and the students shared their knowledge together. It was much easier because there was no need to sit in class every day. It was rather free.” (I12)

However, some participants indicated the disadvantages of studying in non-formal education. They thought they learned less in non-formal schools and thought non-formal education was not as strict education as formal education, and it was much more concerned with self-learning than formal education. They felt embarrassed and they expressed their views of non-formal education in the following statements:

“I still wanted to study at the old school, but I needed to switch school because I became pregnant. I feel like I get less knowledge in NFE because the study here is not as strict and hard as the old one.” (I8)

“If I continued education at university in the future I would feel ashamed in front of my other friends because I got less education in NFE than in the formal school.” (I11)

Discussion

The adolescent mothers returned to education after giving birth because they wanted to fulfill personal life-goals and fulfill parents' wishes. They had educational and career ambitions to get life-long success.

The participants dropped out from formal schools because they felt embarrassed about becoming pregnant. Even though the Ministry of Education has implemented policy to allow pregnant students to continue education and to return to classes after

giving birth in formal schools, the participants perceived the public and formal schools would not accept and not allow them to continue studying. Likewise, studies in Thailand⁶ and Namibia¹⁷ found that the young mothers did not know this policy, and it was not effectively implemented in formal schools. The chance to return to formal schools is difficult for adolescent mothers who drop out after getting pregnant.⁸ This impact is long-term on young mothers, families, and society and that creates the hopeless situation for this group.

There were many reasons which contributed greatly to the turning points for remaining in or returning to schools after giving birth. The participants aimed to fulfill their educational and career goals to improve their life-long success. They valued getting higher education as a way to provide a better life for themselves and their child in the future. These purposes were consistent with the studies of adolescent mothers remaining in education in many contexts, such as Asia, and western contexts.¹⁰⁻¹⁴ Participants also reported that they wished to graduate to get a stable job although some of them did not focus on this previously.¹⁸ Similarly, new teenage parents experienced a change in attitude and focused on returning to education even when pre-pregnancy attitudes were not positive toward graduation.¹⁹ The responsibility of raising a child inspired participants to return to school and follow a career. Likewise, the responsibility of motherhood inspired adolescent mothers to remain in education to improve their life opportunities and long-term success.^{13,14} Moreover, most participants fell pregnant while studying and this made their parents angry and disappointed as they had expected their daughters to have a good education and therefore a better future. Accordingly, they wanted to correct their mistake for their parents by returning education after giving birth. This was congruent with the study of life experiences of unmarried Thai adolescent mothers.²⁰

The participants also expressed that they wanted time to nurture their child after giving birth. Therefore, all participants decided to return to or to continue education in non-formal schools and that was congruent with the study of Neamsakul⁶ because studying in non-formal schools fits their needs and time. They stated that non-formal schools were flexible educational institutions and suitable for student mothers who raised their child simultaneously. Participants felt like that they found acceptance and opportunity in non-formal schools. Likewise, young mothers who attended the Young Parent Program reported that the reasons to return to school were its flexibility, sense of achievement, and continuing education.²¹

Noticeably, the majority of the participants still relied on their parents and some stayed with the family of the child's father. All of them expressed that they received social support from the family to help them deal with the multiple tasks during schooling, such as child care and housework including all basic needs. This was consistent with previous studies that stated social support influenced the process of transition to parenthood of adolescent mothers.²²⁻²⁴ Participants indicated that their mother was the major supporter for adolescent mothers who returned to education. Participants' mothers were their maternal role model and helped them take care of the child when they were at school or at work. Similarly, the strong bonds in Thai families can help first-time adolescent mothers in the adaptation to maternal roles.^{20,25} These were the strength of this study.

Conclusion

Becoming a mother and a student simultaneously was not an easy situation for the first-time adolescent mothers because they were still young and lacked mothering skills. However, all participants received support from their family,

especially their mothers, to deal with these both roles. Motherhood during adolescence did not mean that their future life was ended. Raising the child made these women realize their future life in order to broaden their education and their career. Moreover, they felt guilt in relation to their parents since they became pregnant during study. Therefore, all participants returned to education after childbirth in non-formal education because it was suitable for serving the participants' needs and time. The turning point to return to education was to fulfill their personal life-goals and their parents' wishes to obtain life-long success.

Recommendations and Implications

The knowledge gained from this study is applicable to be basic knowledge for guiding nursing practice and for nursing educators to facilitate and provide support for pregnant adolescents and adolescent mothers after giving birth to remain in or to return to education for their long term success. Health care providers, especially nurses in prenatal education, postpartum education, and postpartum follow-up care or home visits are in a position to advise these mothers to pursue their life-goals and to achieve their parent's wishes. In addition, it can be used to guide policy to promote all educational systems to enable these groups to obtain life-long success in the future.

This study contributed to empirical knowledge of the turning point to return to education among first-time Thai adolescent mothers during childrearing in Songkhla Province, Southern Thailand. There is room for the quantitative testing of this finding. Developing instruments to measure motives returning to school of adolescent mothers by recruiting participants from other regions is suggested.

Limitation of this study

The majority of the participants were from a low-income bracket and all of them studied in non-formal schools. Therefore, they might not be representatives of all adolescent mothers who decided to return to all educational systems.

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