TEENAGE FATHERS' PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES: SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC IMPACT OF EARLY PARENTHOOD IN ESWATINI

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Abstract
Despite rising teenage pregnancy rates affecting both boys and girls, most interventions focus exclusively on girls while the voices of boys remain unheard. This study delves into the perceptions of adolescent males who became fathers while enrolled in secondary school in the Manzini Region, Eswatini. Through interviews, the research explores the impacts of teenage pregnancy on their social and academic lives, identifies factors contributing to their actions and seeks solutions from their perspective. This study employed a descriptive research design through a qualitative approach. 'Twenty adolescent males from secondary schools in the Manzini Region were purposively selected using convenience sampling. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to generate data. Framework analysis was used to analyse data. Findings reveal peer pressure, alcohol, lack of parental guidance and exposure to pornography as key drivers behind teenage pregnancy. The study further highlights the unintended consequences faced by boys, including school dropouts, parental disapproval, stress, depression, academic decline and regret. Recommendations advocate for government initiatives, such as training teachers on comprehensive sex education and providing funding for extracurricular activities like sports, to empower teenagers and prevent future pregnancies.

Keywords: *teenage fathers, fatherhood, teenage pregnancy, family, social isolation*

Introduction

Teenage pregnancy remains a tenacious and pressing issue across Eswatini and its neighbouring countries, casting a long shadow on the futures of young girls and their communities**.** Despite dedicated interventions since 2007, the adolescent birth rate remains stubbornly high at 87 per 1,000 girls, with only a minor dip from 89 per 1,000 in 2010 (Risenga & Mboweni, 2022). This stagnation underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the complex factors fuelling early pregnancies. With over 16 million girls between 15 and 19 becoming pregnant globally, teenage fathers contribute significantly to this statistic. While solutions often focus solely on teenage mothers, researchers like Payne (2019) and Uengwongsapat et al. (2018) call for a broader perspective, emphasizing the need to understand and address the challenges faced by teenage fathers as well. Young fathers, teenage fathers included, in Eswatini are normally perceived as non-supportive, absent fathers and womanizers. These fathers are sometimes denied access to their children due to cultural norms and societal expectations; teenage fathers often find themselves in a precarious position. As Ngema (2013) highlights, practices like paying damages to the female's family can create an insurmountable barrier for fathers, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This lack of access and or law demanding shared parental responsibility, can lead to diminished father-child relationships and detrimental consequences for both. In some cases, desperation drives teenage fathers to engage in harmful behaviours like substance abuse or even criminal activities to fulfil these societal demands and gain access to their children (Lobaka, 2017).

Studies in Eswatini detail how teenage mothers and their families are burdened to raise the baby while the teenage father and his family deny responsibility and or financial support. This has led to many teenage mothers leaving school while teenage fathers continue with their education. However, this

does not suggest that teenage fathers easily escape the hardship of raising a child. The challenges faced by young fathers extend far beyond financial constraints. Alampay (2014) emphasizes that teenage pregnancy frequently leads to school dropout and significant psychological distress, jeopardizing the future opportunities of young girls. Furthermore, Makhanya and Matthias (2018) point to the lack of attention given to the difficulties faced by unmarried fathers, whose cultural and familial expectations often hinder their involvement in their children's lives. Okeke et al. (2020) echo this sentiment, emphasizing how cultural norms and rituals can act as gatekeepers, further marginalizing fathers and exacerbating existing inequalities.

Literature Review

This study serves as a crucial step towards raising awareness about the challenges faced by young fathers in Eswatini communities. By illuminating the diverse range of psychosocial and economic hurdles they encounter, this research seeks to inform policy decisions, community interventions, and support systems that can empower teenage fathers to fulfil their parental roles effectively. Ultimately, recognizing and addressing the needs of young fathers is not only essential for individual well-being but also for fostering stronger families and more equitable communities. **Teenage pregnancy remains** a persistent global challenge, casting a long shadow on girls' education, health, and overall well-being. Despite numerous intervention strategies and research efforts (Matjila & Wilson, 2021), many countries, including Eswatini, continue to grapple with high rates of teenage pregnancy. While research has shed light on various aspects of teenage pregnancy, particularly focusing on girls, a critical gap exists in understanding the role of boys in this complex issue. Former Minister of Health Sibongile Ndlela Simelane's statement highlighting the increasing prevalence of teenage pregnancy in Eswatini, with girls as young as 12 giving birth (Swazi Observer, 2018), underscores the urgency of addressing this gap.

Current interventions, despite commendable strides made by the government (Okeke et al., 2020) often overlook the involvement of boys. This lack of focus on boys as partners and potential fathers limits the effectiveness of existing interventions and hinders a comprehensive understanding of the factors driving teenage pregnancy. Therefore, this study aims to explore boys' experiences, attitudes and behaviours concerning sexual relationships, contraception and fatherhood in order to gain deeper insight into their perspectives on teenage pregnancy in Eswatini. By understanding these dynamics, the research seeks to inform more effective interventions and policies that address the needs of both girls and boys, thereby helping to reduce the country's high teenage pregnancy rates. Particular attention was given to the social and academic impacts of teenage pregnancy on boys and the consequences of early fatherhood, with a view to improving support systems for young fathers.

Fatherhood can be a fulfilling journey, but it also presents numerous challenges for young fathers. This section delves into the psychosocial and economic hurdles they face, along with the influence of cultural norms on fatherhood and its potential link to criminality. Studies conducted outside the context of Africa points out that fathers also have challenges that emanate from pregnancies with which they are responsible. These challenges concern parental involvement, economic challenges, cultural influence, and criminality and fatherhood. Paternal involvement and attachment: Fathers, like mothers, play crucial roles in shaping a child's development and well-being. Studies by Kruk (2010) and Alampay (2014) highlight the positive impact of fatherly involvement on children's emotional, social, and intellectual development. However, societal expectations and legal barriers can limit young fathers' involvement, leading to strained father-child bonds and negative emotional consequences for both. Alampay (2014) points out that restricted access due to financial constraints or lack of formal relationships with the child's mother can exacerbate these issues. Furthermore, negative messaging

from mothers or others can fuel children's resentment towards their fathers, further harming the relationship.

Economic Challenges: the legacy of historical injustices and economic disparities in various societies, as discussed by Payne (2019), contributes to the difficulties faced by many young fathers. Seepamore (2016) notes that the prevalence of single-mother households in South Africa, reflects the historical and economic pressures that have pushed fathers to the margins. Meintjes et al. (2015) attribute this to factors like population control, poverty, and migration, which forced fathers to seek employment opportunities away from their families. This physical separation, coupled with the societal expectation of fathers as primary financial providers, has created disconnect between many young fathers and their children. Furthermore, Lesch and Kelapile (2016) emphasize the detrimental impact of unemployment on father-child relationships, often leading to negative perceptions of fathers as incompetent or incapable.

Cultural Influence: cultural norms and traditions can both empower and constrain fatherhood. Lobaka (2017) points out how cultural practices can be used to justify excluding men from their parental roles, leading to social and emotional harm for both fathers and children. Okeke et al. (2020) further argues that denying fathers access to their children fosters single-mother families, which can contribute to stress, broken social bonds, and increased vulnerability to crime. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that not all cultural practices hinder fatherhood. Some cultures celebrate and encourage the active participation of fathers in their children's lives.

Criminality and Fatherhood: the relationship between fatherhood and criminality is complex and multifaceted. While some studies, like Makhanya and Matthias (2018), suggest that a father's presence can deter boys from criminal activity, others highlight the potential for economic hardship and social exclusion to push young fathers towards criminal activities to fulfil their paternal responsibilities. This underscores the need for holistic approaches that address the underlying social and economic issues that contribute to both fatherhood challenges and criminal behaviour. Young fathers face a unique set of challenges on their journey of fatherhood. Understanding the psychosocial, economic, and cultural factors that shape their experiences is vital for developing effective support systems and policies that empower them to fulfil their parental roles and contribute positively to their children's lives. By addressing these challenges, we can create a society where fatherhood is embraced and supported, leading to stronger families and more resilient communities.

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is one of the most accepted explanations regarding the influence of social environments on human development. This theory argues that the environment one grows up in affects every facet of his/her life. Social factors determine the way of thinking, the emotions one feels, and the likes and dislikes. Environmental shifts frequently precipitate significant psychological and behavioral transformations. For instance, relocating to a foreign country with a distinct cultural framework inevitably alters an individual's identity. Similarly, modifications to a person's social role within any of the five ecological systems can lead to comparable identity shifts. Bronfenbrenner's theory explains the influence of systems in which a developing child is directly involved (e.g., teacher training) and those that have influence but do not involve anyone in the child's immediate environment (e.g., public health policy changes, cultural changes (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In the context of teenage fathers, Bronfenbrenner's theory explains their active role in the process, context, and timing of their experience (Antony, 2022). Fatherhood brings with it a positive perception of caring for and supporting the children, along with underlying new commitments to the child. This aspect suggests that fathers perceive positively the concern to supply the needs of their children in the upbringing and care process (Kiralp & Ummanel, 2023) they experience anxiety, insecurities, significant changes in their routines, physical and social isolation at the same time high parental stress. Furthermore, fathers' involvement in leisure activities, daily counselling, and college counselling, as

well as their warm, receptive, and rejecting, restrictive parenting behaviours were found to be significant variables affecting child happiness (Ildefonso, Bregabriel, Samillano, Hallagomesa & Yap, 2022).

Methodology

This study delves into the often-uncharted territory of teenage boys' experiences with pregnancy through a descriptive, qualitative approach. Descriptive research, as Olmos-Vega et al, (2023) defined it, aims to meticulously paint a picture of a specific group, situation, or phenomenon, unravelling its key characteristics and facts. This methodology allows for a deep exploration of the topic at hand, generating rich and nuanced data while providing flexibility to adapt to unforeseen themes. However, potential biases due to non-random sampling and challenges in generalizing findings to larger populations are inherent limitations.

The target population for this study comprised teenage fathers attending secondary schools within the Manzini region of Eswatini. A sample size of 20 participants was selected to facilitate a profound and nuanced understanding of the lived experiences within this specific demographic. Rather than employing a random selection process, the study utilized purposive sampling, a non-probability technique where participants are intentionally selected based on their specific characteristics and relevance to the research phenomena. While this method ensures that the sample is information-rich and directly addresses the study's objectives, it is important to acknowledge that it may limit the generalizability of the findings compared to probability-based methods. The selection of 20 participants was guided by the principle of data saturation, which occurs when no new thematic insights are derived from additional interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Given the high specificity of the target population—teenage fathers within a localized educational context—this sample size provides sufficient information power to capture the complexity of their experiences while maintaining the depth required for rigorous qualitative analysis (Malterud et al., 2016). Furthermore, a sample of 20 aligns with established methodological guidelines for qualitative inquiry that prioritize 'information-rich' cases over statistical breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A semi-structured interview guide, meticulously crafted with open-ended questions, served as the primary tool for data collection. These questions aimed to elicit detailed and insightful responses from participants, allowing them to freely share their experiences with pregnancy. Ensuring the trustworthiness of the findings was paramount in this study. Four key strategies were employed: Credibility: to guarantee alignment with the study's objectives, the research questions and interview guide underwent thorough review by experienced teachers. Transferability: thick descriptions were incorporated into the findings, providing context and enabling readers to assess the applicability of the results to other settings. Dependability: an audit trail was meticulously maintained to track the research process and data analysis, while data triangulation was achieved through the utilization of multiple sources, including interviews and focus groups. And, confirmability: the audit trail also served to establish confirmability, and the researcher openly acknowledged potential personal biases and the methods implemented to mitigate their influence throughout the study.

Two primary methods were used to generate data for this study: Individual interviews in form of semi-structured questions were conducted with participants to obtain in-depth accounts of their experiences. Secondly, focus groups were employed where discussions within small groups of participants, facilitated by focus groups, fostered broader perspectives and rich data generation.

Informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality were cornerstones of the ethical framework for this study. Participants were provided with a clear explanation of the research, empowered to ask questions, and assured of the voluntary and confidential nature of their participation. Framework

analysis, a rigorous method involving data familiarization, theme identification, data segment indexing, theme charting, and, ultimately, interpretation of findings, was employed to analyse the interview data.

Findings and Discussions

Social and Academic Impact of Teenage Pregnancy on Boys

Teenage pregnancy significantly alters a boy's life, particularly in the social and academic spheres. This was evident in interviews conducted during the study, with the effects grouped into several thematic categories:

Declining Academic Performance

Discovering the pregnancy triggered profound stress, impacting the boys' academic performance. Concentration waned, hindering their ability to grasp concepts taught in class. Psychological strain further affected their motivation to study, leading some to drop out, believing their prospects were bleak. "*When she told me she was pregnant, my mind just went blank. I would sit in class and look at the teacher, but I wasn't hearing anything. The words just wouldn't stick anymore because I was only thinking about what was coming*" [Teen father 15]. Others sought part-time jobs to support their expectant or newborn babies. The burden of informing parents added to their stress, often resulting in failing grades. *"I knew my parents would be disappointed. That guilt made it impossible to sleep or do my schoolwork. My grades just dropped because I was living in constant fear of their reaction."* [Teen father 5].

Research by Bernstein et al. (2008) supports this connection between stress and academic performance. They define stress as any event or circumstance that disrupts daily functioning and necessitates adjustments. Students encountering such situations inevitably experience negative academic repercussions. Similarly, Wilton and Ross (2017) identified specific sources of stress for students, including financial challenges, family responsibilities, balancing work and school and heavy academic workloads. This study's findings corroborate these sources, as the boys' need for part-time jobs to provide for their children exacerbated their stress and compromised their focus, leading to academic decline. Additionally, Darabi, Macaskill and Reidy (2017) emphasises the multifaceted impact of stress on students, affecting them academically, socially, physically, and emotionally.

Goher and Batool (2022) further elucidate how stress hinders academic performance by causing poor concentration. This study confirmed this, with many boys finding it difficult to focus in school, leading to failing grades. Furthermore, Smith (2013) indicates that stress decreases student productivity and output. Our findings aligned with this, showing how the boys' stress prevented them from giving their best effort on assignments, resulting in poor results. They lacked motivation to study, often neglecting assignments or completing them hastily and inaccurately. Additionally, they prioritized other tasks over exam preparation, leading to further performance decline.

Concentration is critical for academic success, and inadequate reading habits or plans can negatively impact it. Banerjee (2016) supports this, concluding that insufficient exam preparation, often stemming from poor concentration and ineffective reading habits, significantly affects student performance. Yadusky, Kheang and Hoggan (2021) further corroborate this, highlighting academic under-preparedness as a key factor in student failure. In this study, the boys' inability to focus and prepare for exams due to the constant presence of the pregnancy issue contributed significantly to their poor academic performance.

Lacking money to support babies

The unexpected pregnancies experienced by these teenage boys were profoundly demoralizing. Beyond the immediate shock of fatherhood, the looming reality of financial responsibility weighed heavily upon them. *"I felt so ashamed. I was supposed to be the 'smart one' in the family, but then this happened. It's hard to hold your head up in the corridors when everyone knows you've messed up your life before it even started"* [Teen father 1]. Still confined to the academic environment of school, their primary source of support remained their parents. Adding another dependent to an already resource-strapped family amplified the existing financial strain. *"I am still eating my mother's food and sleeping under her roof. How am I supposed to bring another mouth to her table when I know she is already struggling to pay my own school fees?"* [Teen father 10].

The boys readily acknowledged the substantial monetary requirements of raising a child. They grasped the ideal of establishing financial stability prior to parenthood, recognizing the challenges it posed within the current context. This understanding resonates with Donald, Davidson, Murphy, Hadley, Puthussery and Randhawa (2022) observation that teen fathers from disadvantaged backgrounds often struggle to financially support their children. Moreover, limited educational attainment, a frequent consequence of early fatherhood, often translates into unemployment, perpetuating the cycle of financial hardship. Our findings reinforce this notion, highlighting the intense stress experienced by these young fathers, particularly those facing additional limitations due to lower socioeconomic status. The uncertainty surrounding their ability to provide for their children compounded the existing burden, especially for those already reliant on parental support.

Similarly, Alazzawi and Hlasny (2022) identified economic vulnerability and employment challenges as prevalent among young fathers. This aligns with the pronounced financial anxieties expressed by the boys in our study. Some lacked financial security even within their own families, further emphasizing their awareness of the ideal timing for parenthood – established adulthood with financial stability – and highlighting the immense personal burden associated with becoming fathers as teenagers. *"Every time I looked at her stomach, all I saw was dollar signs I didn't have. Diapers, milk, clinic fees—it's like a mountain of debt is waiting for me and I'm still just a student with empty pockets"* [Teen father 4].

Parents minimizing/ withdrawing support.

The arrival of a child significantly altered the lives of these boys, often leading to a swift decrease or complete withdrawal of parental financial support. Awareness of the pregnancy prompted some parents to reduce or eliminate monthly allowances, forcing the boys to seek menial part-time jobs for necessities like toiletries and clothing. This financial hardship even resulted in school dropouts for some individuals due to unaddressed tuition fees. Despite this withdrawal of support for the fathers themselves, most parents did provide for the newborns, alleviating some financial strain. *"My parents said they wouldn't waste money on a boy who doesn't respect himself. They stopped buying me new clothes or giving me lunch money. It was their way of showing me that I had failed them"* [Teen father 6].

Donald et al. (2022) suggests that fatherhood forces teenagers to confront the loss of independence and embrace responsibility for their children. This aligns with the observed eagerness of these boys to find jobs and contribute financially, often utilizing previous parental allowances for this purpose. Their desire to contribute stemmed from their internalized concept of a father as a provider, even in the absence of formal employment.

Lot of regrets

The unexpected pregnancies triggered profound regret among the boys, extending far beyond the immediate academic consequences. Failing a class was a tangible consequence, but it paled in comparison to the shattered sense of potential. They grappled with the knowledge that, had it not been for the pregnancies, even average students could have progressed. This deep regret stemmed from the boys' aspirations, shared by many teenagers, of completing school and pursuing higher education. *"Every time I see my old school uniform, I feel a sharp pain in my chest. I didn't want to just 'get by'—I wanted to be someone important, like a lawyer or a teacher. Now, that dream feels like a lie I told myself. I regret it so much because I know that without this, I would have made it"* [Teen teacher 7]. These dreams were abruptly cut short by the financial and social realities of early parenthood. No longer able to rely on parental support for school fees, many were forced to drop out and seek menial jobs to afford necessities for their children. This stark contrast between their imagined futures and the harsh realities of their present fuelled a sense of bitterness and despair. Even those who secured part-time work felt trapped in roles far removed from their dreams of well-paying office jobs. The regret of impregnating while still in school ran deep, a constant reminder of unfulfilled potential. "*Even though I'm working and bringing home a little money for the baby's milk, I feel like I'm in a cage. This job is a dead end, but I can't leave because the baby has to eat. Every morning when I walk past the school gate to go to work, I realize that I'm just a reminder of what happens when you throw your future away"* [Teen teacher 6].

Regret, as Roese et al. (2019) define it, is a negative emotion intertwined with self-blame, where individuals chastise themselves for not acting differently to achieve a desired outcome. General feelings of regret have been linked to depression and anxiety (Roese et al., 2019), and specifically, regret about pregnancy has been associated with maternal distress and depression. The findings of this study resonate with these existing research findings. The teenage fathers expressed overwhelming regret, constantly blaming themselves for the consequences of their actions. Their deep longing for consistent condom use amplified their remorse. This regret intensified with time, compounding the stress about their future and negatively impacting their mental health, leading to depression and academic difficulties.

Namerow, Kalmuss and Cushman (2021) highlight the intricate relationship between teenagers' mental health, parenting experiences, and their subsequent feelings of regret regarding parenthood. This aligns with the study's findings, as the boys' immense stress associated with parenthood fuelled their regret about having children at such a young age. Kumar et al (2018) documented a steady increase in emotional distress and parenting difficulties experienced by teenagers during the first year after childbirth. This aligns with the study's conclusion that the boys' feelings of regret about parenthood would likely intensify, further jeopardizing their mental health. The emotional burden and practical challenges of providing for their children, especially for those who struggled academically, compounded their regret and contributed to their mental health decline, even leading to class failure and repeating the year.

The Burden of Early Fatherhood

Supporting a child while still attending school proved an insurmountable task for these boys, who were already financially reliant on their parents. Becoming a father during their student years represented a major deviation from their anticipated life path, unleashing a cascade of interconnected challenges. *"It's like trying to walk two different paths at the exact same time. How can I be a student studying for a future when I am a father who needs money right now? My parents only have enough for me, not for a baby. You end up failing at both because you just can't carry two worlds on one set of shoulders"* [Teen father 11]. Finding suitable part-time work in eSwatini was difficult, leaving them with exhausting, low-paying jobs that drained their energy. By the time they returned home, sleep replaced studying, leading to academic failures and dropouts. The sheer burden of schoolwork, child support, girlfriend demands, family disapproval, and financial stress became overwhelming. This burden was

even more acute for boys from impoverished backgrounds, who faced a constant struggle to balance education and child support, eventually forcing some to drop out for financial relief.

These findings align with Hans and White (2019) who argue that teenage parenthood creates significant economic and social disadvantages. Young fathers are less likely to graduate high school or attend college, hindering their access to adequate employment and leading to a lower standard of living and increased reliance on public assistance. Similarly, the boys in this study experienced significant academic disruption, with some failing grades and others resorting to dropping out for financial reasons. These outcomes shattered their dreams of higher education and stable employment, leaving them trapped in a cycle of unemployment and poverty.

Namerow, Kalmuss and Cushman (2021) further emphasises the potential for incomplete education, unemployment, and emotional trauma associated with teenage pregnancy. This resonates with the study's findings, as the boys who were unable to re-enter school due to their early fatherhood are now unemployed, lacking the qualifications necessary for secure employment.

Social Isolation and Its Perils

The immense stress borne by these boys significantly impacted their social lives. They gravitated towards isolation, shunning their former social circles. Some friends mockingly labelled them "fathers," inflicting emotional wounds that severed friendships. *"I stopped going to the soccer field and hanging out at the shops. I just felt like I didn't belong with the other boys anymore. They were talking about girls and fun, but I was carrying a secret that made me feel like an old man. It was easier to just stay in my room than to pretend I was still one of them"* [Teen father 6]. Others offered detrimental advice, urging pregnancy denial or girlfriend abandonment, further amplifying the distress. Consequently, solitude seemed preferable to the negativity emanating from such "friends." *"Some of my friends told me I was a fool to admit it. They said, 'Just tell her it's not yours and block her number, she can't prove anything.' It made me feel sick because I knew it was my responsibility, but hearing them say I should just run away made me feel even more lost and pressured"* [Teen father 7].

The only exception to this social withdrawal was their girlfriends. The boys perceived them as needing unwavering support during the pregnancy, a show of care they deemed crucial. However, the girlfriends were under their own intense pressure, as pregnant girls in eSwatini often face immediate school expulsion. This shared burden further limited the boys' capacity for broader social interaction. Cheung and Park (2010) posit that emotion suppression leads to a surge in negative emotions, inauthenticity, and diminished well-being. Studies by Darabi et al. (2017) and Kumar et al (2018) link suppression to increased depressive symptoms, lower life satisfaction, and reduced social support. These findings resonate with the study's results. The unexpected pregnancies triggered profound stress in the boys, stripping the joy from their lives. Lacking supportive friends who often offered ill-conceived advice, they retreated into social isolation. This self-imposed exile compounded their depression, further exacerbating their lack of social support.

Summary

Teenage pregnancy affects not only mothers but boys' lives as well. This study unearths the profound impact, particularly in the academic and social arenas. Academic performance plummets, crushed by the anxieties of the situation. Concentration crumbles, motivation dwindles, and study habits wither, leaving behind a trail of failing grades and the spectre of dropping out. The financial fallout lands squarely on their shoulders, a burden intensified by their dependence on parents ill-equipped for

sudden child support. Job hunts replace textbooks; allowances shrink, and school doors swing shut under the weight of unexpected responsibility. Parental responses paint a tumultuous landscape. Some rally, offering support and a safety net, while others withdraw, their disappointment echoing loudly in reduced allowance or severed ties. This inconsistency whipsaws the boys' emotions, compounding their anxiety and leaving them adrift in a sea of uncertainty. Regret becomes a constant companion, a gnawing reminder of lost opportunities and shattered dreams. The path they envisioned now veers sharply into the unfamiliar territory of early fatherhood, leaving aspirations unfulfilled and futures clouded. Social isolation adds another layer of hardship. Stigma clings to them like a second skin, isolating them from peers who judge and whisper. The pressure to conform to a world that no longer holds them tight pushes them inward, further severing connections and magnifying their emotional distress. The picture painted by this study is bleak, but it's one that demands attention. Teenage pregnancy's tentacles reach far beyond the delivery room, ensnaring boys in a web of academic decline, financial struggle, and social estrangement. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is crucial, for within their grasp lies the chance to weave a different narrative, one where support replaces stigma, opportunity mends regret, and connection cushions the fall.

Conclusions

This study concludes that early fatherhood among secondary school boys in the Manzini Region of Eswatini exerts considerable social and academic challenges on adolescent males. It further concludes that prevailing interventions targeting teenage pregnancy in Eswatini remain limited by their primary focus on girls, thereby neglecting the experiences, needs, and voices of teenage fathers. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the study highlights the complex interplay of individual, familial, school, and broader socio-cultural factors that shape the transition to fatherhood during adolescence. Ultimately, a more inclusive and gender-sensitive approach is essential to effectively address teenage pregnancy in Eswatini. Recognising and supporting teenage fathers is critical not only for their own educational and psychosocial well-being but also for promoting responsible fatherhood, strengthening family systems, and fostering sustainable reductions in adolescent birth rates. The study further concludes that failure to address the unique challenges faced by teenage fathers perpetuates cycles of educational disruption, economic disadvantage, and emotional distress, with long-term implications not only for the young fathers themselves but also for their children and the wider community. Addressing these gaps through targeted policies and programmes is therefore imperative for achieving more equitable and effective adolescent reproductive health outcomes in the country.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are advanced:

1. **Enhance Comprehensive Sexuality Education**: The Ministry of Education and Training, in partnership with the Ministry of Health, should implement mandatory, gender-inclusive comprehensive sexuality education programmes in secondary schools. These programmes should equip adolescent boys with adequate knowledge and skills on responsible sexual behaviour, contraception, and the implications of early parenthood, while integrating structured extracurricular activities to reduce risk factors such as peer pressure and idle time.
2. **Develop Targeted Support Systems for Teenage Fathers**: Schools and relevant stakeholders should establish dedicated support mechanisms, including academic assistance, psychosocial counselling, and parenting education programmes, to enable teenage fathers to continue their education and navigate the responsibilities of fatherhood. Such interventions should also facilitate improved family communication and co-parenting arrangements.
3. **Formulate Policies and Awareness Campaigns on Responsible Fatherhood**: The government should develop national policies and sustained public awareness campaigns that challenge negative stereotypes of teenage fathers and promote their positive involvement in child-rearing. These efforts should address cultural barriers to paternal engagement and integrate fatherhood support into broader adolescent reproductive health strategies.

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