

Research Articles

The Meaning of Being Adolescent Mothers while Simultaneously Rearing Children and Studying

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Abstract

Objective: This descriptive qualitative study aimed to describe the meaning of being adolescent mothers who were undertaking child-rearing and studying simultaneously after childbirth. **Methods:** The participants were 20 adolescent mothers within 2 years after giving birth to a healthy baby who were also concurrently students in non-formal education. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out to collect data, which were analyzed using a content-analysis method. “Learning to move forward” was the major meaning ascribed to the meaning of being adolescent mothers while rearing children and studying. Their expressions were classified into two categories: 1) having more responsibility, and 2) accepting and moving on. **Results:** The result of this study can be used to inform nursing educators and teachers to support and encourage pregnant adolescents and adolescent mothers to continue their education.

Keywords: adolescent mothers; teenage pregnancy; child rearing; student mothers

Introduction

Teenage pregnancy and adolescent mothers have become a great concern worldwide in recent years, including in Thailand. While the birth rate in Thailand has been on a downward trend over recent years, the birth rate among adolescent mothers has continued at a high level, and 11.50% of births in Thailand occur in adolescent girls aged between 10 and 19 years,¹ which is higher than the World Health Organization [WHO] criteria of less than 10%. The proportion of women aged 15 to 19 who gave birth in 2018 was 11.20%.¹ Additionally, adolescent mothers have become a matter of great

concern in many societies for two main reasons including the health outcomes of the mothers and their children, and their socio-economic impact.^{2,3}

Adolescent mothers encounter social impacts and lessen formal educational opportunities. They have been shown to be at a disadvantage within society because they are less likely to complete their education and often drop out of high school, become unemployed, and experience an ongoing cycle of poverty.^{4,5} These negative consequences of teenage pregnancy have long-term effects on adolescent mothers, their families and the community. Therefore, in 2016, an Act for Prevention and Solution of

the Adolescent Pregnancy Problem was approved in Thailand by the Ministry of Public Health,⁶ which aimed to solve the problems arising from adolescent pregnancy by allowing pregnant students to continue studying at school and to return to formal education classes after giving birth. Nevertheless, the majority of adolescent mothers do not return to Formal Education (FE), but instead switch to the Non-Formal Education (NFE) system.^{5,7} They preferred to nurture a child themselves along with their families and concurrently return to study in NFE. Non-formal education is a flexible educational system which is suitable for student mothers who are simultaneously raising a child.

Returning to study after child-birth is an important right which affects the future of adolescent mothers. Studies from many countries have revealed that being a mother and taking responsibility for nurturing their children has inspired many adolescent mothers to return to study in order to achieve a better life and a better future.^{8,9} Dole studied the meaning of being a mother for African-American teenage mothers. The results showed that motherhood made them take responsibility for their lives and look forward to the future.¹⁰ Being mothers also made adolescents more responsible in their new maternal role.^{11,12} Previous studies described the experiences of adolescent mothers in Thailand as they tried to establishing a new family¹³ stating that early adolescent mothers became more mature and realized their own value after they became mothers.¹⁴ However, becoming a mother during teenage years was difficult, because they were juveniles with a lack of readiness for motherhood.^{15,16} Early motherhood reduced their educational achievement and labor market participation.¹⁵ Moreover, teenage mothers in high school confronted difficult life circumstances.¹⁷

Meanwhile first-time Thai adolescent mothers were gradually able to adjust to dealing with both maternal and student roles by creating

strategies to achieve their life-balance.¹⁸ A study regarding lived experiences of Thai adolescent mothers while childrearing and studying in NFE classified their experiences into three categories: 1) feeling tired but being able to get through, 2) having good experiences, and 3) having their life goals.¹⁹ However, single teen parent who simultaneously performed both as mothers and students faced a difficult life because of severe demands on the time and energy.⁹ Nevertheless, there has been no previous study about the meaning of being adolescent mothers while rearing children and studying concurrently in NFE. Accordingly, the researcher was interested in exploring this important topic.

Nurses and healthcare providers can apply the findings of this study in dealing with adolescent mothers to inform them and encourage them to continue their education either by returning to FE or through NFE after giving birth.

Objectives

This study aimed to describe the meaning of being adolescent mothers while simultaneously rearing children and studying.

Methods

Design

The descriptive qualitative approach was used to describe the meaning of the experience of first-time Thai adolescent mothers who returned to study while engaged in childrearing. A demographic questionnaire and semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to collect information from the participants. In addition, this is one part of the full study regarding the experience of adolescent mothers while childrearing and studying in non-formal education.

Participants

A total of 20 adolescent mothers who had experience of being both mothers and students

simultaneously in non-formal schools in Hat Yai participated in this study.

Purposive sampling was carried out to select the participants, all of whom were less than 20 years old and first-time mothers. Three inclusion criteria were set for selecting the adolescent mothers to participate in the study: 1) they had a healthy baby aged 2 months–2 years old, 2) they had returned to NFE for more than 2 months, and 3) they were the primary caregiver for their baby.

Setting

The recruitment of participants was carried out at non-formal schools in Songkhla province, Thailand. Non-formal schools are a form of flexible education. Students can enroll at any semester, and there is no tuition fee. The class is scheduled only one to two days a week and a student can select the day to study based on their availability.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Nursing, Prince of Songkla University. The ethical approval no. was MHESI 105.8/016 issued on June 4, 2015. The informed-consent form was separated into two forms: 1) consent for the participant 18 years of age and over and 2) consent for the participant under 18 years of age and her parent or legal guardian. The participants who agreed to participate in the study were assured that their personal data would be kept confidential. The researcher then asked them for informed consents before starting the study. All of them completed written consent forms, and their rights were protected throughout the study. They had the right to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason.

Data collection

Data collection started after the study obtained ethical approval. When approval from the principal of the NFE school and informed consent from participants were obtained, the participants

were informed about the purposes of the study and the data collection procedures. Data were collected from a demographic data form and a semi-structured interview. Additional individual in-depth interviews were then conducted to explore the meaning of the experience of the adolescent mothers who performed child-rearing and studying simultaneously. Most interviews were conducted at their homes, some being conducted at non-formal schools. The interviews were recorded using digital audiotape after obtaining the participant's permission. The initial interview lasted 45–60 minutes. The second interviews were conducted as necessary to clarify and validate some points from the previous interview data and were 30–45 minutes in duration. After the interview, the tape recording was transcribed verbatim and checked for correctness. Data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously. The number of participants was determined based on considerations related to achieving data saturation.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by using content analysis.²⁰ The method involved the following steps: Initiating data analysis, developing a coding manual; themes which were conceptually similar were grouped together. Domain analysis grouped a series of themes together in a semantic relationship. The codes were continually revised iteratively during the study as data collection and analysis. Paragraphs or sentences in the transcripts were taken and divided into meaning units, which are segments of text that contain a single idea. Then, conceptually similar codes were gathered into categories. Pattern codes were revised and redefined in the coding manual and models were used to clarify the understanding of each code. Memoing was employed throughout the analysis, beginning with data collection and continuing to the findings and writing-up in the form of a study. Finally, the data were presented in a creative and rigorous manner that was judged to

best fit the findings.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the study was accomplished applying Lincoln and Guba's concepts.²¹ The verbatim transcriptions of the audiotape recordings and field notes were kept as a record to provide an audit trail. Thus, the research process and the findings of this study can be audited. The researchers clarified unclear data and summarized emerging categories with each participant to ensure confirmability. They checked to confirm the researcher's interpretation. Transferability could be replicated in a similar context or with similar participants.

Findings

Twenty student mothers participated in this study. The participants' ages ranged from 16 to 19 years. The marital status of the participants at the time of the interview was as follows: fourteen married without registered marriage, one married with a registered marriage, three living together (not married), and two separated from their partner after becoming pregnant. Nine participants were living with their own family, seven of them were staying with their partner's family, and four were living with the child and the father of the child. Their educational levels at the time of participating in this study were: upper secondary education in non-formal schools (n = 15) and lower secondary education in non-formal schools (n = 5). The family income ranged from 20,000 to 30,000 Baht per month. The children's ages ranged from 2 to 20 months, and the children consisted of eight boys and twelve girls.

All participants had unintended pregnancies while they were studying at school and all felt that they had not been ready to be a mother. They viewed their pregnancy as a barrier to going back to school. They felt embarrassed because of getting pregnant and perceived that they would be rejected from school. Therefore, all of them decided to

switch from formal to non-formal education either during pregnancy or after giving birth.

After the participants began to experience the roles of both mothers and students, they discovered the meaning of being school-aged mothers while simultaneously studying, as learning to move forward. Their expressions to this point were identified and described as follows:

Learning to move forward

The participants described "Learning to move forward" as learning to adjust to their new roles and developing a better life despite the hardships they faced. Their child was a precious living thing that had come into their life that made them take more responsibility for themselves and their children. The participants perceived that they were more mature and had the patience to fulfill many roles at the same time, including both the mother and student roles. They aimed to achieve educational and career goals in the future in order to achieve life-long success for themselves and their child. Finally, they accepted who they were and committed to move forward in their life for a better future, as shown in the following statement:

"Although rearing a child and studying at the same time was a hardship, I had to be patient. My child was my everything. She fulfilled my life. I nurtured her with my husband and I saw her development every day. I was tired but I was happy. It made me take more responsibility. I felt I was more mature. I accepted the mistake I made in the past that I became pregnant. However, I thought my life had to move on for a better future." P 17

Two categories of learning to move forward were identified: having more responsibility and accepting and moving on as described below.

1) Having more responsibility

After giving birth, all the participants had two major roles at the same time, which were those of mother and student. Fulfilling both roles

simultaneously made them become more responsible and more patient. They had also learned to manage their time to do a variety of tasks such as nurturing the child, studying and doing homework, and doing housework. The maternal role occurred spontaneously while the student role occurred voluntarily. All the participants felt tired because of doing multiple tasks, but they knew that continuing education could make them achieve long term success. For example:

“The most important thing was that we must increase our responsibility and endurance and these must come together. Some girls couldn’t manage their time but I have to use high endurance to be both a mother and a student. Since we have to do the two roles of studying and nurturing the child at the same time, these involve many more duties when compared with other girls of the same age. That’s why I need to take responsibility and be very patient.” (P1)

Being a mother after childbirth made the participants realize what family life is like. They must have patience and learn to overcome many problems which confront them. After that, they felt that they became more mature. They had to think much more than previously before deciding to do anything. For studying, the participants had adjusted themselves to their non-formal school and the new educational system, which was not too difficult. They were able to reorganize their time to accommodate their many tasks. The quotes below express these meanings:

“I felt that I was growing up. I had to think first and had to reason before doing something. I had to consider everything, such as, where to go, what kind of friends I would take, how to live in society, and how to meet expenses because my kid was still young. In particular, I had to collect money for my kid’s future expenses.” (P15)

“I had to keep adjusting to studying at the non-formal school. The studying was not so hard because most subjects were basic like those I used

to study before at my previous formal school. Before examinations, the teachers would tutor the students and also my friends and I would help each other. For projects, I negotiated with friends to divide up the work, and then I did my own part at home because I had to look after my child as well. My study group was very nice. They understood my status and usually helped me to do assignments. My class had a wide variety of student ages.” (P3)

2) Accepting and moving on

Some participants said their situations as adolescent mothers and students at the same time involved accepting and moving forward. They realized that their school-aged pregnancy was a mistake and inappropriate for them and felt that Thai society would blame them for their mistake. However, they thought that they had the right to fight for themselves and change their life for the better by returning to education after giving birth to their child. Accepting the mistake of an unintended pregnancy while studying was a way of learning to solve problems and to start a new life. It can help adolescent mothers to overcome their situation since they cannot go back and correct past mistakes. Therefore, accepting and moving forward helped the participants to deal with their experience and allowed them to have a good future. Their expressions are shown in the following statements:

“I thought that my life would have to continue. I knew I had made a mistake in the past so I had to come back to start my life again. I had to set a new starting point. When I became pregnant, I had two choices, either getting an abortion or continuing the pregnancy. Finally, I chose to quit school to keep the pregnancy and decided to return to study again after giving birth. I had to accept everything I did...” (P7)

“I thought about this situation in two ways. Firstly, it made me learn about life faster than my friends of the same age. I had to learn to overcome

problems by myself and learn to live with being a mother and a student at the same time. Also, I could not go back to change the past. Even though I had become pregnant, I still had the chance to return to study. It was not too bad. I had to overcome these difficulties and to move forward in my life.” (P9)

The participants accepted the mistake of getting pregnant unintentionally while they were studying. Nevertheless, they proved themselves by setting educational goals to make a better future and wanted to move forward to achieve life-long success. The quote below represented this view:

“I see my life as “never hit a man when he is down “. Although I fell, I am able to stand up on my own. I know I became pregnant while studying but I never stopped studying. I returned to study again after giving birth. My goal for the future is that I will graduate and get a degree in the future. After I get a bachelor’s degree, people will know that I can really do it. After that, I will find a good job.” (P10)

Discussion

The participants explained the meaning of being adolescent mothers who had experience of child-rearing and studying simultaneously, as learning to move forward. They clarified that the meaning of this situation made them learn to adjust to their new roles as mothers and students. This made them more responsible for both themselves and their children. The participants felt they became more mature and also had more patience to fulfill the two roles at the same time. They performed a variety of tasks such as, nurturing their child, doing homework, and doing housework. They finally accepted what they were and they strived to move forward for a better future. The participants wished to gain life-long success by obtaining a degree in order to achieve their career goals. Learning to move forward was categorized into having more responsibility, and

accepting and moving forward. This findings were congruent with previous studies related to adolescent mothers and studying, and showed that motherhood and the responsibility for raising children can inspire adolescent mothers to return to study for future success.⁷⁻⁹ The findings were also consistent with Dole’s study of the meaning of being a mother among African-American teenage mothers, which found the major themes to be building a network, sharing responsibility and seeing the future.¹⁰ In addition, it was similar to a study of experiences of becoming a teenage mother from Thailand that was defined as establishing a new family and providing for their children.¹³ However, these studies were performed on adolescent women who only fulfilled the maternal role.

Being adolescent mothers and raising a child, has been found in previous studies to make teenagers more responsible in their new role.^{10,-12} Similarly, a study about the experience of being adolescent mothers in the central region of Thailand, found the main attitude among young mothers to be wanting to move forward by creating a new family,¹³ and becoming a mother made Thai early adolescents more mature and realize their own value.¹⁴ In addition, Thai adolescent mothers rearing children and studying in non-formal schools have been found to have their own goals in life and to look forward to a better future.¹⁹ Also, they returned to education after childbirth because they wanted to fulfill their life-goals for higher education and better career in the future.²²

On the other hand, a previous study of Jordanian adolescent mothers, found that adolescent motherhood lost opportunities for continued education. Consequently, they felt a lack of personal accomplishment. Furthermore, they felt ambivalent towards a maternal role and empowering oneself to face life’s demands. Adolescent mothers felt uncertain about the desire to have children combined

with awareness of increased responsibility to be a good mother.²³ Meanwhile, adolescent mothers who returned to attend school could not balance their time and energy.⁹ However, the study reported herein is the first to consider the meaning of being adolescent mothers who were rearing a child and studying simultaneously.

Limitation

The finding of this study was limited as it was a part of the study regarding adolescent mothers experience of childrearing and studying in non-formal education.

Conclusion

Adolescent mothers who experienced child rearing and studying simultaneously faced many challenges with the new role of motherhood during studying. However, the child made these women realize their future life in order to broaden their education and their career. This situation made them take more responsibility for their life and child. The participants accepted the roles of being a teenage mother and a student. After that, they found the meaning of being young mothers during studying, as learning to move forward.

Implications for Nursing Practice

The knowledge gained from this study can be used by nursing educators and teachers in non-formal education to support and encourage pregnant adolescents and adolescent mothers after giving birth to remain in or to return to education, in order to improve their prospects of achieving life-long success. In particular, nurses involved in prenatal and postpartum care, and in postpartum follow-up care or conducting home visits are in a position to advise and inspire young mothers to pursue their educational goals.

Participation in article writing

The author has conducted all the process of the study and this manuscript.

Conflict of interests

No conflict of interest in this study.

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