

Teen fathers' perceptions and experiences of fatherhood: A qualitative exploration with in-school teen fathers in a rural district in South Africa.

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Abstract

Background: Teen parenthood is a serious problem in South Africa and sub Saharan Africa. Research demonstrates that boys exposed to risk factors have an increased probability of fathering a child during their teenage years. However, there is paucity of studies on teen fathers relative to research on teen mothers. The aim of the study was to explore teen fathers' perceptions and experiences of fatherhood.

Methods: Twenty-five teenagers who fathered a child between 16-19 years participated in in-depth interviews. Teenagers were selected using purposive sampling from two high schools in a rural district in Limpopo Province, South Africa. NVivo data analysis software was used to facilitate data analysis of verbatim transcripts using thematic data analysis.

Findings: Four themes emerged from the data; (a) reacting to being a teen father, (b) transition to becoming a father, (c) perception of self as a father, and (d) involvement with the child. Fatherhood came as a surprise to teen fathers who reacted with shock, denial, and fear. Their perceptions of good father were limited to a financial provider for the child. Most were transformed by the experience of being a father. They wanted to be good fathers and planned to complete school and get employment. The relationship with the child's mother and lack of financial means to support the child were significant barriers to involvement in the life of their children.

Conclusion: Given the high incidence of teenage pregnancy in South Africa, prevention of teen pregnancy interventions should design appropriate programs for teen fathers to prepare them to transition from teenagers to fatherhood. Healthcare professionals who engage with teen mothers during antenatal and post-natal care could use this opportunity to engage with teen fathers to empower them to cope with fatherhood.

Keywords: Fatherhood roles, Teen father, Teen pregnancy, Perceptions of fatherhood, Reacting to fatherhood, South Africa.

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Introduction

Teen parenthood is a serious problem in South Africa and sub Saharan africa. However, there is a paucity of studies on teen fathers relative to research on teen mothers because the focus of teen parenthood has been on teen mothers with the exclusion of teen fathers [1]. Consequently, little is known about teen fatherhood which is likely to be underreported because unlike teen mothers; they can deny paternity making them less in numbers [2,3]. Nevertheless, research has demonstrated that boys exposed to a number of risk factors have an increased probability of fathering a child during their teenage years [1]. There are many factors

against their favor since most interventions for pregnancy prevention focus on girls and teenage mothers [4,5].

The risk factors associated with teen fatherhood are similar to those associated with teen motherhood [6]. Yet the lives of teen fathers are complicated and filled with a multitude of harsh realities, and their challenges are multi-factorial [1]. Teen fathers face many problems before and after they father a child. According to Chideya and Williams, while coming from low socio-economic background results in becoming teen fathers, it may also lead to their being unable to support their children financially [4]. It is evident that teen fathers tend to complete fewer grades and that

poor educational attainment results in unemployment, which lead to high levels of stress of having to support a child when they do not have work [3,5,7].

The personal needs of teen fathers and the impact of fatherhood on their lives are under-researched as teen fathers are said to be hard to identify, contact, and recruit to participate in research [4,8]. Thus, researchers investigate the role of teen fathers through the eyes of the teen mothers [9]. As a consequence, the lived experiences of teen fathers and their perceptions of fatherhood have not been investigated in-depth which makes them voiceless and invisible [4,10,11]. There are still gaps in knowledge that could be filled through new research on teen fathers [1]. This motivated the researchers to conduct the study to explore teen fathers' perceptions and experiences of fatherhood in a community where teenage pregnancy is very high. The findings will provide important information on an under-explored subpopulation [6]. It is essential that the experiences and perceptions of teen fathers be understood as this knowledge could be used to inform the design of appropriate support programs or measures for teen fathers [4].

Materials and Methods

Study Design

We used an exploratory qualitative design to conduct in-depth interviews with twenty-five teen fathers aged 16-19 years between August and September 2014. We used purposive sampling to select teen fathers from two high schools in a rural district in Limpopo Province, a predominantly rural and low-resourced province in South Africa. We used purposive sampling because only first-time teenagers who had fathered a child in their teens could inform the research objectives. Previous studies had documented the difficulties of recruiting teen fathers for research [4,8]. Since teen boys continue with schooling after impregnating a girl in South Africa, we used the school as a setting for this study. The life orientation teachers assisted with the recruitment of the teen fathers. They provided information on how to recruit the teen fathers but were not involved in any other study activities to ensure confidentiality and voluntary participation on the part of the teen fathers.

Data Collection

The second author, referred to here as the interviewer, conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with the teen fathers [12]. All grade 10-12 boy learners attended a session where the interviewer explained the purpose of the study and the eligibility criteria. To protect the identity of the teen fathers, the interviewer explained that those who were willing to participate could stay behind to meet with the interviewer or to leave their contact details with their class teachers and the interviewer will contact them privately. However, all those who were willing to participate in the study stayed behind as a group to get further clarity on

the study. The interviewer used this meeting to schedule interviews with each potential participant. The teen fathers were informed that participation is voluntary and that they could withdraw, if they wished to do so, at any time during the interview without any penalties.

All interviews were conducted after school during self-directed study periods in one of the classrooms. The interviewer opted for individual in-depth interviews to afford the teen fathers private space and enable them to share their personal experiences of fatherhood in an open and non-judgmental environment. The interviewer used the local language, Xitsonga to explore their initial reaction to becoming a father, perceptions of self as a father, the effect of being a teen father, and their involvement in the life of the child. Before the interview, the interviewer explained the informed consent process to the teen fathers and asked them to provide written consent. All teen fathers were 18 years old and above at the time of the interview even though they fathered a child at between 15-19 years, therefore, they signed their informed consent. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were audio-recorded with permission from the teen fathers. To preserve anonymity, the teen fathers used a pseudonym of their choice; these names are used in the presentation of the study findings. The teen fathers received a token (ZAR, R20.00) to buy a soft drink and fruit.

Data Analysis

NVivo qualitative data management software was used to facilitate data analysis using thematic approach. The first step of the thematic analysis was a thorough reading of the verbatim transcripts repeatedly to familiarize with the data and to identify the initial emerging codes. After repeated readings of the transcripts, the authors developed a codebook from the initial codes that emerged from the data. The codebook was developed following several scheduled meetings of the authors to reach consensus on the definition of codes and emerging themes. The final step in the coding was the identification and definition of themes. The findings are presented using themes and quotations that reflect the views of the teen fathers.

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to accuracy of the interpretation of the findings. In this study, trustworthiness was established through conducting the study using the language of the teen fathers by an interviewer who shared the same cultural beliefs and experiences of the teen fathers. The verbatim transcription of the transcripts ensured that the responses of the teen fathers closely represented their experiences and beliefs. In addition, both authors conducted data analysis to ensure appropriate data analysis to reduce interpretation bias [12].

Ethical Consideration

Medunsa Campus Research and Ethics Committee (MREC) of the University of Limpopo approved the study protocol. Permissions to conduct the study from

the selected schools were obtained from the Provincial Department of Education and the School Principals. Teen fathers provided a written informed consent.

Findings

Description of Teen Fathers

We interviewed 25 teen fathers aged 18 years old and above. The mean age of the teen fathers was 19 years with the eldest being 24 years old; only 9 out of 25 teen fathers were below the age of 20 years. The school leaving age is 18 years in South Africa, but only 5 out of 25 teen fathers were 18 years old during the interviews, the rest were behind in grades because of having failed a grade or grades. The median age of fathering a child was 17 years and the youngest age of fathering a child was 15 years. All teen fathers were between the tenth and twelfth grades, with the majority in the eleventh grade (Table 1).

Themes

Data analysis resulted in four major themes regarding fatherhood: reacting to being a teen father, transition to becoming a father, perceptions of self as a father, and involvement with the child.

Reacting to being a Teen Father

Most of the teen fathers learned about the pregnancy from their girlfriends, but a few learned about the pregnancy when the pregnant girlfriend was brought to the boy's home in keeping with the community cultural practices. The news of the pregnancy evoked intense emotions for the teen fathers such as shock, fear, disbelief, denial, and confusion.

It was shocking and scary at the same time because it was something unintended (MJ; fathered a child at 17 years).

I was very scared because it was a mistake. The thing that scared me the most was that I was still at school..., how was I going to tell my parents? (Tsemaboy; fathered a child at 19 years).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of teen father

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Current grade		
Grade 10	10	40
Grade 11	12	48
Grade 12	3	12
Age when teenager fathered a child		
15 years	01	4
16 years	01	4
17 years	09	36
18 years	07	28
19 years	07	28
Relationship status with the child's mother		
In a relationship	13	52
Not in a relationship	12	48

Some reported that they had challenges of accepting being teen father after the girlfriend told them about the pregnancy.

I did not believe her at first because she was still very young and a bit childish, so, I thought she was playing. So..., we went to the doctor to confirm the pregnancy (HT; fathered a child at 16 years).

I did not believe..., one month passed and after the second month, I could see that she was indeed pregnant and I accepted it because what was done was done (Nyiko; fathered a child at 18 years).

For most teen fathers, acceptance came after their parents were notified about the pregnancy either by the teen fathers or by the girl's parents.

When they brought this girl to my mother's house, I wanted to do the runaround but at home they knew her so there was no way I could deny that the child was mine (GTS; fathered a child at 15 years).

Denial for some of the teen fathers resulted in considerations for abortion. One teen father raised the issue of terminating the pregnancy as reflected in the statement.

I did not feel good about the pregnancy at all and I asked her to have an abortion but she would not have an abortion (Nyiko; fathered a child at 18 years).

Transition to becoming a Father

The teen fathers reported personal changes that were brought about by becoming a father. For some, the thought of becoming a father forced them to change their behaviour and lifestyle for the better.

I used to be a sissy boy; I would not even make my bed or wash the car at home. Now, I have learned that even if your parents take care of you, you also need to make something of yourself (Kevin; fathered a child at 17 years).

Ahh..., it changed my life..., now I take care of myself because there is someone looking up to me [child]. Because if I do not care for my life, I will die and leave him behind (Forward; fathered a child at 19 years).

The transition from boy to father influenced how teen fathers perceived themselves. The experience of becoming fathers made them recognized that they needed to complete school in order to become better fathers. They reflected on the sort of fathers they wanted to be and started to make necessary changes in their lives.

I thought that when I start working before I could even enjoy my money; I must start saving for the child. I thought I would first do something for my mother when I start working but now it is my child first (Tsila; fathered a child at 17 years).

Perceptions of self as a Father

In describing the characteristics of a good father, the teen fathers believed that good fathers provide financial support

for their children. They associated the provider role of fatherhood with the ability to provide for the material needs of the children. For the teen fathers, the ability to provide economically took precedence over the emotional and physical relations fathers should have with their child. This is a reflection of how they perceive themselves as fathers.

I am a very good father, the little money that I make through my part time job; the first thing I think of is my child. I buy things for him before I buy for myself (Floyd; fathered a child at 17 years).

So far I see myself as a good father because in my life, in everything that I do, I think of my child. I always think of him when I make plans (Kulani; fathered a child at 18 years).

On the other hand, teen fathers who could not provide financially for their children believed that they were not good fathers. The findings suggest that the perceptions of the father as a provider influence what they think fatherhood entails and use that to measure their ability to be a good father. They believed that they would be good fathers to their children once they get employment.

I do not see myself as a good father because I am supposed to be there and take care of her [child]. I do not even take money to her [child] (Forward; fathered a child at 19 years).

I do not see myself as a good father because I am not working and I am unable to buy things for him [child]. Once I have my own things, I believe I will be a good father (Smaz; fathered a child at 17 years).

Involvement with the Child

For most of the teen fathers, involvement with the child meant providing the material needs of the child, spending time with the child, and feeding the child. Since none of the teen fathers were residing with their children, these nurturing roles were not performed, since their involvement with their children was limited to financial support.

I make follow up about the child every month, like if she is sick. It is as if I am staying with her even if I am not. I make sure that her health is good. I take responsibility just like how my parents are looking after me (Kevin; fathered a child at 17 years).

I try where I can to buy clothes for him. I do not change or feed him..., but sometimes I do spend time with him (Floyd; fathered a child at 17 years).

I buy nappies and things like snacks with the money I make in my part-time job at the car wash (Zeze; fathered a child at 19 years).

Some of the teen fathers were not involved in the child's life because of various barriers that prevented them from doing so.

Eh..., I do support my child but it is hard to spend time with her since me and the mother have quarrels (Paseka; fathered a child at 19 years).

The first thing is that I am not working..., so, I cannot go empty handed to see the child. I am ashamed because since the child was born, I never bought him anything and he will be turning two years soon (Forward; fathered a child at 19 years).

I feel bad that I cannot spend time with my child, as I do not have the time because of school. During school holidays, I spend time at the place where I work part-time (Vusi; fathered a child at 19 years).

Discussion

The study explored the perceptions of teen fathers about fatherhood and their experiences of being teen fathers. The teen fathers were still attending school since most became fathers at the age of 17 years. Over half (13 out of 25) reported being in a romantic relationship with their child's mother, while for some, the relationship with the child's mother was friendly or strenuous and hostile. Fatherhood came as a surprise to the teen fathers and they reacted to the news of the pregnancy with shock, denial, and fear. The reactions suggest that they were ignorant of the consequences of unprotected sex and they did not link their actions of engaging in unprotected sex to the risk of making a girl pregnant. Shock and fear were common reactions to news of teen fatherhood in other studies conducted in South Africa and the USA [10,13].

Fear was the most common reaction reported by the teen fathers; they feared the reaction of their parents to the news of the pregnancy. Moreover, they were anxious about their incapability to provide for their children because they were young, at school, and unemployed. They were fretful because they were still dependent on their own parents for financial support. Similar findings were reported in studies conducted with urban teen fathers in South Africa [4,10,14]. In addition, Paschal and colleagues reported that African American teen fathers expressed feeling overwhelmed by the idea of being a parent and did not know how to manage adult expectations of fatherhood [6]. Teen fathers in the current study had difficulty in accepting that they were going to be fathers, for some, the first reaction was denial even though they had sexual encounter with the girl. They could not believe that the pregnancy had occurred and that they were responsible for it. Njambatwa [5] argue that the reality of having to be responsible for a new life is unpleasant for teen fathers who are still at school and financially dependent on their parents.

Affirming the results of previous research in South Africa, most teen fathers desired to be good fathers and tried to fulfil their perceived fatherhood roles [4,5,10,14]. In contrast, Paschal et al [6] reported great diversity in how African American teen fathers perceived fatherhood and

how they performed in this role. While the majority cared for their children, some teen fathers rejected the father role and took no responsibility in parenting their children. Teen fathers in the current study, similar to what has been reported in other studies, perceived fatherhood in the sense of providing financially for the child [4,6,8,10].

According to Chideya et al [4] teen fathers in the African context and many other societies grow up in a patriarchal society which emphasises and socialises them on the importance of the provider role in fatherhood. In most societies, fathers assume fatherhood roles based on cultural or societal norms, and the role of a father being a provider is central in many cultures [5,7]. It was unfortunate that the need for financial provision among teen fathers overshadowed other important fatherhood roles such as quality contact time with the child as well as emotional bonding. Being able to provide for the child was viewed as a symbol of being a good father by teen fathers and failure to do so resulted in shame and guilt [4].

Most of the teen fathers were not actively involved in the nurturing of the child even though more than half were still in a romantic relationship with the child's mother. Living apart hampered their involvement in the day-to-day activities of their children. Furthermore, lack of money, schoolwork, and the relationship with the mother of the child were the main barriers to their involvement with the child. The relationship with the child's mother and the perceived provider role greatly influenced the involvement of the teen father with the child. Research has shown that when the teen father is unable to meet the expectations of the mother of the child, she would deny him access to see the child [2,5,8,10]. Similar findings were reported in previous studies [8]. When external factors prevented the teen fathers to provide for the child financially, they withdrew from attempting to see the child or they would be denied access to see the child by the child's mother [4,6,8,11,15].

Previous studies have demonstrated that early fatherhood affect the school performance of teen fathers in a negative way. Instead of thinking of studies, they think and focus on their responsibilities as fathers and often have to find part-time jobs to provide for the child [5,10]. Our findings showed a similar pattern, we found that the teen fathers' grades dropped when they initially learned about the pregnancy as a result they were behind in grades. As mentioned, the school leaving age in South Africa is 18 years, but only five teen fathers were 18 years old during the interviews, the rest were behind in grades because of having failed a grade or grades. However, because becoming a father made most of them to be determined to complete school and make something good of their lives, their school performance improved. They felt that education would assist them in being better fathers and they wanted to use education to create a good future for themselves and their children. Our findings support the views of Lemay et al [8] who argued that becoming a

father is a motivator for the teen fathers to want to improve themselves through education.

Previous studies indicated that teen fatherhood could impact both positively and negatively on the behaviour of the teen fathers. In a study conducted among African American teen fathers, fatherhood was described as a life-changing event, as they traversed a range of negative behaviors to become actively involved fathers [11]. Most teen fathers in the current study were positively transformed by the experience of being fathers. Becoming a father motivated them to want to improve themselves [8]. They also wanted to be positive role models to their children. The findings are consistent with those reported in earlier studies; Paschal et al [6] reported that many teen fathers provided or attempted to provide support to the mothers of their children despite being economically poor [6,8]. Chideya et al [4] found that becoming a father resulted in the teen fathers changing their behaviour for the sake of their child. It is notable that teenagers in poor rural settings experienced fatherhood in similar manner like teen fathers in well-developed countries. Maiden [11] found that fatherhood transformed African American teen fathers who were motivated to work harder as individuals.

As reported in previous studies, to fulfil the provider role of fatherhood, teen fathers sought part-time jobs to generate income to provide for their children [4,6,8,10]. It should be noted that all the teen fathers in the current study continued with schooling during the pregnancy and after becoming fathers. Chideya et al [4] suggested that fatherhood make teen fathers realise that their lives are no longer their own and that they are accountable for the care of their children, hence the endeavour to find part-time jobs to earn an income to provide for their children. Since the teen fathers depended on their parents financially, they saved the allowance they received from their parents to provide for their children [14]. The desire to contribute financially to the care of their children was in line with their belief of a father as a provider.

Conclusion

We found that although fatherhood evoked negative emotions, most teen fathers were positively transformed by the experience of being fathers. Their perceptions of a good father were limited to being a financial provider for the child with the exclusion of other fatherhood roles such as quality contact time with the child. The relationship with the child's mother and lack of financial means were significant barriers to their involvement in the life of their children. Most believed that they were not good fathers because they could not play the role of provider. However, most of the teen fathers were transformed to be good, caring, and loving fathers despite their challenges to meet the financial needs of their children. Even though external factors prevented them to be fully involved, they were motivated to be good fathers and planned to attain good education and employment to provide for their children.

Given the high incidence of teen parenting in South Africa, particularly in rural communities, prevention of teen pregnancy programs should also focus on teen fathers to prepare them to transition from teenagers to fatherhood. Since teen fathers understood that educational attainment would assist them in being better fathers, programs should assist them to complete school to get employment opportunities and fulfil their self-identified role of fatherhood. This will have a positive impact on their children, contributes to the social-emotional development of the child, and benefit the teen fathers to be role models to their children.

Furthermore, teen fathers expressed the desire to being a positive role model of their children. Therefore, there is a need for interventions or strategies to reach out to teen fathers and facilitate these changes to improve the outcomes of teen fatherhood. Health care professionals in primary health facilities are in a good position to do so as they engage with teen mothers during antenatal and post-natal care. They could use this opportunity to engage with teen fathers to empower them to cope with the expectations of the fatherhood role.

Limitations

The main limitation of the study is the small sample size which was limited to two schools in a rural setting. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized across all teen fathers in South Africa. Nevertheless, the study findings provide a basis upon which research with larger samples can further investigate experiences of teen fathers in different settings in South Africa.

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